WILLIAM J. CLINTON PRESIDENTIAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH JAMES STEINBERG

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Riley: This is the James Steinberg interview, part of the Clinton Presidential History Project. I’ll note for the record that we talked before we went on the tape about the confidentiality of the proceedings. You’ve expressed some concerns about security aspects of the interview. We can guarantee you that nothing will get out until you’ve had a chance to review the transcript and clear it.

We usually start these interviews by asking a little bit of background information. What was your executive and legislative branch experience before you came to the State Department in 1993?

Steinberg: I’d worked in all three branches of the government. I had clerked on the D.C. circuit. That was in 1978 and ’79. Prior to that, I had worked as a special assistant to the head of planning and evaluation at the Department of HEW [Health, Education, and Welfare] in the beginning of the [Jimmy] Carter administration. After my clerkship, I went into the Justice Department for the last 18 months of the Carter administration. I left the Carter administration on its last day, in January of 1980, and spent almost five full years on Capitol Hill working for Senator [Edward] Kennedy, first on the Labor and Human Resources Committee and then on the Armed Services Committee. Then I was out in the think tank world between 1985 and 1993. I came back into the government in 1993.

Riley: One of the articles in the briefing materials said that you had worked with Warren Christopher.

Steinberg: I had. When I was at the Justice Department, one of my responsibilities was the litigation both in the United States and abroad concerning the Iranian hostages. I worked with Secretary Christopher. Indeed I had him as a witness in a number of proceedings in which we were attempting to make sure that the claims that were being brought against the Iranian assets were not going to interfere with the negotiations. So I had the opportunity to travel with Secretary Christopher to a couple of federal courts and to put him on the witness stand, as it were, to discuss why these cases were so sensitive. Although my job was primarily litigation, I also had some responsibilities in terms of the legal issues around negotiating for the hostages. So I worked with him and others at the State Department on all of those hostage-related issues.

Riley: Was Lloyd Cutler involved in that also?
Steinberg: Very much so, very closely. I’d known Cutler for a long time because he’d been associated with the Center for Law and Social Policy in Washington, which was my first Washington job in the mid-1970s. We had a long association there as well.

Riley: And you kept in touch with those two during the out years?

Steinberg: Absolutely, yes. It’s a small world, Washington, in terms of the people who work on these issues. Lloyd’s deputy in the second part of the Carter administration, Joe Onek, who was deputy counsel to the President, had been the director of the Center for Law and Social Policy. He had also worked for Senator Kennedy. So we had the Kennedy connections and the Carter administration connections. It’s a pretty small policy community in Washington in that respect.

Riley: And you worked in ’88 for the [Michael] Dukakis campaign?

Steinberg: I did. I was the chief foreign-policy person who was full-time on the campaign. As with many campaigns, there was one senior person who was a paid staff person. I started in October of ’87 on that. There was a group of outside advisors, the most prominent and most significant of whom was Madeleine Albright, the chief outside foreign-policy advisor, but many other people who played a role in the Clinton administration, including Sandy [Samuel] Berger and Tony Lake and others, were also advisors to that campaign.

Riley: Did you take any lessons out of ’88?

Steinberg: There are a lot of lessons. I teach students a lot about these things. I think that a lot of the lessons there are important with respect to understanding the role of foreign policy and what the expectations are of the public with respect to foreign policy. In some ways ’88 was an unusual year because it was before things changed. It was hard. Few people had a sense in November of ’88 of how dramatically the world was going to change shortly thereafter.

Riley: Were you involved in the campaign in ’92?

Steinberg: I was. I’d been the on-the-campaign person in ’88, and that’s something everybody should do once in their life and not more than once. First of all, I’d known Governor Clinton because he was very close to Governor Dukakis. I’d met Governor Clinton several times during the ’88 campaign, both in Boston and on the road.

When the time came to put together the national security team for then-Governor Clinton, I had urged the people close to him to appoint Nancy Soderberg, who had been my deputy in the ’88 campaign and who had worked with me in Senator Kennedy’s office after she had worked for [Walter] Mondale during the ’84 campaign. Then right after ’84, Mondale approached me and said, “We have this great person,” so we hired Nancy to be part of the Kennedy staff. It would have been right after the ’84 election, maybe January of ’85. In many respects she was the obvious person to play the same role in ’92 that I had played in ’88.

I was at RAND at the time, and there are sensitivities about a public role at RAND because it’s a fairly public research and development center. I didn’t play a public role, but you’re free to privately and unpublicly provide advice, so I worked very closely with Nancy and Tony and
Sandy and others during the ’92 campaign, particularly on the Balkans because I had been doing a lot of work at RAND on the Balkan issues.

Riley: Did you have an official role during the transition?

Steinberg: Official? I think the answer is probably yes, although I would have to check. I spent about eight weeks in Washington after the election working on transition issues. I can’t remember whether I was paid—I suspect not—but I had a day-to-day role in the transition.

Riley: Doing policy stuff or personnel?

Steinberg: Almost exclusively policy stuff, and almost all of it was related to both the Balkans and to Europe. I co-chaired the group on that with Jenonne Walker, who became the senior director for Europe at the NSC [National Security Council] once Clinton took office. I worked with Brian Atwood, who was leading the State Department transition. I suppose, although I don’t recall, that I probably had some minor involvement in personnel stuff, but it was almost all policy related.

Riley: Were you thinking at this time about going in?

Steinberg: Yes, absolutely. My expectation was that I would go in, and I was fairly flexible about what I was prepared to do, so I discussed a number of possibilities. I’d been at RAND for five years. That was a good experience, but it was a good opportunity to come in, so I was both hoping and hopeful that I’d have an opportunity to do that.

Riley: How did the original appointment come about?

Steinberg: It was very complicated. It was a musical-chairs game. I had a number of conversations with a number of people about different positions at State, at the White House, and at the Pentagon. But at some point the dust cleared and there was an open chair. Toby Gati, who had initially started on the NSC, was brought over to become Assistant Secretary for INR [Bureau of Intelligence and Research]. They were looking for a deputy, and they offered me the job, and I took it.

Riley: Tell us what the job involved.

Steinberg: It was a wonderful job.

Riley: Did you start in January?

Steinberg: No, I probably started in the summer of ’93. I don’t remember the exact date, but there was quite a lot of back and forth early on. So I arrived, I would say, mid-to-late summer of ’93. The INR is the in-house intelligence arm of the State Department, and it is also part of the broader intelligence community. It plays a unique role as both an in-house intelligence advisor to the Secretary as well as to the Under Secretary, Deputy Secretary, and the Assistant Secretaries. It is also the liaison between the State Department and the intelligence community.
When Toby came in, we did some reorganization of the functions of the office. I created, working with Toby, a new portfolio, which was called the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Analysis. I had all of the units of that office that were responsible for analytic work, as opposed to collection and technical issues around intelligence—basically all of the regional and functional offices where you had a senior-level office. I was responsible for all of that. Because of that, I played a big role in the production of the Secretary’s morning summary, which was a compilation of what we called finished intelligence, which were analytic materials that assessed the intelligence that was nominally produced for the Secretary of State and for senior officials in the State Department. Because it was so well regarded, it was also provided to the President and to the senior officials outside the State Department.

Although I had a fairly broad-ranging set of experiences in national security and foreign policy, because I was responsible for all of the offices—Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America—it was an incredible cram course in the full range of national security and foreign policy challenges that were facing the country. I particularly had to spend a lot of time getting up to speed on areas of the world and on issues that I was less familiar with. Because the Secretary’s agenda was heavily dominated by Somalia and Haiti at the time—those were two issues that I didn’t know as well when I came in—I spent a lot of time both becoming familiar with them and also trying to reorient the work of the bureau to reflect the realities of a new administration and a changed world.

Riley: Just to clarify, the intelligence that you were receiving was generated outside State, or was it generated in State?

Steinberg: It was both. Intelligence is complicated. What we call intelligence is what people tend to think of as the secret stuff. But in fact intelligence is information. We’re an all-source bureau, so some of it would have been collected by the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] or by some of the other technical agencies, such as the DIA [Defense Intelligence Agency] or the military intelligence agencies. Some of it was reporting from foreign service officers. Some of it was open source information from the press and other things. Because it is an all-source analysis thing, it is any information that sheds light on understanding a particular foreign policy.

Riley: Much later down the road, we heard concerns about stovepipes and about the lack of communication among people who had access to intelligence information. Were you picking up any of this from your position?

Steinberg: The Bureau of INR has always had a unique place in the intelligence community. It is, in some ways, much closer to the policy community than to the rest of the intelligence community. It sits in a policy agency, the State Department, and it has its own perspectives, because many of the analysts, the staff of the bureau is, I’m going to guess, maybe 60 percent civil service and 35 to 40 percent foreign service. So it is unique in the sense of having people who have been serving foreign-service officers and who then move into more of an intelligence and analytic role, which is much rarer because in most of the intelligence community, for security reasons, a lot of the people have had very limited experience overseas, whereas our foreign service offices in INR had a broader set of experiences.
I would say that the problem was less stovepiping and more that INR brought a very different perspective to that, and it often found itself as a minority voice within the intelligence community in its assessment of events. I think the track record shows that it was a minority that proved to be right more often than not.

Riley: How was the morale in the State Department when you got there? Did it look from the inside like you expected it to look, or were there surprises?

Steinberg: I think the morale was pretty good. I think that the end of the Cold War excited people in terms of the possibilities of what could be done, and there was a sense that there were new opportunities for the United States to play a more active role, that we weren’t just repeating the same old, same old with the Soviet Union. The United States could move on a more positive set of agendas than the containment and countering strategies of the Cold War.

The morale was quickly affected, though, by the difficulties with Somalia and Haiti. In the first months after I got there, some of these events had already taken place, including the very tragic events in Mogadishu, and that obviously had an impact on me. People were discouraged by that, I think, and were concerned about how we were going to respond to that, what kind of impact it would have on the U.S.’s standing in the world. Also, the broader problem, which is a very common problem—I’m writing a book about it—was the transition and the difficulty historically that not just the Clinton administration, but every administration has had on the security side in its first year in office. There are some deep, structural reasons why nobody has done much of a good job in their first year, and the Clinton administration was, in many respects, an important object lesson in some of the difficulties and challenges of that transition.

Riley: Is there anything about Somalia or Haiti that you can add to the public record about what you found when you came in?

Steinberg: I’ll make two observations. On Somalia, I think that part of the problem was that—and this obviously was a perspective from the job I had since I was not involved in the policy deliberations in the INR—although the INR briefs the policy people, it is not a policy bureau. It is the only part of the State Department that is not a policy bureau. So I was not in the policy deliberations.

The most vivid events happened before I arrived, but what was very clear was how little we knew. We had basically one analyst in the bureau who was quite knowledgeable, but it is always problematic when you have only one person because you don’t have that synergy and the back and forth. Even in the Africa bureau, there was limited knowledge of the region. There had been some Cold War dimensions of it back in the Carter administration with the Somalia-Ethiopia issue, the Ogaden Wars. But you didn’t have the same level of expertise and attention to the issues that you had with Central and Eastern European issues and the like. There was a very limited understanding of what was going on there. That obviously had an impact. There also was the very complex set of issues of how the United States acts multilaterally and how it should work in an environment where both the UN [United Nations] and the U.S. were, with their own responsibilities, trying to work together. Those were difficult challenges that were being worked through for the first time.
I was much more involved in Haiti, in part because the major events continued on when I
switched jobs, so I was more involved in the policy. I think that the important thing about Haiti
was, one, the problems of transition, of statements and positions taken during the campaign that
proved problematic after the election. Then there was a growing understanding, moving from the
first year into the second year of the Clinton administration, of the broader ramifications of how
action in one area affected other areas, in the sense that after the tragedy in Mogadishu appeared
to be thwarted, again, in Haiti it was going to have very deep consequences for the United States’
global standing. The rethink of the Haiti policy that took place in the winter of 1994 was very
much driven by a sense that we not only had a problem that we needed to deal with in Haiti, but
that it had huge spillover implications both regionally and globally.

Riley: You had indicated that when you first came in, you had spent a lot of time thinking about
the Balkans. Was that issue big on your agenda when you first arrived?

Steinberg: Less so in the INR job. Obviously we did a lot of reporting on the Balkans. We also
tried to engage and bring in voices from outside the government who were knowledgeable about
the Balkans. I think that INR can reach out to scholars and analysts in order to give a broad
picture of what is going on. For me in the first months, there was a sensitivity. Even though I’d
been very involved in shaping the administration’s policy during the campaign, I had to step
back a little bit from the policy world when I was in INR because I didn’t want to be seen either
by my own analysts or by the consumers of our product as somehow promoting the policy that I
was associated with as we produced the intelligence product. So while we produced an enormous
amount of intelligence product on the Balkans, I was not involved in the discussions about
policy, and we tried to call it as we saw it from the perspective of INR.

Riley: Is there anything else from the INR period that we should talk about?

Steinberg: I think the most important thing was that we tried hard to think about how you
restructure the way intelligence is done, the definition of the issues, and the priorities, with an
eye to this very changing world. So we created an office in INR, for example, on global issues
such as the environment and health and the like. We recognized early on that you needed a
different framework in which to approach the various functions that intelligence provides, such
as warning and information, in order to better map out a changed world. So one of the things that
I was most pleased with was the adaptation of the bureau to be prepared to support policy
making in a post–Cold War world.

Riley: Did you pick up anything about the relationships between the other institutions and State
from that perch?

Steinberg: Sure. The other big issue during the period, which transitioned from my INR job to
the policy planning job, was North Korea. North Korea was very much an intelligence-related
issue. There was a huge debate at the time about exactly what kind of nuclear capability North
Korea had. This is another case where INR had a very different perspective from many or almost
all of the other agencies.

Riley: That was?
Steinberg: INR was much more skeptical about how far advanced the North Korean program might be, and it was more cautious about making assumptions about worst case scenarios or about assuming that the worst case was the case as opposed to trying to show the range of possibilities. There was a national intelligence estimate done at the time in which INR was constantly in the position of raising questions and challenging things. “How do you know this? What are you basing your conclusions on?” I think this was very much a case of where there was a perspective that could bring some real-world flavor to it, which is very different from the kind of analysts who were working other parts of the intelligence community. We were often quite isolated, but we had extremely talented people, both foreign service and civil service officers, who were knowledgeable and who were quite willing to stick to their guns about it.

Riley: These were the people who were providing you the information that caused you to take a dissenting view?

Steinberg: Right. There is a coordination process, and it goes up the various levels. It starts at the working level and then tries to find common ground. Finally it gets escalated to the decisionmaking level within the intelligence community. We were, on several occasions, footnoted on those.

Riley: Jim Woolsey’s position in the first Clinton administration seems to be a little bit anomalous. I wonder if you were picking up any of this.

Steinberg: A little. Part of it obviously is that you have your professional life and your personal life, so although my job was in the intelligence community, I knew a lot of the other policy makers, so I had a sense of the challenges and the difficulty. There is a deep challenge and set of questions about how much you want the people in your administration to be able to function well together and how much you want creative tension but not destructive tension. It is especially challenging for people in the intelligence community because they have a responsibility not to be part of the policy team, but they also have a responsibility to work effectively with the policy team, and that’s something that each individual has to figure out how to do. I didn’t see much of the senior-level stuff.

My experiences with Jim as Director were in intelligence coordination, which was a different set of issues and problems, so I didn’t have any firsthand insight. But it is very important to avoid groupthink, and you want people with diverse perspectives and views. On the other hand, at some point you have to get everyone in synch with each other, willing to work with each other, and you can’t fight about everything.

Riley: How much of this are you picking up from your position in the State Department? Was there any internal dissent going on within the administration’s foreign-policy-making apparatus? There’s a sense that the first year is a little bit rocky. [Les] Aspin has some problems. Woolsey is not fitting in as well as others are. Is this something that you see from your perch and that you talk about?

Steinberg: To some extent. It was very different once I moved into policy planning. When I was in INR, I was close friends with Tom Donilon, who was Christopher’s chief of staff. We saw
each other regularly and talked regularly, so I was familiar, but it was not part of my job.Obviously a number of these things were in the air, but I was not directly involved with them.

Riley: And the Secretary himself, were you having much exposure to him?

Steinberg: During that period, almost none, because the way that INR interacts with the rest of the building is the specifics change at various times during the administration, but there would be a senior staff meeting at the Assistant Secretary level, with the Deputy Secretary, several times a week. Then once a week the principals would meet with the Secretary. But I almost never participated in either of those when I was at INR. My job was to brief Toby, who then participated in those meetings. I may have had some, but I don’t recall any significant interaction with Secretary Christopher from the summer of ’93 until March of ’94.

Riley: And March of ’94 is when you transitioned into Policy Planning.

Steinberg: Yes.

Riley: Tell us how that came about.

Steinberg: There are always a lot of challenges in staffing the administration. Secretary Christopher had picked Ambassador [Samuel] Lewis to be the first Director of Policy Planning, with, I think, a particular eye on the fact that Secretary Christopher had a great interest in dealing with the Middle East. It was a priority of his. Ambassador Lewis had been the Ambassador to Israel. Christopher knew him well. For a variety of reasons, it wasn’t the right fit. There were different expectations, I think, both from the Secretary and from Ambassador Lewis about what the job would be and how it would be carried out.

Riley: Can I get you to elaborate on that a little bit?

Steinberg: This is secondhand, because I was not involved in this.

Riley: Sure. It’s not a deposition.

Steinberg: I don’t know how well Secretary Christopher knew Dennis Ross before coming in, but he very quickly began to develop quite a lot of confidence in him. He saw Dennis as the main person. I think that although Ambassador Lewis was sort of in it, he just didn’t have the same central role. My impression was that that was why he was there; he wanted to work on the Middle East. He was not disinterested in the other issues, but the Middle East was his main thing. After all, Dennis had been the head of policy planning for [James] Baker, and he had played the central role on the Middle East. I think Ambassador Lewis probably had some expectation that he would fill both of those parts of Dennis’ job from the previous administration, that is, the head of policy planning. But Dennis was kept on. He left policy planning but became the special Middle East coordinator. So I think that the part that Ambassador Lewis was most eager to work on didn’t materialize with the job.

I think some of it is that the relationship between the Secretary and the Director of Policy Planning is a personal one. It is not an institutional or structural relationship, and it works when the chemistry and the working relationship are good, and it doesn’t when they’re not. It’s not that
they didn’t get along fine, but there wasn’t the same sense of confidence and of wanting to have him around. I think there was a mutual agreement to move on.

Riley: Good, that’s helpful. So you were approached, or was this floating around for a while?

Steinberg: Yes. My view was that I’d be happy to get back in the administration. I was pretty willing to take on whatever jobs I was offered, but my background and interest were clearly more on the policy side than on the intelligence side. Although I think that in some ways I could not have had a better preparation for being the head of policy planning than by being responsible for the Secretary’s morning summary for six months. I mean, I knew as much as anybody about almost all of what was going on in the world by the time I was done.

But I clearly was interested in a policy job. I was close to Tom Donilon, Christopher’s chief of staff, and I think that he felt that it would be good, that I had a contribution that I could make in the policy world. When it came up, Tom approached me and asked if it was something I wanted to do. Who wouldn’t? It’s one of the premier jobs in the government. So I had a chance to meet with Secretary Christopher. We had a long lunch. I told him how I saw the job and what I hoped to do with it, and happily he offered it to me.

Riley: Can you tell us a little bit about the flavor of your conversations and about your understanding of what he wanted from the position?

Steinberg: He clearly was looking for somebody who could transcend the stovepipes and the institutional perspectives in order to help him fashion a broader agenda, both in terms of identifying priorities and in understanding the deeper or strategic dimensions of what foreign policy was. In other words, beyond the day-to-day issues, what are the big objectives? What are the big goals, and how do the pieces fit together? The skill sets that are particularly strong at the State Department tend to be problem-solving, here-and-now-type things and less of long-term, long-range thinking and shaping. That’s the way we recruit and use foreign service officers. We send them out in the field to solve problems.

We had a retreat in that first year I was there—I don’t remember the exact date, but it would have been during the first 12 months—with a lot of people from various bureaus in the State Department. The facilitators asked, “What skills and what roles do you see as foreign service officers?” Most of them didn’t think that policy development or policy making was what they were there to do. I think Christopher felt that very much from his own experience. He was looking for people who were directly responsive to him and to his priorities, who could help him put a broader stamp on the overall goals and objectives of the State Department and then help him carry that to the broader national security community throughout the administration.

Riley: Did you talk about making any changes in structure, or were there any other significant personnel changes?

Steinberg: Not personnel changes. I can’t remember whether it came up in the luncheon. It was clear to me that the area where we did not have enough strength in policy planning, and where I didn’t have enough personal strength, was on East Asia. I felt that East Asia was going to be an increasingly important part of what we did. So I probably told him then, but certainly one of the first things I did was to find a deputy who was strong on East Asia.
The other thing we talked about was giving greater prominence to transnational issues—environment, terrorism, things like that—which hadn’t gotten the same kind of attention from policy planning. They were interests of his and interests of mine, which the department didn’t do a good job of. We talked about how policy planning could be especially influential in dealing with these nontraditional issues, because they didn’t fit in. That also complemented the fact that he had created a new part of the State Department, the G Bureau, which Tim Wirth was the Under Secretary of, to deal with a number of these global issues. Because it was seen that you could get a lot of energy and strength in policy innovation by having policy planning and the Bureau work together to try to deal with some of these issues.

I also made clear, and he was very receptive to this at the lunch, that I believed strongly that policy planning could only be effective if it was in the room for all the decisions. Even though it was concerned with the long term and with the interactions between things, policy may be conceptualized in a big way, but it gets executed in the day-to-day decisions. If you weren’t there when the day-to-day decisions were made and you weren’t able to ask, “How does this fit in with the broader picture, the longer term?” then you couldn’t execute or implement that role. I said I needed an understanding from him that he saw it the same way. He was very receptive to this, and he knew fairly quickly that I had the right to go in or not to any meeting I wanted. I traveled with him on almost all of the foreign trips, so I was able to make sure that the perspective we were bringing wasn’t just something that came in on papers but that it was there as decisions were made.

**Riley:** Did you find unexpected difficulties or expected difficulties in doing what you were doing with respect to the other people who had more line responsibilities?

**Steinberg:** Not unexpected. There were certainly tensions. I didn’t feel it. I felt that because they knew fairly quickly that I had a strong, personal relationship with Christopher, was always invited to be in meetings, that at the Assistant-Secretary-and-above level, people just accepted that. They may not have loved it, but they accepted it. There was certainly more tension at the working level, where my staff would be in the working-level meetings where there was, I think, a lot of tension between the lines who basically said, “This is our responsibility. What do you know about this?” Many of these people were not career government employees. At policy planning, it is about a third foreign service officers, a third career civil servants, and a third outsiders who come for short-term appointments.

I would often hear back from my staff about how they were being pushed out or resisted. I never worried about it much because at the end of the day, we had the ultimate trump card to play, and ultimately people knew it, because I always got the backing of Christopher. Now, a memo could not go in to Christopher from one of the other bureaus without my seeing it. We had the right to concur or not concur on any recommendations. So pretty quickly, I think, the rest of the building, whether they liked it or not, understood that that was how Christopher was going to operate, that we had that clout.

It was also reinforced from the other strength, which was that although I didn’t know him before, I quickly developed a very close relationship with the Deputy Secretary, Strobe Talbott, who was a big supporter in policy planning, somebody who as a journalist and historian understood the historic role that policy planning played. So I saw us as almost service staff to him, which increased our clout because we were not only staffing the Secretary but also the Deputy
Secretary who was presiding over the daily morning meeting and who saw us as his right hand. So we had all the right connections and relationships to make sure that the perspective of policy planning was heard on everything.

Riley: Your relationship with Talbott stayed good throughout your time?

Steinberg: Absolutely terrific. We’ve continued to work closely together, including at Brookings, where I was his vice president.

Riley: When you came in, were there any efforts to stop and survey the universe and to start over again to see where you were, or were things already in motion?

Steinberg: Not in ’94. We did this when I went to the White House. After I came over and Sandy became National Security Advisor, we had a total “Let’s step back and think about the second term” exercise. That took place in December of ’96, January of ’97, which was very back to basics. What are we all about? How do we use four years? It was a strategic look at that. During the first term there was not the same kind of deliberate effort to do that. There were aspects of policy, particularly on the Balkans, where we had a major exercise—I guess it would have been in the spring of ’95—when Tony and Christopher basically convened teams A, B, and C to think about the fundamentals of what we were trying to get done. We also did that with Haiti in the spring of ’94. We rolled it back and said, “Let’s rethink this whole thing.” But I don’t recall a soup to nuts across the whole thing to step back.

There were changes obviously. There was a lot of shake out going on. In addition to Sam Lewis, there was Steve Oxman, who had been the first Assistant Secretary for Europe, who left after a year, in part because of the Balkans’ problems. Things weren’t going well. So there were a lot of changes, but there was never a moment to fully step back. Obviously the other big change was Talbott becoming Deputy Secretary.

Riley: Right.

Steinberg: There had been a lot of shakeup that took place after the first term but not the same deep, strategic look that we undertook at the beginning of the second term.

Riley: The bigger question is the one related to figuring out America’s position in the world in a post–Cold War environment, which I’m assuming must have been an ongoing concern. I wonder if you could address that.

Steinberg: Having said that there was not a step back exercise, I’d say that the closest thing to that was the [Barry] Goldwater-[William] Nichols Act of 1986, which required the President to prepare a national security strategy for the country. The requirement of the statute is that the first one is supposed to be prepared, I think, within 180 days after taking office and then annually thereafter. No President has ever met the first deadline, and as I always say to my students, for good reason. Anything they would have produced in the first 180 days wouldn’t be worth the paper it was written on. The same was true with us. There’s way too much to be done. You’re still settling in; you’re starting to figure out what you’re all about. It wasn’t until the spring of ’94 that we got around to doing this.
Tony Lake, the National Security Advisor, convened a very small group. I was the only person outside of the White House, I think, other than Joe Nye, Chairman of the NIC [National Intelligence Council], who was involved to think about how you would write a national security strategy for this administration, with a very thematic and big-picture, post–Cold War objective. What would it look like? The team was headed by Jeremy Rosner, who was on Tony’s staff, who was both the chief speechwriter and who was doing a policy planning function for Tony. We had a small group of four or five people who were working on this, which led to the first national-security-strategy project, which I think came out in October, called the Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement. So in that sense, there was a big look, but it wasn’t so much on the day-to-day of the policy as much as, how do you frame what the role of the United States is in a post–Cold War world? So at that level, we identified the core objectives.

If you think about some of the big themes that became hallmarks of the administration, they were identified in that first document. For instance, the point about engagement, consciously saying that in the past, there had been situations where we’ve had wars and we’ve come back home afterward, but the end of the Cold War did not provide an opportunity for the United States to come home, to become more isolationist. There was still a broad set of global challenges that required an active U.S. role.

There also was a sense, which obviously has been a big theme in the debate over the last 20 years, that a world with more democracies and market economies was favorable to the United States, and that the United States ought to be actively supporting the enlargement of the community of market democracies. There were the big themes of, who are we? Where do we play in the world? Where do the policies connect to that broader picture? That exercise, which is a very top-down exercise, produced a national security strategy where we developed big themes. Then it went out to the agencies for comments, but it was not a bubbling up or an accumulation of individual things. It was very much pitched at Tony’s effort to put a stamp on the perspective of what the U.S. role was, what our priorities were, and what our overall strategies were.

Riley: Did it stick?

Steinberg: It did stick. I gave a speech to the NDU [National Defense University] about national security strategies. But this basic concept, which is that the United States is more secure and more prosperous in a world in which market economies are successful, is a consistent theme throughout all of the six national security strategies that were written during the Clinton administration. It obviously differs in approach to some of the things in the [George W.] Bush national security strategy, particularly in the first national security strategy, in the sense that until Bush it was less focused on the United States transforming, and was more focused on the United States supporting and encouraging. I think things have come back around again to that view that we should be on the side of those things, but the idea that we have to be out there, a kind of post-Iraq rationale of pushing these things, is not something that we contemplated.

The most obvious early manifestation of this was Haiti. The issue was, you had a situation with a relatively democratic government, and there was a coup that interfered with this. The United States had an interest in being seen as supporting the democratic government against the coup makers and in trying to rally the other democracies, as we did both through the OAS [Organization of American States] and through the UN on Haiti as a way of extending
democracy. I think that what became richer through the course of the various national security strategies was a deeper sense of how globalization was the defining strategic force in the world. Mastering globalization, getting its benefits, and dealing with its dark side emerged as a theme in the first national security strategy, and it became much more elaborated as the administration went on.

Riley: Are you picking up concerns about terrorism at this stage, or is this something that comes later?

Steinberg: Sure, the World Trade Center bombing took place in 1993. It was identified in the ’94 national security strategy. In ’95 Clinton gave a speech in New York, in connection with the 50th anniversary of the UN, which was the first major speech on terrorism. It was identified in ’93 because of the World Trade Center, but it galvanized in a major project that we undertook at policy planning in preparation for the speech. I think it was in June of ’95, in New York, when Clinton gave his first major speech on terrorism. We had a major role in that. I had a couple of people on my staff who I specifically assigned to deal with the issue of the downsides of globalization.

I would say that it was in the consciousness in ’94, and it began to assume a prominent place. I feel comfortable saying that in the minds of senior people in the administration—and as reflected in the President’s words by ’95, and well before the more dramatic events later in the decade—that we had seen this as one of the biggest challenges.

Riley: What were the other challenges that you were focusing on?

Steinberg: Environment was another big one, something that Christopher and I were both very interested in personally. We identified that. Global public health was another one of the big ones, which was a big concern of Tim Wirth’s. He was very influential in identifying that, as well as in environmental issues, and in the sense that globalization needed to lift all boats. You couldn’t have a world in which only some were the beneficiaries. I think those were the big things. Proliferation was, I guess, the last element of this, the idea that globalization opened the door for greater danger, that dangerous technologies could be spread. If you look at, particularly, the ’95 speech and the second national-security strategy, you see it more elaborated, pulling together those threads.

Riley: You mentioned Wirth a couple of times here. How was that initiative received within the Department, and did it seem from your perspective to work pretty well?

Steinberg: I think that people were relatively positive about it in general, but the difficulty was integrating it into the work of the bureaucracy. You basically have two kinds of choices structurally. One, you can create a set of offices or entities that are specifically responsible for those things. They’re very fired up, very focused on it. But that creates a certain tension with the people who are more traditionally involved with either economic or political issues. On the one hand you have effective advocates for that perspective by creating a democracy bureau or by creating an environmental science bureau, I guess it was. They’re the advocates of the issue. The people there, that’s what they live and breathe. On the other hand it tends to create a certain amount of tension and clashing.
The other alternative is to say that you can go with the traditional structure, which is largely organized around regions, but you have to make sure that every one of those bureaus has, for example, a deputy who is responsible for these global issues. There’s no right answer to the question about which is the better one, but clearly the model that Christopher and Tim had adopted was to create a set of bureaus underneath him that were the functional advocacy bureaus.

My own judgment had been the other. It happened before I was there, so I was not involved in the discussion. I tend to prefer the alternative structure, in which the Assistant Secretary for a region has a deputy for economics and a deputy for the functional issues, so that in the bureau, everything is being integrated as you think about how to interact with East Asia or Latin America. You need some functional staff because there are issues that are not geographical. If you’re going to deal with climate change, you can’t just do it in regional bureaus.

As was the debate over AID [Agency for International Development]. I believe that rather than having a separate AID, where you have a separate structure with different regions—you have an Assistant Administrator of AID for Latin America and an Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America—I always felt that it would be better to integrate it and to have under the Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America a person who was responsible for assistance programs. But again, there are arguments both ways. It’s not obvious that it is one or the other. You just have to make a choice.

**Riley:** Are there two or three issues or developments from your policy-planning period that you want to talk about?

**Steinberg:** In some ways the centerpiece of the first administration—and, I think, one of the greatest achievements—was the evolution of NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organisation] and NATO’s enlargement. It was a signature feature of what Christopher came to do. It occupied a lot of his time. It was an important example of taking the broader conceptual framework and applying it to a specific problem. From a policy planner’s point of view, it was particularly attractive because you’re particularly attracted to the things that you don’t have to do but that you want to do because you think it is shaping. There were no action-forcing things. Obviously there were a little bit, in the sense that there were countries who now wanted to get in, but you didn’t have to do it.

This was an attractive case of developing a strategy that was the obvious outgrowth of the overall view of enlargement and engagement, which was, you needed NATO to be relevant in order to keep the United States engaged. There was always the option that NATO could wither away. The Cold War was over. It was created against the Soviet Union. So for the engagement wing of the strategy, the adaptation of NATO was critical to answering the question, how does the United States stay in harness with our European allies and stay involved on that stage? On the enlargement side, obviously the question was, what was it going to take to consolidate the new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe? Having elaborated this, it then was clear to me and to people in policy planning that we needed to evolve there and we needed to enlarge. But obviously there were other perspectives on that, largely from those who were worried about the impact on Russia of enlargement.

**Riley:** Were these principally within the State Department?
**Steinberg:** Principally, but a little bit in the Pentagon as well. I think the Pentagon had more reservations about it because of the danger that it would create new conflicts. They were also worried that enlargement would bring in less capable military allies to NATO and therefore make NATO less effective. But it was largely in the State Department.

The story is pretty well known that this was one place where Strobe and I disagreed. We finally found a common ground, and when we reached it, Strobe became a very effective advocate of the policy, but initially he was much more reserved about it. He wanted to go slowly, and he was concerned about the impact on the outside world and on the evolution of democracy in Russia. Tom Donilon and I were deeply committed to it, and my staff was deeply committed to it. We had a lot of people who had worked on these issues and who felt very strongly. It was definitely the policy-planning staff’s strong conviction. It was shared by the key Europe people at the NSC, including Tony. So that was the configuration. But Christopher, although he had great respect for Strobe and valued Strobe’s consult, shared our view about this.

**Riley:** Can you give us a two-minute version of how these forces worked their way through the system?

**Steinberg:** We would develop papers and proposals that would outline a strategy and what we thought ought to be done. As with all of these things, we tried to hook them to events. There would be questions about the evolution of the NATO military doctrine or about an upcoming NATO summit or NATO ministerial meeting. We would prepare a paper and say, “Here are the steps we need to take, here’s the long-term strategy, and here’s what we need to do in the near term.”

Strobe, I think, chose an appropriate and effective means of communicating, which was that he would write personal notes to Christopher expressing his views about this, which he always shared with us. There was total transparency, which I was quite grateful for. He saw everything that we gave Christopher; we saw everything that he gave him. It created a lot of confidence that we could have significant policy disagreements, but that it was done in a good-faith effort where there were legitimate and different views on this. Then we would have small meetings with the key actors, with Christopher, in which people would argue for their perspectives. Initially, when I first got there, we were kind of slow walking the enlargement issue. By ’95, I think that the combination of the events in the Balkans—along with having put in harness our team of policy planning with a strong conviction and a good plan going forward—brought Christopher around to the view that this had to be done.

Frankly his experience with the Russians probably helped too. He felt that the initial approach, which was to be rather deferential and solicitous of the Russians, rather than producing more forthcoming attitudes, encouraged the Russians to be even more demanding. I think his interaction with [Andrei] Kozyrev and others caused him to be somewhat skeptical. I think he felt that being clear about our intentions and making clear that we were going to do this because it was the right thing to do and that it was not directed against the Russians was the best way to convince Russia that it should not try to exploit the relationship with the United States to deny others things that were important to them. Ultimately the key decisions were made in ’95 for the United States to take a leadership role in pushing for a relatively rapid expansion of NATO and to include, in particular, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary.
Riley: In Strobe’s case, was it more that the ground had shifted underneath him with ongoing developments, or did you just have a more powerful argument in the end?

Steinberg: I think it is largely that we had a more powerful argument. Having articulated the grand strategy, I think that it was hard to explain in the context of that grand strategy why we would be either opposed or reluctant to move forward when this seemed to be the obvious outgrowth of the overall approach. The ground shifted to some extent in the sense that the continued instability in the Balkans helped convince Christopher and others that we could not allow that to spread. Overall, a number of the countries—Hungary, Austria, Romania, Bulgaria, and others—border along Yugoslavia and the other states, so there was a sense that probably the adverse events in the Balkans were a further argument for going forward, as was the instability in Russia. Although that could have been our rationale, the people who wanted to go slowly said, “Precisely because things are not consolidating well in Russia, we should not put more stress on the system.”

Riley: When you’re trying to convert Secretary Christopher to bring him around, was yours entirely an inside game, or were you also working with the sympathetic people on the National Security Council staff?

Steinberg: Certainly we were working with them, because the game had to be worked both by persuading Christopher and also by getting the principals to do it. So it was important that we were well coordinated with our colleagues at the White House. I mean, once we got Christopher, we still had to get the President. The President obviously had invested a lot. He made some very important early decisions—that meeting in Vancouver with [Boris] Yeltsin in ’93 before I got there and all that. So in addition to convincing Christopher, ultimately the President had to be convinced. He obviously was close to Strobe. He had a strong, personal relationship with Strobe. We had to work with the NSC to make sure that ultimately we got the President there. But in terms of Christopher, it was largely a conversation that took place inside the State Department with Strobe, Peter Tarnoff, Tom Donilon, myself, John Kornblum, and [Richard] Holbrooke. Obviously Holbrooke, once he became Assistant Security, became important for us as well.

Riley: Again I’ll go back to the Balkans. Is there something more that you can tell us?

Steinberg: Well, the Balkans were the decisive moment. If from a policy planning point of view the enlargement was the most important issue initially because it cemented the overall strategy, then the Balkans raised the question of could the United States step up and handle the challenges? There was a question about, if the United States could not find a way to work with the Europeans to stop this genocide that was taking place in the heart of Europe, then you could talk all about a single-power world and all of that, but there were serious doubts about the U.S.’s effectiveness. I think that this was one where it was more reactive. But in order to surmount a reactiveness, it required a much more aggressive and determined strategy than had been pursued in the early part of the administration.

This was around the time of that horrible spring of ’95, when the enclaves in eastern Bosnia began to fall and there was the Srebrenica massacre and the like. There was a planning exercise that was organized by Tony Lake but that was carried out in the various parts of the national security bureaucracy that said, “We have to grab this. We have to solve it.” It produced an
aggressive strategy that included pressing and ultimately being prepared to break with the UN over the dual key, that is, the use of military force, particularly air power, and then an aggressive diplomatic strategy that led to Dayton. It was critical. I think that air cover in Bosnia is not paradise, but you could talk about evolving and adopting NATO, but if NATO couldn’t respond to this real-time challenge, then people legitimately could say, “This is just a piece of paper.” So it was critical. I think it was a turning point.

I think that the credibility of the United States and NATO were reestablished by this effective intervention. It was late but it happened, and it succeeded. Once we made the decision to commit the full resources and prestige of the United States to bring an end to the conflict, it happened, and it happened through the combined use of diplomacy and force, which was quite important, and it led to the final playing out of the issues through the ’90s and into the intervention in Kosovo, which was the natural segue and which had to happen. It was a crisis that was going to happen, we knew, following Dayton, and it had to be managed and adapted to be played out. I think it was critical for establishing the credibility of the United States and NATO as effective actors in dealing with these new post–Cold War challenges. That was enormously important.

Riley: Again, any other issues from the policy planning period that you want to talk about?

Steinberg: I would put a lot of emphasis on the early development of these issues around the dark side. Globalization, proliferation, and terrorism were issues that we identified early. There were a lot of issues about how well the government executed in dealing with them, but I feel very comfortable in retrospect saying that this was not something we missed. I think a lot of the commentary is quite wrong about this. It’s not surprising they say it, but nonetheless, I feel I have gone back and reexamined it a lot. We were quite alert to it, and we had identified precisely the kind of problem that we were going to face. Clinton understood it too. So I think that’s probably important.

The other part that I began to work on during that period was the attempt to adapt and strengthen the international organizations and institutions. Everybody has his favorite little moments, but I think that the effort by a handful of us in the State Department and White House to bring about a change in the leadership of the UN and the new Secretary General was a great achievement.

Riley: You had a behind-the-scenes role in that that I’d like to hear about. It started a lot earlier than most people realize.

Steinberg: It was clear to us, coming out of all of the problems of dealing with Haiti and the Balkans and others, that there was too much opportunity being lost by having leadership at the Secretary General level that was unfriendly to the United States and unsympathetic with the ways in which we felt that the UN had to adapt in order to be effective. It became clear to us that there was going to be an attempt to have a second term for [Boutros] Boutros-Ghali. Throughout this period after all, we were facing a Congress that was in full revolt against the UN, withholding the dues, unsympathetic to the UN. In our judgment we were in danger of literally having the U.S. more or less pull out and say, “This is not relevant or useful to the United States. If we’re not going to expel it from our shores, we’re no longer going to be an active participant in it.” That was enormously damaging. It was going to take away an important element of our own soft power, our own credibility, and a tool that was very important.
As this began to tee up and as it became clear to us that Boutros-Ghali was going to seek a second term, we began an effort, largely done by a handful of people at the White House and State Department, to say that we were going to make it clear to our allies that we would not support him. We will veto a second term for Boutros-Ghali. Let’s get everybody off of that bandwagon before we have an ugly clash, because you can either have an ugly public disagreement about this, or Boutros-Ghali’s friends, particularly the French and the Egyptians, can let him know that this isn’t going to happen and have him exit stage left.

Critical to that was not only getting our government to make a determination that we would not accept a second term under any set of circumstances, but also that we had a strategy for finding somebody who would be acceptable to the UN. We identified Kofi Annan early on as somebody who could fill that role. We were able to conceptualize a strategy that we thought was important to the United States and the UN, and it worked.

Riley: You kept it—

Steinberg: Very quiet. We couldn’t keep it too quiet that we were going to oppose Boutros-Ghali because it was critical in order for the strategy to work, for the other countries to know that the President had made up his mind. I think a lot of them felt at the end of the day that the President would not want to have a big fight with his friends and allies. So we had to, if not on the front page of the New York Times, make clear to the key other countries that the President had made up his mind. But in terms of identifying somebody, it was clear that there was a danger that he would be seen as the U.S. candidate who—

The other one—this was tactical, but I think it had a big impact—was the selection of the Secretary General in ’95, ’96. There was an expectation that Ruud Lubbers, the Dutch Prime Minister, was going to become the next Secretary General. We invested an enormous amount in this evolution and transformation of NATO, and it was critically important to have a Secretary General who shared that and who could become a partner in making it come about. We assumed that Lubbers was the consensus choice. It’s kind of the way things work for former Prime Ministers.

Lubbers came and had lunch with Christopher. I’d have to check the date on that, but it was a few weeks before the expected coronation was going to take place. The meeting was horrible. Lubbers was unengaged, uninterested in the kinds of things that we thought were important. I think he had a similarly unsatisfactory meeting with Secretary [William] Perry. We decided afterward that we weren’t going to let this happen. It was a very delicate case because on the one hand the United States has enormous influence, and it is almost inconceivable that a choice could be made against the wishes of the United States; on the other hand, at the time that you’re trying to build these relationships and show that you’re a good ally, you don’t want to look like you’re a bull in a china shop.

This was an awkward situation. We again, I think, came up with a very good strategy, which was that although Lubbers was the assumed natural ally, the French were never very enthusiastic because he wasn’t a French speaker. So we were able to identify somebody who was a fluent French speaker, who was from a Latin country, which was unexpected from the United States
point of view. After all, he worked in a socialist government. But we had gotten to know [Javier] Solana quite well, and we had a lot of confidence in him.

This is something I feel very proud of. I think it was a masterly choice, and I think Solana was a brilliant Secretary General who helped that transition and who played a critical role in managing the Balkan crisis that year. We understood how to work the diplomacy, and we were able to achieve our objectives without it looking like the United States was throwing a fit and insisting that it was going to be our way or the highway. I think everybody felt quite good about it. In both cases we were able to find a way to extricate ourselves from a situation where there was a leader of an international organization who was not going to be consonant with our interest, and yet we did it in a way that didn’t look like we were being the petulant power.

Riley: Were there any other big architectural changes during the Clinton administration that we ought to take note of historically?

Steinberg: I think the attempt to adapt the global trade system was enormously important, although we were not as successful as I would have hoped. The failure of Seattle, I think, was a setback. In my reviews about why that happened, I think that our good friends, people we were close to on the economic side, misjudged that. The second thing is the transformation of our relationship with China, which I think is and was one of the huge questions. Then of course we can talk about the Middle East, which is obviously an ongoing thing.

The Middle East is instructional in the sense that this was an ongoing problem. It didn’t evolve radically, although Oslo changed the context. But I would say that the issues of China and trade were very big. They came together around PNTR [Permanent Normal Trade Relations]. On my list of things that I put a special emphasis on in terms of achievements in the administration, I think that the PNTR for China was critical. You weren’t going to have an effective World Trade Organization that didn’t have China in it. Yet it was quite important to find a way to do this in a way that dealt with a very complex domestic political situation and to use it to build the relationship with China across a broader range of issues.

We started off with China on very rocky footing. I was not with Christopher on the first trip. I had just become the head of policy planning but was just settling in, so I did not make that first rather disastrous trip with Christopher, which would have been in March or April of ’94. But one of the first things I did in policy planning was lead the effort to reexamine the question of the MFN [Most Favored Nation] linkage. The first large paper that the staff wrote for him was how do you resolve this train wreck that we were facing, given the commitment in ’93 that China had to meet certain human rights benchmarks or we would not renew MFN? So, working with my staff, we came up with a strategy for basically delinking MFN, and that was the beginning of a long road back to establishing a more constructive relationship with China.

Riley: Did you take a lot of heat internally for that?

Steinberg: Oh, sure. There was a strong constituency on the human rights side.

Riley: Sure.
Steinberg: Also you had an unusual situation there. I teach my students to understand some institutional perspectives. Normally you would have expected that the democracy bureau, DRL [Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor], would feel very strongly about this. But we had a relatively unusual situation where the Assistant Secretary for East Asia, Winston Lord, also had very strong convictions about this and so was worried about the values issues and the like. So the person who you would have thought was an ally, who would normally focus on the strategic relationship with China, also was less unwilling to do it.

There were unusually strong allies in the economic agencies, both within the bureaus in State and particularly at USTR [United States Trade Representative]—Mickey Kantor and others—who saw that this was quite important for the U.S. economy. So we had an alliance across agencies dealing with those issues. It was very important, and it was the first of many steps that it took, ultimately leading to President Jiang’s [Zemin] visit to the United States in ’97 and then Clinton’s visit to China in ’98.

Riley: A couple more pieces from the State years. One of the areas that the administration has subsequently taken heat for by critics has been Rwanda. That might be a place where somebody would look and say that the policy planning shop might pick that up. Maybe the intelligence shop might have picked that up. Have you given thought to this?

Steinberg: I’ve given enormous thought to this. Anybody who was involved has given thought to it. Obviously it was an extraordinary human tragedy of a magnitude that there are no words for. Even the brilliant graphic, journalistic, and film depictions don’t begin to do justice to what we recognize was the horror of the genocide. There are lots of different aspects of this question. Could we have known that when the plane was shot down that the violence was going to explode? We probably underestimated it from an intelligence point of view, but I don’t think we generally underestimated the volatility of the region.

I got started on this more in my INR hat than in my policy planning hat because it began to happen when I was still at INR. I remember the discussions in INR when [Juvénal] Habyarimana was shot down and the anxiety about this. We had been more focused, to be honest, on Burundi, because in some respects the situation seemed slightly more stable in Rwanda and quite fragile in Burundi. If people were going to guess in the late fall, early winter of ’93 which of the two countries was more likely to have a genocide, I think we would have bet on Burundi. But there’s no question that people understood how fragile and bad it was.

I don’t think it was a massive intelligence failure in the sense that nobody knew or could have guessed. Probably, on that scale, yes, nobody could have guessed. I think most people find it hard to imagine that anybody could perpetrate horror of that type. But I think there was a clear sense in INR when the plane was shot down that this was a very dangerous situation. People were very focused on the Great Lakes area as a place where an intense ethnic violence, even beyond the scale of the Balkans, was possible. So on that side, not perfect, but I don’t think it was something like where were we, and what were we thinking? I think people were paying attention.

Then it becomes the policy question. There is an enormous amount that has been written about it in retrospect. I’m probably one of the few people left in the administration who understands why
we did what we did. It’s easy for people to say to others after the fact, “If you had put in a few people—” But the reality was that in the immediate aftermath, when the violence broke out, we saw the slaughter of the Belgian peacekeepers who were there. It was an intensely violent situation in which there was absolutely no reason to believe that an insertion of a small force would have cauterized this, that the genocidaires would be intimidated by it. Not only was it not just their being there and saying, “We have to stop because they’re there,” but there was a serious risk that any UN force, other than a massive one, would have also been subject to great violence. They were afraid. So there wasn’t an option of a small intervention force that would magically prevent it somehow.

The counterfactual history is easy, it’s satisfying, but there is no reason, even in retrospect, to think it was right, much less prospectively going back. It is clear that Somalia affected the situation in terms of the challenge of inserting American forces. Because there was no stomach for interjecting American forces, it was hard to insist that the UN do it when we weren’t prepared to do it ourselves and none of our partners at the UN were prepared to do it.

There’s some argument that we blocked the UN going in. I don’t quite buy that, although I’d have to go back and look at the specific decisionmaking at the UN as to whether we blocked it or if we didn’t think that the UN was prepared to send in enough people to protect themselves. We didn’t want to repeat—people remembered how Somalia happened. It was the going in to avenge the murder of the Blue Helmets in Mogadishu that led to the Black Hawk Down incident. We felt strongly that even if it was not going to be U.S. forces as part of the UN force, there was a risk that the same thing would happen there and that we would then have to go in.

But having said all that, the outcome was so bad, you have to say to yourself, “There must have been something different that we could have done.” I think that the best case can be made for whether it would have been possible to set up safe havens or enclaves to provide places for people to go that might have been more secure. Although the reality is, as we saw in Eastern Bosnia with Gorazde and Srebrenica, that the safe havens didn’t work there either because the peacekeepers weren’t in Bosnia prepared to take on—so there was a lot of redoing back. Nobody is going to be satisfied with the answer, “There was nothing that could be done.” But I think that the views about this are a little too simplistic, both in what we knew and feared for good reasons and in what we know and understand in retrospect.

Riley: Included in the briefing materials was a New Republic article that appeared in ’98 that made somewhat disparaging comments about the policy planning shop.

Steinberg: I thought it was before that.

Riley: I think it appeared in ’98, but it may have been earlier.

Steinberg: I remember the piece.

Riley: I want to give you a chance to answer the piece.

Steinberg: To be honest, the person who wrote it didn’t know anything about anything.

Riley: Ninety-seven.
Steinberg: Had no experience or knowledge.

Riley: Not a public relations shop, not stripped of think tank or policy planning.

Steinberg: I don’t think this person actually knew anything about the policy planning. The reality is, first of all, yes, we did have responsibility for speechwriting, and that is absolutely essential. If you can’t articulate and be the voice of how the policy is being explained, then you’re not doing policy planning. I can’t imagine what the alternative would be. Ironically nobody would write this today because everybody understands that the public diplomacy and the articulation of the strategy are critical to the policy planning side. The allegation there is that we were all political hacks. I don’t think the record supports that. You had a lot of people with very strong, substantive policy-planning backgrounds.

What you certainly don’t want—I’m not quite sure what they had in mind, what they would have thought was better—is a pure academic. When you think about the great policy planning directors, none of them were academics. I mean, George Kennan was hardly an academic. He became one after the fact, but he was a career foreign-service officer. [Paul] Nitze was not. He had strong experience in the military.

Riley: This is the kind of thing somebody will come across 15 or 20 years from now and be surprised.

Steinberg: Part of it too is that, to be honest, the New Republic had a deep animus against Clinton. They really disliked Clinton, so anytime they could find a chance to take a shot, they did. If one of these writers could propose something to the editor that looked like a good shot at the Clinton administration, they’d take it. But I take much more seriously the exchange that I had with [Michael] Mandelbaum over the Balkans. Unlike this, which I would not dignify with a response, it was important to answer Michael’s charges. One of the things I feel best about was that I had a lot of fun working with Tom Malinowski on that piece for Foreign Affairs, and I feel very satisfied that we won that exchange.

Riley: Michael had been a supporter of the President in ’92.

Steinberg: There’s a story there, but I’m not going to give you that one.

Riley: That’s too bad. [laughter] I know enough to know that he was disappointed that he wasn’t brought in, and you’re nodding, but that’s as much as you’re going to tell me. How did you end up in the White House?

Steinberg: Happily my relations with everyone in the administration grew throughout this process. I had worked a lot with Tony, and I had worked a lot with Sandy on a daily basis. There was a very strong tie, in part because Tony and Christopher are not that personally close. Sandy had an excellent relationship with Christopher, so there was a lot of direct communication.

Riley: Was there a problem with Lake and Chris?

Steinberg: Just style. They were different kinds of people. Chris is a very methodical guy. Tony was a big-picture, not the yellow-lined legal pad kind of guy. I don’t think there were any deep
disagreements, but there was not a strong personal chemistry. I think Christopher felt more comfortable with Sandy. A lot of the day-to-day was handled on the Christopher-Berger channel. I spent a lot of time with Sandy. I was in his office all the time. We’d known each other before the administration some, but we became close. I was obviously close to Madeleine. We’d spent almost every day together in the ’87, ’88 period during the campaign and had worked together closely. It was clear that it was going to be Sandy and Madeleine for the second term.

I was in a good position of asking, for me, what would be most rewarding? The two options were either to become Under Secretary for Political Affairs or go to the White House. I felt that, having been in the State Department, the opportunity to go to the White House would be something that I would value and that would give me a different set of experiences and a different kind of challenges—more day-to-day management and less on the broader stuff. But I’d been the head of policy planning.

Sandy invited me over for lunch in the White House mess right after the election. I can’t remember the exact day. It would have been November for sure. He talked a little bit about his expectations. A certain advantage of having a former deputy who became National Security Advisor is that he knew all of the difficulties of being a deputy. We talked about a lot of those things, about what the role would be, and I had some pretty strong views about that. Fortunately, because he’d been deputy, he obviously could appreciate the value of having a strong, effective, and well-informed deputy. Establishing those principles, both in principle and in practice, turned out not to be difficult. Then he offered me the job, and for a variety of reasons, although I was intrigued by the PA [Political Affairs] job, the White House job seemed to be the best fit for me. So he offered it and I went.

Riley: Had you had much exposure to the President before you went over?

Steinberg: Some. I traveled with Christopher on all of Christopher’s trips, and Christopher traveled with Clinton on all of his trips. So most of my exposure to Clinton was during foreign travel. I was in all of the meetings with him in preparation for the meetings and stuff like that. I had been on Air Force One a couple of times for those things—obviously not the same way I did when I was in the White House, but I had spent a fair amount of time with him in a variety of different circumstances by the time I came over. He certainly knew who I was, and I had worked with him.

Riley: Did you like being in his company?

Steinberg: Oh yes. He’s an extraordinary figure. I’d met him with Dukakis. He’s a wonderful person. He’s a brilliant and extraordinarily imaginative and innovative thinker with great personal skills, and he knows how to develop personal relationships with people. It’s easy. He has a very high sense of comfort of how to bring people along, make them feel engaged, make them feel appreciated. There is a warmth that is genuine. He’s naturally interested and curious in what you do. I know it’s been hotly debated, but certainly by the time I started working with him, which was around year 2 ½ or 3 in the administration, he was deeply into and interested in the issues that we were working on. It was not like pulling teeth to get him to do things. He liked to talk about it; he liked to engage; he wanted to know more. So I found it quite easy.
Riley: You addressed obliquely the question about the earlier period.

Steinberg: I don’t know. There’s no way I could evaluate that because my only exposure to him was while traveling. I wasn’t in the meetings in the Oval Office. I don’t think I was in the Oval Office once in the first term, so I never saw that, and I don’t have any feel for what those things were like except when I saw him on travel. But that was a lot because we had trips to Moscow. We had lots of things. We went to Helsinki. I’d been with him on a number of those trips. There he was very engaged, very interested, very knowledgeable, very creative in thinking about this stuff. He clearly loved thinking and working on those issues.

Riley: And his relationships with these foreign leaders?

Steinberg: Extraordinary. That was the best. It was something that I began to appreciate in the (G-8) sherpa job, which is a unique and special thing. His ability to dominate those things, he understood the leaders magnificently, understood them as politicians, as human beings, as world leaders. He understood what made them work and what made them tick and how to get them on his side. There’s a magnetism about Clinton. There was no leader who didn’t want to be with him, spend time with him, engage with him, be associated with him. It was unbelievably magnetic, especially for other leaders, even more than for other people, even though he has that magnetism generally. He was able to be effective and influential because people wanted to work with him.

He was empathetic. It seems quite straightforward, but not that many people do it well. He could always put himself in the other person’s shoes. He could imagine what they were thinking, what their domestic political problems were, what their challenges were. He was always able to come up with creative solutions that would help them win. He was never interested in scoring points or in making somebody do something. He was always trying to get in their skin. You’d say, “Mr. President, we have to get the Russians to do this.” He’d say, “Think about how Yeltsin would think about it. Maybe he just can’t do this,” or, “What can we do to help him do this?” He had a strong sense of empathy and understanding of what motivated other leaders and what drove them. He never felt that it was useful to be contentious or combative. He’d be strong and clear, but he understood that at the end of the day, the best way was to convince the other guy to want what you wanted. His effectiveness on a one-on-one level was masterful.

Riley: So your interpretation, then, is that personal diplomacy is a good thing.

Steinberg: There’s no question. A lot of these leaders, they identified with him. Take [Jacques] Chirac, for example, a fascinating case. Clinton liked big men, literally, in a literal sense. He had an especially strong identity with them. Yeltsin, [Helmut] Kohl, Chirac were big men, big personalities, strong political leaders. We had all these fights and disputes with the French, but he had an ability—because he knew, because he could see what it meant for Chirac to do this—to wear off the edges, make it less contentious. I’m not a “realist” in that sense. There are obviously constraints that countries have, but there are things that leaders can do that can make a difference.

I’m quite certain—he is obviously the only President I’ve seen very close; I saw Carter a few times during the Carter administration—from looking at history, that nobody was any better.
There may have been others who were as good, but nobody was better at turning those personal skills. You can compare [Woodrow] Wilson at Versailles for example. Clinton has a very different ability of getting people to not want to be against him. They couldn’t always fully agree, but they didn’t want to be against him.

**Riley:** Were there any particular cases of people with whom he had trouble or who seemed resistant to his charms?

**Steinberg:** I’m thinking.

**Riley:** Middle East?

**Steinberg:** No, not Middle East. I would say that the closest was [Vladimir] Putin. I think Putin was quite indifferent to it. Clinton got it right away. Clinton was very skeptical about Putin from the first meeting. It’s so ironic with [George W.] Bush talking about looking into Putin’s soul. Clinton looked into Putin’s soul too, and he saw something completely different. He saw someone who was very cold and calculating, who was not trustworthy. He saw the KGB [Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti] background. I remember Clinton’s remarks. It was a very frosty first meeting. He said, “I understand where he’s coming from.” But there was no warmth. There was no connection or communication there. In that second meeting they had in the Kremlin, which I was not in—I was in the first meeting—they had a very small, private meeting. It also went equally badly. I would say that the only one who jumps to mind is Putin.

There were others. It was complicated with some of the Japanese Prime Ministers, in part because their tenures were so fleeting. In one minute they’d be gone. There was an awkward relationship between Clinton and [Ryutaro] Hashimoto. But the others, and especially the bigger figures, literally, such as Kohl, Yeltsin, Jiang, or [Fernando Henrique] Cardoso, some of the strong leaders, there was an especially strong bond. He was especially effective with them.

**Riley:** The Chinese?

**Steinberg:** He and Jiang had a very effective and strong relationship. There was no question that that helped a lot. Jiang wanted a relationship with Clinton, and that helped us get some things done and deal with some of the issues because of that.

**Riley:** What were you picking up in the post–[Monica] Lewinsky period? Was there confusion? We get the sense that people abroad were confused about how this managed to infect American politics.

**Steinberg:** I think that people were confused in the sense that, just as back in the Watergate era, people had questions about—given how successful they perceived [Richard] Nixon to be as a President—why everybody was giving him a hard time about the burglaries. There were a lot of people who couldn’t understand why this was being treated the way it was in the United States. But I don’t get the sense that people worried that it was affecting policy.

**Riley:** Sure.
Steinberg: I think they felt that when they were engaging with Clinton, he had their time and attention. The only time that I ever had a sense of this having an impact was during the very difficult trip to Moscow, I guess, in the first week of September. I don’t think it was the last week of August. I think it was the first week of September, after the Russian economy melted down. The two of them, Yeltsin and Clinton, were both not in a happy place. Yeltsin obviously had a catastrophe there, and there was very little Clinton could do to help him, which he felt bad about. We invested a lot. We tried to push for the IMF [International Monetary Fund] loan in the spring. Then everything fell apart. So you had two leaders who were dispirited. That’s the only time, with each in his own way dealing with his issues, that I saw anything in the global situation. Then we went from there to Northern Ireland, and Clinton was totally energized by the whole experience, and he was back to his old self.

Riley: You were on that trip.

Steinberg: This was not the first trip. This was a subsequent trip. This was well after the Good Friday Agreement. This was in ’99.

Riley: You were on that trip also?

Steinberg: I was not on the first trip to Belfast. I regret that. I would have loved to have been there. What happened was, he’d gone to Belfast for the famous lights speech, but we were in the middle of negotiating the new transatlantic charter for NATO at the same time. I forget where we were before Belfast. We were somewhere in Europe. Then Christopher and the State Department team went to Madrid, which was where the negotiations were going to take place. So we didn’t go to Belfast, and I missed that first trip. I missed the other trip to Ireland, which I regret. But we went directly to Madrid, and then they met us in Madrid.

Riley: I want to go back to something you mentioned earlier. You said that there was, at the beginning of the second term, a bottom-up review of U.S. foreign policy that took place during the second term. I wonder if you could go into a little more detail about what that involved, who was involved in it, what the major findings were, how it played out in the second term.

Steinberg: I think that both Sandy and Madeleine clearly wanted to put their own stamp on the second term. There was a sense—this is now post-Dayton and everything—that things had been turned around, that the wobbliness of the beginning had been addressed and that there was now a chance to establish this as a very significant Presidency in the foreign policy and national security sphere. But the only way that was going to happen was if there was a deliberate attempt to identify what we wanted to get done and to see the next four years as an ensemble—that is, to work backward and ask, “Where would we like to be four years from now, and what will it take to get there?” That meant both identifying what the priorities were and what we wanted to get done, and then developing the implementation to go along with the grand strategy.

So what we did, basically, was launched by Sandy and Madeleine, with a very small group of people from the NSC and State. I don’t believe that anybody from the Pentagon was involved in this part of the exercise. The three key people on the State Department side, along with Madeleine herself, were Wendy Sherman, Jamie Rubin, and Jim O’Brien. Wendy, a longtime friend of Madeleine’s, became counselor when Madeleine became Secretary. Jamie and Jim both
had been with her at USUN [United States Mission to the United Nations]. Then there were four or five of us at the NSC.

The idea was basically to ask, “What is this Presidency all about, and what would be the kinds of achievements that we can realistically hope to get done that would reflect the world that we want to leave behind?” A lot of time was spent brainstorming. What are the big issues out there? What are the opportunities? What are the risks? Papers were developed. Though there was a core group overseeing the whole thing, papers were farmed out to various parts of both the NSC and the State Department on different aspects of the policy. Then we came together with a framework document, with the goal of having the President, in his first State of the Union of the second term, basically lay it out and say, “Here’s what I hope to get done in my second term as President.”

There was a lot of debate back and forth about what are the priorities? How many do you have? What can you get done? What is the sequencing, with different people having their favorite views? There was an attempt to pick out both signature achievements but also things that were meaningful in terms of the overall strategy. I’m pretty sure that we ended up with six core goals, things that we wanted to get done. We set it out as a guide to action for ourselves, for the rest of the bureaucracy, to tell the world, “This is what we’re trying to get done.” It was a very useful, very valuable exercise, I think. It not only kept us focused, but it reminded us of what we were about so that we didn’t get distracted from the day-to-day.

Riley: Was the document published?

Steinberg: I don’t think the document was published, but if you look at the State of the Union, at the section on foreign policy, I’m quite sure that we laid out the headline objectives. I don’t think a document was published. If you look at the next iteration of the national security strategy, it’s all in there. But the best expression of it—it’s always too short; people never get as much in the State of the Union as they want—is in the ’97 State of the Union address.

Riley: Did Defense give you any trouble later on for being cut out?

Steinberg: Having done this, we then brought it more back into the regular process to make sure that people were on board. It’s different in different administrations, but I think the feeling was, from a policy planning point of view, that the Pentagon is a support agency rather than a lead agency, that the policy choices primarily ought to be driven by NSC and State. Although it was fully reflective of this—I don’t think people were disappointed—the more interesting questions were on the economic side.

The reality is—and it is one of the more interesting parts of the evolution of the Clinton administration—that we deeply integrated the economic issues. We succeeded in something that had been tried ever since the early ’70s, which was bringing the economics into the heart of national security decisionmaking. Part of it was Sandy’s background, because he had a strong trade background. That helped, in part because we had excellent relations with Treasury, both with [Robert] Rubin and [Lawrence] Summers.

We developed a strategy on the deputy’s level. Lael Brainard was the deputy, and she and I co-chaired almost all of the meetings. Rather than argue about who had the lead on things, we
would just co-chair the meetings. There was a lot of economics in this grand strategy. PNTR for China, a new global trade round and things like that. So if anybody would have had a reason to feel slightly excluded, it might have been the economic agencies, but I think we brought them around enough. There was certainly no debate or resistance, because everybody got their hands in on the State of the Union, at least when it was laid out as the things that we were going to try to get done.

Riley: You had some shared staff also with the NEC [National Economic Council]?

Steinberg: Yes.

Riley: And that seemed to work okay?

Steinberg: The international economic directorate had—we used this strategy all through the NSC, which I think was one of the most important innovations that we did. We had shared staff with the NEC on international economics. We had shared staff with the CEQ [Council on Environmental Quality] on environment. We had shared staff with OSTP [Office of Science and Technology Policy] on science policy. Then we had shared staff with HHS [Health and Human Services] on health. So this was a strategy that we used pretty much across the board as a way of trying to figure out how to integrate all of these different parts into the NSC process.

Riley: When you came to the NSC, did it look like you thought it would look? Were you surprised by anything that you discovered when you came in?

Steinberg: I think I was surprised. The thing that was most striking was the incredible level of talent and commitment of the NSC staff. Even though they come from other agencies, it is absolutely an extraordinary collection of men and women who work unbelievably hard, and they are the best. The best people want to do that, and they end up there. I’ve never worked with a better group of people. I’d say there were 80 or 90 professionals on the staff there. They were performing so far above an A-plus level all the time. They were so committed, and they so much believed in what they were doing. It was an inspiring sense of what public service and commitment were about. I loved working with them, every one of them. The level of what they produced for a relatively small staff—there was huge debate in the literature and the politics about the NSC staff, but boy, the country gets its money’s worth. It’s very impressive.

Riley: What were the two or three issues or developments that occurred during the second term that you’d most like to talk about?

Steinberg: I think China is very important, and I had a big role on China, so I was very preoccupied with that. When I came in, my first thing was to get comfortable with China and Asia because I didn’t feel a high degree of comfort with my experience. I came out being more of an Asianist than a Europeanist 7 ½ years later.

Because I had begun with the MFN de-linkage in ’94 and then had been a dissenter in the State Department on Lee Teng-hui’s visit to Cornell—the only significant decision where Christopher did not take my advice—I had a big stake in this. I inherited from Sandy the responsibility for being the private channel to Taiwan. So I handled all of that. Then I became the point person on organizing the visits with Jiang.
Riley: How delicate was that?

Steinberg: It was pretty delicate, and it was very important because both sides have a lot at stake. Politically it is the most precarious of any relationship that the United States has. There’s very little constituency for strong U.S.-China relations, and there are a lot of interests and perspectives that are very skeptical, ranging from the right, with its worries about Chinese military modernization and military rivalry, to the left, with human rights, Tibet, religion, etc. Yet there’s nothing more important. So handling that and developing that relationship as China rises is one of the most important challenges facing the United States. So I put a lot of emphasis on that.

Riley: That relationship has to be White House-oriented or can it be—

Steinberg: It has to be White House-oriented because it involves every facet of the U.S. Government. One of the great debates is about the relevant roles of the White House and about the NSC versus the agencies. The problem now is that almost every big problem is so multifaceted that it is very hard for any one executive agency to own it. State historically tried to re-create it by having an economics bureau and things like that. But now, since we’re dealing with a very multidimensional, globalized world, the role of the White House is much more central than it ever was. It is inescapable. But China was one of those issues. The Pentagon had a set of interests, Treasury had a set of interests, USTR had a set of interests, and Congress had a set of interests. There was no place else where you could bring all of this together. So I would say that that’s one.

Obviously, personally the Northern Ireland peace process was very gratifying. A lot of groundwork had been done—the decision to give [Gerry] Adams the visa before I got there. But I was involved in the day-to-day negotiations over the Good Friday Agreement. It was not the most important strategic development, but it was very rewarding personally. I developed some terrific relationships with the people in Northern Ireland, in the Irish Republic, and in Britain over this. My personal relationship with Tony Blair grew out of that because I actually spent a lot of time with Blair personally over the Northern Ireland issue, with Bertie Ahern and others, as well as [David] Trimble, Adams—

Riley: You say you were spending time with Blair personally. You were going over to see him individually?

Steinberg: Yes, I actually got to spend a weekend at Chequers with Blair over the course of the negotiations. This was after the initial visit of ’97; this was ’98. I spent the weekend there, and I had access to Blair personally throughout the whole time.

Riley: What was his relationship with Clinton?

Steinberg: It was extraordinary. They’d get going and it was a virtual cycle of energy and excitement and innovation about ideas. You’d feel like they were two kids, their eyes wide open with the possibilities. They were passionate about policy and ideas. They wanted to talk about these things and go on and on. There was nothing that didn’t interest the two of them. They had so many things in common in terms of their approaches to government and what they thought was the function and responsibility of government. It was quite extraordinary.
Riley: Were you surprised at how close Blair evidently became with the subsequent President?

Steinberg: Yes, I was. I wouldn’t have guessed it. I understand a little bit about it. I remain close. I haven’t seen much of Blair. I saw him a couple of times after we left, but I’ve seen Jonathan Powell and Alistair [Campbell] fairly regularly. I think part of it is a tribute to Blair’s sense that it was an important part of his role to develop that relationship, but there turned out to be personality issues that one wouldn’t have guessed they had in common too.

Riley: In your dealings with Blair, is there anything in particular that you can comment on? Any descriptions of meetings?

Steinberg: I loved working with him because he cared so much. Mostly we focused on the Northern Ireland issue, but we were involved in the Balkans and other things. It was his personal sense of responsibility of what a leader has to do, to spare no effort and to make everything work that he can. His personal sense of responsibility, I think, is enormously impressive. His commitment was not for personal gain or glory. He cares so deeply about it, and he surrounded himself with bright, talented people. So it was always a treat. There was certainly no sense of “I’m a Prime Minister and you’re just a staff person.” I mean, we were on a great first-name basis, very easy, comfortable. You could talk candidly; you could exchange views. I could disagree with him, and he could disagree with me. It was very personally rewarding. He was the only, I guess, head of government with whom I could say I had that kind of relationship other than Clinton himself. So it was very special for me to be able to have that.

On most of the things, I was Sandy’s deputy. It was very rewarding for me that Sandy involved me in everything. There was no division of labor. I wasn’t cut out of anything, but I was definitely the deputy—except on this, where I was the principal. Sandy was involved, but this one was mine.

Riley: Why did you become the principal on this one?

Steinberg: In part I was inheriting it. Nancy Soderberg had been in the White House, had run it, although a little bit with Tony. Sandy personally, because it had been kind of a Tony and Nancy thing, hadn’t been involved in those relationships. I go back to John Kennedy. I knew a lot of these individuals from the Kennedy days. So it was natural for me to step into it, and I was quite enthusiastic about being part of it. I had a relationship with George Mitchell that predated this. That was obviously very rewarding.

Riley: You’ve talked about how Blair and Clinton are alike. Are there important differences between the two of them that you can comment on?

Steinberg: Blair is a little more methodical in his style. Clinton kind of grabs the whole thing. I hesitate to be too psychosocial about these things, but I think the combination of Blair’s proto-Catholicism and his—made him focus a lot on the details, whereas Clinton would get people in the room and get it done. He’d put his arm around Trimble or put his arm around Adams and say, “We have to get this done.” It was a little bit of the big-man, smaller-man thing. Clinton tried to use his magnetism more, whereas Blair tried to use his ideas, his mind, and his arguments more. Clinton thought he could do it with force of personality. This is one case where I think he was able to use his force of personality as a big mover.
Riley: And the combination of these things was essential for what happened in Ireland?

Steinberg: Absolutely, no question. You needed somebody working the day-to-day the way Blair did, staying with it and putting political capital on the line, but you also needed somebody who could raise the people above the day-to-day and see the bigger picture, which Clinton was incredibly effective at.

Riley: What did Mitchell bring to the equation?

Steinberg: Mitchell brought the ability to have the Americans in the room all the time. They respected him as a Senator, and he just camped out there, even more than I did. I went regularly, but George lived there for months. It showed that the Americans cared. It wasn’t just a publicity stunt. It was a measure of the degree to which the United States was invested in the outcome. In the same way, Dennis Ross’s personal involvement in the Middle East was a measure of that. He clearly spoke for and had access to the President.

We would do this all the time. We had a standing offer that we used constantly, which was that if George wanted to, he could pick up the phone and get Clinton on the line, and it made a difference to these guys. If you were in a room with Trimble and Adams, you needed to get a hard decision made. The fact that they knew that George could get Bill Clinton to come to the phone, which we did four times the night before the Good Friday Agreement was signed, it made a huge difference in helping the parties understand the U.S. role and our stake in this.

Riley: Ireland was the big accomplishment—anything else?

Steinberg: Kosovo, again, everybody in the administration was very involved in it, but I was deeply involved. We knew Kosovo was coming. Beginning in ’98, it was clear to me that there was going to be a military conflict. There was a lot of pressure in ’98 when the first round of violence that was instigated by [Slobodan] Milosevic began. There was lot of pressure on the United States to do something. It was also clear to me that if we didn’t bring the allies along, there would be a disaster. It would be another case of the United States trying to bigfoot. The cost would have been greater than the benefit. So we had to have a patient and deliberate strategy that anticipated the fact that ultimately this was not going to be solved diplomatically. But we had to convince the Europeans that we had explored all of the options.

I remember the meetings in the winter of February and early March of ’98, laying out the strategy, going to the UN. We had a game plan that we had to follow. Ultimately we knew this wasn’t going to work, but we needed to convince the world and establish legitimacy that all of these diplomatic avenues had been pursued if we ended up having to use force. My friends at Brookings wrote the book called Winning Ugly. I think it’s a little unfair. But like all complex foreign policy strategy, we had to be prepared. You have to know that people are going to snipe at you, that the press would ask, “Why aren’t you intervening? Why are you doing these sanctions?” But we knew what we were doing. Ultimately it succeeded. We were able to get to a place where we didn’t divide the alliance, where we were ultimately able to get the Russians to become a constructive part of it.

The story that unfolded from January of ’98 through the ultimate conclusion in June of ’99 was something that we got a tremendous amount of criticism about—the bad early days. Did we
Did we think a few bombs would cause Milosevic to give in? But the fact is, we had anticipated most of these things. We were prepared for it. We had played the whole thing out from where we wanted to end up back to the question how do we get there? The result was one that we could feel proud of. It was a huge victory for me. Nobody believed us. They didn’t trust us. They thought we didn’t know what we were doing, but the fact is, we did. We executed. It was a critical moment, I think, for the administration, for NATO, and for Europe that we were able to get it done. Obviously a lot of people were involved, but this was my day-to-day responsibility. Though I traveled a lot with Sandy and Clinton in the first part of the term, I basically stopped traveling in ’98 because my job was to get this handled.

By the way, the other thing I’d say on the positive side was that I was fortunate to have the most extraordinary, wonderful group of deputies to work with. The deputies committee is an enormously important part of making the government work. It is kind of the chief operating officer, day-to-day, boiler-room part of the operation. We had a great group of people—Strobe, Joe Ralston, John Gordon over at CIA, a combination of John Hamre and Walt Slocombe, depending on the issue, from the Pentagon. They worked together incredibly well and were an incredibly effective team. They represented the interests of their organizations well, but they understood at the end of the day that you had to come around—as we used to say, “check your hat at the door”—to solve the problems.

We met together constantly in formal meetings. We had lunch once a week. They were extraordinary people to work with. A lot of the accomplishments, I think, came from this incredibly effective working relationship that we had with each other. Kosovo was the most important example of that, where we hung together and made it work. Ralston in particular—a guy I have enormous admiration for, wonderful advice, helped us a lot—was able to mediate between the perspectives of the Pentagon and us, which were often awkward. There was a lot of mistrust at the Pentagon about what the White House was doing. Joe was always the go-to guy to get it done.

Riley: Wes Clark’s role in this was a little complicated?

Steinberg: It was complicated. Wes was under a lot of pressure. He had a lot to prove. He had always had complex relationships with his superiors. I had an excellent relationship with Wes, and I think that helped, although it caused certain tensions in the Pentagon because they knew that he had a direct channel to us. I think that in the end, although I know it wasn’t appreciated over there, it was probably a good thing because we were able to give him some reassurance. He was on the line too in different ways. He played his role in a way that I’m not troubled by, because at the end of the day, when the President made the decisions, Wes understood what they were, even if he disagreed with some of them. I think he deserves a lot of credit for the positive results as well.

Riley: Is there a good published account of Kosovo?

Steinberg: I think mine’s the best. [laughter]

Riley: I should have seen that one coming.
Steinberg: I want to point out one more thing, which I feel very strongly about, which I was very involved with, which was Kyoto.

Riley: Okay.

Steinberg: There were a lot of complications about the substance of it and whether the treaty was workable. There were some technical issues and things like that. But I think one of the most important achievements of the Clinton administration was taking that seriously too. We recognized, one, that it was a problem that had to be dealt with. Two, it was critical for the United States to be seen as a leader and as a player, and that while there are plenty of arguments for domestic politics, which Bush obviously succumbed to totally—the economy, it’s unfair, etc.—this was something that if you’re going to be a global leader, you have to address. It’s one of the dominant issues of our time.

We identified it early on, not surprising given VP [Albert] Gore’s [Jr.] interest and others, but all of us. The NSC got deeply involved in that. I was involved in the day-to-day negotiations, including the backstopping of the talks. It was, I think, quite important. Even though it wasn’t perfect, had there been another Democratic administration following Clinton, we could have perfected it. We would have been able to go forward. The United States would have been seen as part of the solution and not as part of the problem. We were able to find a way to be part of that process and to play a constructive leadership role, something that was very important over time. The failure of this administration to do that is one of the most costly things they did.

Riley: You mentioned the Vice President here but not in any other context. What was your perception of him?

Steinberg: The Vice President was involved a lot. He played a very important role in Kosovo because he was a very strong supporter of the course of action that we were pursuing, and that helped in awkward times to know that the Vice President was there and that he was prepared to make the decisions, to use force. I think that was very reassuring to the President.

But the distinctive role that the Vice President played was that he had a set of problems that he had particular responsibility for, and he handled them fantastically. Gore-[Viktor] Chernomyrdin in handling the Russia account, Gore-[Hosni] Mubarak, Gore-[Thabo] Mbeki. He had a set of things in which he was very influential. What he did well was recognize that there was a limit to how much you can have the Vice President and the Vice President’s staff try to duplicate, be something separate. What [Richard] Cheney has done has been a catastrophe, in my judgment, not only because of the substantively bad judgments but because it undermines the integrity of the whole NSC system if you’re having a parallel process. The Vice President was very respectful of that. He knew that as an advisor to the President he could have his views—he had his regular lunches with the President—but he didn’t try to disrupt the process.

Leon [Fuerth], who was fabulous, was always there, present at every deputies’ meeting. He was a constructive member who didn’t try to say, “The Vice President is going to bigfoot this,” or, “We’re going to do something different.” So I don’t think it in any way detracts from the importance that Gore played to say that he understood that you could be very disruptive as a Vice President if you were to say, “There’s this whole process, but we’re going to short circuit it
all, and I’m going to go around it.” They never did. He always fed back in through the process, and it was greatly appreciated by everybody else.

Riley: Did you have any ongoing relations with members of Congress?

Steinberg: Staff.

Riley: Was there a Congressional relations?

Steinberg: Staff. I worked in Congress. I know members. Members like to see the big guys. I obviously had some personal relationships. There were members whom I knew personally. But that was one place where there was a real division of labor. Sandy and Madeleine and Bill Cohen would meet with the members, and I would meet with staff. I particularly took on the job of working with the Republican leadership. That’s where the big challenges were. I started having regular lunches and meetings with some of the key Republican staff because we needed to keep them on our side as best we could. That was my piece of the action—almost none with the members, but pretty regularly with some of the key staff.

Riley: On balance, was working with the Republican Congress a good thing or a bad thing for the administration with respect to foreign policy?

Steinberg: It was bad. I don’t mean to sound partisan, but unfortunately there was such animus against Clinton that it was not treated in a serious and fair way. There were moments, like when Senator [Trent] Lott criticized President Clinton for the so-called Desert Fox attacks on Iraq, after having advocated them for months. He had to impugn the President’s motives. If he hadn’t attacked Iraq, Senator Lott would have impugned him for not doing it. So I regret to say that with a few exceptions, the Republican leadership was partisan, and was not serving the best interests of the country. They were more interested in scoring points than in collegiality.

It was not true of everybody. As for the staff, I would say that it was not true. I had a good relationship with the staff. I don’t think they were trying to do that. But with [Christopher] Cox and the China missile allegation, it was dishonest and quite vindictive. The Wen Ho Lee affair was driven not by serious and thoughtful examination of what served the national security interests, but was pure partisanship. I don’t think the Republican leadership covered itself with glory during this period.

Riley: Do you remember back in your State years whether there was a revisiting of possibilities after losing Congress in ’94?

Steinberg: Christopher tried, but that was not his strength. He’s not a politician. Madeleine did better with her fabled relationship with Jesse Helms. I think it was the right thing to do. Christopher believed in it in principle and was very gracious and courteous, but he didn’t have any chemistry with the politicians.

Riley: You had, as a part of your portfolio when you came over to the National Security Council, the task of helping remedy the political problem of the contacts between the NSC and the party.
Steinberg: No. I saw that in the clips. I never did a single thing on that. There had been an issue about the DNC [Democratic National Committee] contacts, which happened in the first term, of which I have no firsthand knowledge. Sandy wanted to clean it up, so I was designated as the person to have the contacts. I don’t believe that in the entire time I was in the White House that I ever had a single contact. It was done to insulate the rest of the staff, but at no point, I’m quite sure, did I ever have a conversation with anybody.

Riley: By that time, with the election behind you—

Steinberg: Yes, I was the designee, but I don’t think there was ever a conversation.

Riley: All right. You lose the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in the second term—in a provocative way, as I recall. I think the Republicans called this up to vote. Do you remember anything?

Steinberg: I do. This was another example of point scoring and partisanship. I blame a lot of people for that. I also blame a lot of the opinion leaders on the Republican side. There is a certain irony that Secretary [George] Shultz and Secretary [Henry] Kissinger have now come around, in this famous series of editorials they’ve done with Secretary Perry and Sam Nunn, to the view that we should have the CTBT [Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty]. They were not helpful at the time. I suppose that was their best judgment, but this was enormously damaging to the United States globally. It was incomprehensible why the Senate didn’t ratify it. The stockpile-stewardship issues were not, in my judgment, as serious as they were made out to be. Plus there was the supreme national-interest clause that allowed you to withdraw if it came to that, and failure to ratify was damaging to the U.S. prestige.

Going back to my point about Kyoto, there was a certain leadership issue. We helped negotiate for CTBT, and we were abiding by it, so it was not as if we got a benefit for not ratifying. I think that a lot of this was the spirit of the times, which was, rather than having a thoughtful examination or thinking about whether there were some reservations that could have been adopted, there wasn’t a strategy on the Republican side to help make it work. It was done in a very political environment, very costly—ironically, unlike the Chemical Weapons Convention, which, as you know, passed. There the Republican leadership was very constructive and very helpful. There it helped that the chemical industry was on the side of half the Senate, which was not trivial in these contexts. But that was a great success.

Both of these were, by the way, on the list of priorities in that State of the Union message in ’97. The CWC [Chemical Weapons Convention] was a very important achievement, and the defeat of the CTBT was very damaging, and I deeply regret it. When I look back at the regrets, I would say that Seattle—the attempt to launch a new trade round—and CTBT are two of the things that I feel were the biggest disappointments.

Riley: You made a reference to that earlier when you felt that maybe the internal staffing—

Steinberg: Our folks on the trade side believed in the theory that launching trade rounds were in the too-big-to-fail category and that if we could hold our ground, at the end of the day we could get to the so-called green room, where all of the parties come together the night before and somehow pull a rabbit out of the hat. It was worth preserving all of your cards and all of your
chips until the last minute. But in fact they had the dynamic exactly wrong. We had created such ill will and such a bad atmosphere going in that the global climate was strained. Now, people can say no to the United States, and they did. We failed to make some important concessions in improving the atmosphere, the sense of good will on the United States’ part in the run-up to Seattle, which made it impossible for us to save it at the last minute.

We argued about this for the months leading up, in which the NSC staff—and I was very involved in this—and someone kept saying, “For God’s sakes, you need to enlist some allies. You need to show that the United States understands why people are mad about the Uruguay Round and why they think the TRIPs [Trade Related Intellectual Properties] and TRIMs [Trade Related Investment Measures] were bad for the developing countries, and show that you’re going to do something about this.” But we lost that argument. They kept saying, “We’re the pros. We know how these things work. Don’t worry.” The President trusted their judgment. It was very damaging. Not so much not getting the round itself—that was some damage, but the prestige damage was very high.

Riley: We haven’t talked much about the Middle East, especially in the second term.

Steinberg: The main reason we haven’t is that, as important as it was, I did not play a major role. I was in Sandy’s office for all of the meetings, but one of the things you learn in government is that you can’t do everything. Sometimes there are plenty of people doing it, and they don’t need you to do it. So I was always available to give Sandy my second opinion on things, but I didn’t go to Camp David. I stayed behind to tend to the other business. I didn’t go to Wye. I stayed behind. Because Sandy and I had such a good relationship, when he felt like he needed to give his full time to things like that, he would literally say, “You just handle the rest of it.” But the price of that was that although I was very involved in the first term with Christopher, I was a back-bencher and a second-seater. There’s a lot to be said, but I’m not the best person.

Riley: But as a close observer, are there pieces of that that we have gotten wrong or—

Steinberg: I have my view about Camp David, which is, first of all, Clinton was right to have convened it, in part because we were very motivated. I think this is little appreciated by the fact that [Yasser] Arafat had been threatening throughout 2000 to issue a unilateral declaration of independence. There was a strong conviction among all of us that this would blow everything up, both in the literal and figurative sense, and that the only way of forestalling it was to make a big move to negotiate. That’s number one.

Number two, I don’t think a President of the United States can say no to an Israeli Prime Minister when he says, “I want to make a shot at this.” You can say that Arafat wasn’t prepared. It’s true that Arafat didn’t want it, but of course Arafat didn’t want to go. He didn’t want to get jammed. But I think the President was right to do it. I think that ultimately the most important responsibility for the failure was Arafat’s unwillingness. I’m convinced that he never would have been willing. He had no incentive to conclude an agreement. He had incentive to keep the process going, move things along, get more concessions. If there was going to be an agreement, he was the Moses who was never going to go into the promised land.

Riley: Sure.
Steinberg: He was not going to do it. And I place some of the blame on some of the other key Arab governments, who didn’t put any pressure on him. They claim that they weren’t consulted enough in the beginning. If they weren’t in at the takeoff, then they couldn’t be in on the landing. There’s probably some truth to the fact that we didn’t do enough ground work with them beforehand. But nevertheless, when the time came and the issues were on the table, I think they could have been more helpful. That’s the only thing that I can add to the record.

Riley: So you don’t think that summits are inherently a bad idea.

Steinberg: No, I think they’re sometimes essential. You have to think about it. You have to be prepared for failure and think about what the consequences of failure are, but sometimes the only way to get it to happen—and it isn’t always going to happen—is to be well prepared in the sense that you have to have a strategy for them, but they don’t have to be pre—sometimes you just have to go do it.

Riley: I had wondered, when I was asking you about Clinton’s relationships with foreign leaders, whether Arafat was immune to his charms.

Steinberg: No, I don’t think he was immune to his charms. I believe that Arafat thought that he literally would not have survived signing an agreement. For him it was an existential question. There was ultimately never going to be a deal that was good enough for him to feel that he wouldn’t be considered a traitor for doing it. Therefore he didn’t have enough of an incentive to do it.

Riley: Iraq? We haven’t talked about Iraq. That becomes huge later. I’m sure that historians are going to want to look back.

Steinberg: Ultimately I think most of us believed that Saddam [Hussein] could be contained and that it had to be an active containment policy. That’s why, after the debacle of the Kofi visit to Baghdad and the undermining of the inspectors because of that visit, we had to force the issue that ultimately led to [Richard] Butler’s being thrown out and the Desert Fox bombing. We felt that if we could keep the pressure on, that it would be worth it. Certainly at no point did we contemplate invading and overthrowing.

We did sign the Iraq Liberation Act. We were in a pretty weak position politically, and we were pretty confident that it wasn’t going to force us to do anything. I’m not saying that we wouldn’t have liked to have seen a different regime there. That’s right. I think you can debate the rhetorical switch in ’98. People on the left would argue Saddam had no way out because our posture clearly implied that we would never lift the sanctions. I don’t buy it, to be honest, and that wasn’t Saddam’s game.

So we had a containment strategy that was based on the no-fly zones—ultimately the Desert Fox attack, which in retrospect turned out to be very effective in damaging a lot of his infrastructure. We didn’t see enough in it. It’s not like we didn’t hear the arguments. [Paul] Wolfowitz and those guys used to come in to see Sandy all the time to make their arguments. “We should have these enclaves. If we create an enclave in the South, people will rise up and get rid of Saddam for us.”
We decided in ’98 that we could not continue to be the victims of Saddam’s cheat and retreat strategy and playing yo-yo with the inspectors, which is why we forced the issue. We were just as happy to have the inspectors thrown out so that we weren’t pinned down by that. Obviously we believed that there were biological and chemical weapons. Nobody believed that there were nuclear weapons or an active nuclear program. So when we did the strikes, they were designed largely to reduce his ability to deliver BWCW [Biological Warfare Chemical Warfare], so we went after the missile factories and things like that. It wasn’t very satisfactory, but on the other hand, we weren’t paying a huge price for it. There were mixed signals from the Saudis about what they wanted. We didn’t have any confidence that if we went for regime change that we would have the support from Arab countries. So it was never seriously contemplated that we would do other than what we did, which was to keep him contained.

Riley: Are there two or three favorite stories from your time there that we haven’t heard?

Steinberg: The other thing that I think was quite important in terms of the evolution of how the United States sees itself in the world was the Asian financial crisis. I use this a lot because it’s a great case study of government decisionmaking and of how the structures of decisionmaking make a difference. When the crisis began to raise its head, beginning in Thailand, this was seen through a traditional lens of this is an economic issue. It’s the Thai currency. This is something that the Treasury knows a lot about. But what does that mean? It means the Treasury has to lead. The meetings were held at Treasury. We’d all tramp over to Bob Rubin’s conference room or to Larry’s conference room to talk about these things.

Some of us thought, *Gee, Thailand, treaty ally, important proto-democracy.* But from the economic agreement perspective it was more like, “This is a very complex currency issue, and there’s not much we can do, and it’s their own fault anyway.” So the initial reaction was all from an IMF-Treasury perspective. “Yes, there are great treaties, but it’s their own profligacy, and they didn’t listen to the IMF. You can’t put the IMF on the line because their situation is too dire, and if they fail, the IMF’s credibility will be hit.” We went through this whole drama, and then Thailand went down the drain. It caused tremendous bad will in Thailand toward the United States. What was worse was that at the same time that we felt we weren’t prepared to do anything, the Chinese, of all countries, put up a billion-dollar line of credit to support the IMF in Thailand. It was clear after that that we at the NSC and State had missed the boat. Obviously there were important financial issues here, but there were other important considerations going on.

As the contagion spread, particularly when it moved to Indonesia, we insisted that the meetings move to the White House. It was clear that if they were to be held at Treasury, you could tell how they were going to come out. Then there was a great debate about, “Where is it going to be held?” Ultimately it was decided that only the Chief of Staff would hold the meetings because Treasury and economic people were never going to let Sandy chair the meeting. We weren’t going to let Gene Sperling chair the meeting or Bob. So we ultimately started meeting in the Chief of Staff’s office.

There were extraordinary daily meetings, with Bob Rubin and everybody else debating about Suharto of Indonesia. All of a sudden Treasury had become experts. Suharto was too corrupt. It was not until the contagion spread to Korea that finally the process was able to see the stakes.
We were sitting around, and I remember that Bob—I think this is in Bob Rubin’s book, maybe in Paul Bluestein’s book—as the situation got worse and worse in Korea, Bob said, “Look, by now the reserves are going out at X million per day. I think there is only a one-in-three chance that the Korean Government will intervene.” I said, “Bob, this is the last front line in Asia. We have 35,000 troops there. That sounds like pretty good odds to me.”

Ultimately Treasury came along, and we did the right thing in Korea. It was remarkable. Even though we made a lot of progress in integrating the economic and security stuff, it took that crisis for people to understand that you cannot have these stovepipes or reserved bits. Until and unless the President can get an integrated look at this from everybody and understand where the tradeoffs are, you’re not going to make good policy. In the end we came out okay. But we paid a very big price early on, and there were a lot of questions about U.S. leadership in the early stages because we didn’t organize ourselves properly to handle that. It was the fault of us at the NSC and State not to appreciate early on how much bigger this was and how important it was not to let this be seen entirely through our Treasury-IMF lens.

**Riley:** Did you think that the President had a pretty good grasp of this, or was he relying on his people?

**Steinberg:** He’s relying on his people in the sense that he had enormous amount of respect for Bob Rubin. There were issues where he felt, *Bob has done so well for me.* See, Suharto was another one of these big men. Clinton knew Suharto. They had had the APEC [Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation] Conference in Bogor in ’95. So all of a sudden it became very personal for Clinton. He said, “Wait a minute. Yes, there are problems with Suharto, but he’s a leader. He’s done a lot for his country.” Clinton engaged at the point when it became Suharto, and then obviously when it became Korea. But that transformed Clinton’s sense of the stakes in this crisis, when he could think about it in terms of, what is Suharto going through? and, how is he feeling about this and the choices he’s facing? He realized how it would feel to have your friend, the United States, turn its back because you made these mistakes and you had unacceptable economic policies or whatever. So that was a big turning point.

**Riley:** Overall a successful President in foreign policy?

**Steinberg:** I think so. There are million books written.

**Riley:** But I’m talking to you.

**Steinberg:** I understand, but I think that, given the constraints, it was very successful. We touched on the political environment. I think we were very hurt by what I described. I’m prepared to speak publicly about what I thought was the pettiness and partisanship of the Republican leadership, which was very damaging to the United States and which constrained the President’s ability to do a lot of important things. He was always fighting rear-guard actions. Even in Bosnia, he was constantly being sniped at by the Republicans. Every time we did things that they would have thought were right if they had been done by somebody else in the White House, the Republicans weren’t prepared to give the President credit. They were trying to pin him down. All the allegations about the Chinese political contributions, the Hughes missile, they
were all designed to weaken the President and to make it harder for us to conduct foreign policy. That was a big constraint, and it was costly.

I think that there were costs from that very rocky first year. That’s why I’m writing this book on Presidential transitions, because I think it is important, not just for Clinton but for every President who has had a rocky first year, to try to find a way to start off better, because I think you pay a disproportionately high price for problems in that first year. You’re disproportionately likely to encounter them in that first year. I think that we were not as effective at articulating and getting through to people what we were trying to accomplish. We certainly were trying. I don’t think it was that we failed to appreciate the importance of public diplomacy and articulation. We worked on speeches. We thought about it a lot. It was very deliberately in our consciousness.

With terrorism, we thought we were communicating with the American people, starting with that New York ’95 speech, about how important this was. You’ve seen the things that people in the administration have written. We can show you a dozen speeches, a dozen times where Clinton identified this problem, and yet people perceive, and the conventional wisdom is, that we didn’t. Obviously we failed to communicate. Given the effectiveness of President Clinton we had as a communicator, that’s a failure to communicate.

But in terms of switching the orientation to a post–Cold War world in which the United States was a big power but in which very few problems could be solved by the United States acting alone, I think that we had a good grasp of those challenges—such as the need to be an engaged but effective partner and the need to build international institutions and patterns of cooperation. We recognized that a lot of these new challenges were not state-to-state challenges but that they were new threats, such as climate change and pandemic disease and the like, which I think we did a very good job of identifying and preparing the U.S. Government to deal with.

We also handled a number of the big, on-your-plate crises, especially in the Balkans, which I think is the most significant. Whether it was the Taiwan missile crisis in ’96 or other moments, they required significant skill and subtlety in handling them. I think that nobody is every fully satisfied with the outcomes. There obviously are more things that we wish we could have accomplished, but in terms of having a strategy and a perception, I give us good marks. On execution, I give us fairly good marks given the constraints.

Riley: Where would you go into the files that exist if you were a historian?

Steinberg: That’s a good question. The file issue is, I think, one of the most perplexing ones. I have literally no notes from my seven-plus years in government. I took no notes because every time anybody took notes, they ended up in Congress. They ended up being subpoenaed. It wasn’t worth it. It’s a huge loss, because I can tell you, you do these oral histories but you don’t have the contemporaneous notes. But we understood the Federal Records Act rules. I could make contemporaneous notes. If I threw them away at the end of the day—and I did—they were not federal records. Nothing was saved. There’s literally nothing—nothing left behind and nothing taken away. So I don’t know what others did, and I don’t know what’s available.

Riley: We hear this. I’ve done 110 of these for Clinton, and I would say that 107 or 108 of them have said exactly the same thing.
Steinberg: And it’s a tremendous loss. As a teacher now involved with oral history, I get a huge amount. We’ve been doing some work—as everybody does here—thinking about the Vietnam question. There’s the great debate about, what did [Dwight] Eisenhower tell Jack Kennedy about Vietnam? They are turning up a lot of stuff out of the archives. It’s very interesting stuff. We’re not going to have very much of this. I couldn’t in good faith tell my successor that you should put yourself on the line to do it. Because of these political problems, there will be somebody asking, why did you write that down? The handwritten notes on intelligence, it is a disservice to history and to a good study of policy that we can’t have these things.

Riley: Is it also a complication in governance? Do you learn to get by on your memory, or were there occasions where you would have been more effective if you’d had a two-page, closely recorded memo of a meeting that had happened two months before?

Steinberg: Obviously you learn to get by. From that perspective, it is hard to judge how much more benefit you get.

Riley: This comes up constantly.

Steinberg: You clearly would be better off if you understood what you understood and what your assumptions were at the time. You could go back and look at it. There’s no question, I can’t do the quantity, but the arrow points in the direction that says it would be better to have these records, though I can’t see anybody doing it. It’s unfortunate. It’s not just your personal pain that you risk but pain to others to put them through it. This all started in the Clinton administration with the famous Josh Steiner episode. Josh had worked for me in the ’88 campaign, so I knew him well. Wonderful young man. This is the horror. Not only was it embarrassing to him, but it was also embarrassing to the people he worked for, which he clearly wasn’t trying to do.

Riley: I’m very grateful for the time you’ve taken today. I know that you’re doing some writing, and I hope you’ll continue because one of the things that I discover as I do these interviews is that there are some people whose memories seem to be pretty acute and some whose memories aren’t. Yours is acute. You obviously still have a lot in your head that we haven’t gotten onto tape. So keep writing.

Steinberg: If there are specific things that you want to come back on, I’d be willing to try to find the time to do it.

Riley: You’ll get the transcript back, and if there are particular episodes or observations that come to mind as you read this, you should feel free to type up a quick appendix or, if you want to, give me a call and have me record something over the phone. I can then send it back through our transcription process. We just want to get as much of this stuff as we can.

Steinberg: Obviously I appreciate it because these are great teaching tools. Since that’s what I do now, it’s important. Those of us who have done this and who teach like to have other people’s perspectives, because your own is just your own. Some of the case studies that others have developed are very useful. You have been involved in them because they reflect a slightly different perception from your own of what was going on. I’m especially attuned to the value of these kinds of things.
Riley: Even when we spend 10 hours with people, we don’t get everything down. It’s a poor substitute for a contemporaneous written record, but it’s the best we can do.

Steinberg: It’s a terribly poor substitute. You can try to be as candid about the past as possible, but we all know enough about psychology to know that it’s uncontrollable, our selective memory for putting a better gloss on things. You wonder whether your memory of an event is the way you wished it was as opposed to what it was.

Riley: Absolutely. But we do the best we can, and I appreciate your cooperation.