

A Brookings Book Event

**STEPHEN HESS BOOK UPDATED: ORGANIZING THE PRESIDENCY
Discussions by Presidential Advisers back to FDR**

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MR. STEPHEN HESS: Welcome to Brookings. Today we are celebrating the publication of a new edition of my book “Organizing the Presidency,” which was first published in 1976. When there is still interest in a book that goes back more than a quarter of a century it’s cause for celebration. So when you celebrate you invite a bunch of your friends in to celebrate with you. We’re here with seven people who have collectively served on the White House staffs of eight Presidents. I can assure you that we all have stories to tell and this is going to be for an hour and a half a chance to tell some of our favorite stories. I hope we’ll be serious at times, but I know we’re going to have some fun.

I’m going to introduce them quickly in order of the President they served or are most identified with, and that would be on my right, George Elsey who is the President Emeritus of the American Red Cross and served on the White House staff of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman.

I guess in order I’m next for Eisenhower. I was a speechwriter to President Eisenhower and then came back eight years later to the White House as Deputy Assistant to the President for Urban Affairs under Richard Nixon. Basically I was the Chief of Staff to Daniel Patrick Moynihan.

We then have Harry McPherson on my left, partner in Piper & Rudnick. I had to look that up because you changed the name of your law firm. Harry came to Washington as a young man driving across the country from Texas after getting his law degree.

MR. GEORGE ELSEY: We all came to Washington as young men. [Laughter]

MR. HESS: And here we are. Corrected, as always.

Harry joined as a staff in the Senate with Lyndon Johnson and lo and behold Lyndon Johnson became President of the United States and Harry became the counsel to President Lyndon B. Johnson.

Next would be Ron Nessen. Ron is now here at Brookings as our Vice President for Public Affairs. He reported for NBC on the White House and suddenly a President of the United States, Gerald R. Ford, asked him if he would be Press Secretary to the President, so he moved from one side of the aisle to the other for that purpose.

Fred Fielding was there twice. He is a partner of Wiley Rein & Fielding, and was first on the Nixon White House as a Deputy Counsel to the President, but we remember him most for being the counsel to President Ronald Reagan.

Now we come to our two Bill Clinton folks. On my left is James Steinberg who is now the Vice President and Director of our Foreign Policy Studies at Brookings and he was the Deputy National Security Adviser to President William Jefferson Clinton.

And on my right is Gene Sperling who is now a Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. He was the Director of President Clinton's National Economic Council and if he doesn't tell you I will, 25 years ago he was also my intern. I'm very proud of him. If there are any interns out there

in the audience, let that be a lesson to you.

I want to start this by going back 60 years, and I want George to remember when he was a 24-year-old naval reserve officer who had been called to serve President Roosevelt in what was then called the Map Room, which today we would know has evolved into the Situation Room.

I'm going to later ask him to tell us about Harry Truman, but at this moment, tell us what it was like as you walked into the Map Room in 1942. What was on the wall, what happened as you wheeled in Franklin Delano Roosevelt because of course he was in a wheelchair. Maybe even what happened when Winston Churchill popped in to look at your maps.



MR. GEORGE ELSEY: Thanks very much, Steve.

The Map Room was a small room in the house itself on the ground floor, right next to the diplomatic reception room. It had started out in the West Wing but there was no proper security. Newsmen were all over the place, visitors were in and out, so FDR put it in the mansion for total security reasons.

We had around the walls maps and charts. We displayed the battlefronts, constantly changing as information was brought to us by officer courier from the War Department and the Navy Department. Pins, colored pins showed the ships, both allied and enemy. And as you know, we'd broken German and Japanese codes so we knew where enemy ships were as well as our own. But in addition to keeping up with the news so that FDR could at any moment come in and see what was going on, we were also his secretariat for his messages that he sent through us to Stalin, to Churchill, to Chiang Kai Chek. We handled all of that high-level traffic. We could release a copy to his Chief of Staff or to Harry Hopkins only on his direct say-so. And if the staff member to which he referred a matter didn't follow up promptly it was up to us to do a little needling to see that the work was handled efficiently.

We also kept records of the Summit conferences, the big meetings at Casablanca, Quebec, Tehran, and so on. So if any question came up well just what was decided there we had the source, the files on hand.

Then, God help us, we were communicators. We had to learn how to operate the ECM, the Electric Coding Machine. Any time the President took off on a long trip overseas or something of that sort we had a private cryptographic system that we and our counterparts, two or three of us would travel with him, the rest would stay behind, we would take care of the Top Secret classified communications between the President, wherever he was, and Washington.

So we were a busy bunch of kids and we loved every minute of it.

The room was so private that only Harry Hopkins, who lived upstairs on the second floor with Roosevelt most of the war; a man named Admiral Leahy who presided over the Joint Chiefs of Staff;

and then the military and naval aides, they were the only ones allowed in the room besides the President -- except when he had Winston Churchill as a house guest. And Churchill was that ebullient kind of a fellow who just moved in as though he owned the place, which in fact he seemed to when he did come to Washington.

We had our problems with Churchill. Churchill, as Steve heard me tell yesterday, one night I was alone. There was only one of us at night -- all night, of course. One night I had just had a flash message delivered from the Pentagon from Eisenhower reporting the surrender of the last German forces in North Africa and I was just ready to phone the usher to say I have a message to take upstairs to the President when in came Churchill.

It was late. "Any news, Lieutenant?" "Yes, sir. Great news." I showed him this message from Ike. "Great, I'm off for our Embassy. I'll take it with me." Leaving me with nothing for FDR. [Laughter]

Well, that's all right. We enjoyed Churchill day and night.

MR. HESS: Let's go 60 years into the future and ask Jim Steinberg to describe how the Map Room had evolved into the Situation Room. Where it is, what happened as you walked in there. What were the similarities in your job and perhaps the differences too, Jim.



MR. JAMES B. STEINBERG: For "West Wing" enthusiasts, the reality of the Sit Room is rather disappointing. We don't have the kind of drama of all of these high tech screens and low lighting and the sense of intensity that Gene is helping television bring to the Sit Room. But the one thing that did happen 60 years later is that the Sit Room moved back to the West Wing. They found a way to secure it.

As you walk in through the lower lobby off West Executive Avenue you have two choices. You can take a left and you're in the White House Mess or you can take a right and you're in the Situation Room.

There are really two parts of the Situation Room. There's the Sit Room itself which is quite a nondescript conference room. Of course fully secure and very sort of modest in furnishings. It really is a conference table with arm chairs around it. It usually seats about eight to ten members of either the Principals Committee, which is the Cabinet-level members of the National Security Advisers to the President, or for my function the Deputies Committee which also met there.

It has a screen in the back covered by paneling, it can be opened up. It's used primarily when a member of the committees, either the Principals Committee or the Deputies Committee can't be there in person and we have secure video that allows them to participate. That was particularly important for people like Ambassador Holbrooke up at the UN who never wanted to miss a meeting but could be there virtually. But it was also useful in times of ongoing crisis because you could have Cabinet members, the Secretary of Defense or the Secretary of State, if they didn't have time to rush over to the

White House to be at a meeting, you could convene meetings on a moment's notice, and on the screen you could have multiple images so you could have different members of the Principals Committee or the Deputies Committee participating in real time in those meetings.

The big innovation during the years we were there is when I first came to the White House the conference table faced east and west. And after the renovation it faced north and south. [Laughter] You can draw your own conclusions from that.

The nature of it is, obviously there are no windows and it does provide a kind of sense of intimacy for senior advisers to talk privately among themselves and in that sense I think it's very conducive to kind of the difficult but collaborative process that takes place as part of these meetings.

Typically the principals meet there without the President or the Vice President, but on occasion -- particularly on very important national security decisions that were very sensitive and therefore security was required, the President would convene his principal advisers in the Situation Room, although for the most part the formal National Security Council meetings were held in the Cabinet Room.

Surrounding the Sit Room is the heart of the operational side that we heard so much about (from Gene Elsey), and in some ways while the electronics and the gear may have changed, the function hasn't changed that much in 60 years. The Sit Room staff runs all the secure communications for the President and his senior advisers in the White House. It routes all the intelligence directly from the various intelligence agencies to key members of the White House staff. It handles the President's telephone calls which are an important part of the day-to-day operation of foreign policy. The President makes a lot of calls to counterparts. Sometimes they're secure calls with close allies; sometimes open lines; but all managed through the Situation Room staff.

The one thing that we have that's probably a more important function today than before is television. At any time you walk into the outer area of the Situation Room you'll see a number of televisions going with the Sit Room staff monitoring that, monitoring the wires and providing a real-time sense of alert to the key members of the White House staff. It's a busy place. It's crammed into a very small space. Usually six duty officers sitting there at any one time, 24 hours a day, with instant access to the President, the Vice President, and all the senior personnel connected to similar operation centers run by the State Department and the Department of Defense.

MR. HESS: Let's switch from structure a moment to the President and how their personalities, their character, their work habits will of course shape the White House.

I thought what I'd do is ask all of our guests to tell a story, perhaps a favorite story, maybe they've told it before, even dined out on it, that would somehow characterize their President, their President's MO, that might give us some flavor of what it would have been like working in the White House for that particular boss.

I want to start with Harry McPherson who had a particularly colorful President. I don't think you'll have trouble thinking of a good Lyndon B. Johnson story to tell us about.



MR. HARRY C. McPHERSON: That isn't hard.

The best thing for people interested in the character of a President that I know of, the best historical record available is on every Saturday afternoon here in Washington from 3:00 to 5:00 on C-SPAN Radio, I think it's rebroadcast on Monday, for several years now tapes which were in the possession of the Johnson Library have been released to the waiting world, so you can hear Lyndon Johnson talking to all manner of persons. What's good about it is not only that you hear a lot of funny things. Many of them have been publicized in Michael Beschloss' two books on the tapes so far, but you also get a sense of this fellow who never seems to have had a conversation with anybody in which he was not trying to get something. [Laughter]

Most of us, when you think of your day, just have casual conversations with people on the telephone.

I find when I ride the MetroLiner up to New York that everybody in the car has a cell phone and they're all talking absolute drivel. [Laughter] I thought when cell phones were invented that there would be terrifically interesting things that people would say, "Marvin, you must meet me and bring the document." But it's not that at all. It's "So did you get the lamb? I told you to get lamb. What are we having fish again for?" [Laughter] That's what's going on.

Not Lyndon Johnson. It was not his way of dealing with anybody. You have the feeling in these conversations of a huge freckled hand on somebody's chest pushing them all the time. Even when he's being sweet, and when he's being accommodating. When he's talking to Mrs. Kennedy for example. You know that at the end of it he's going to ask her to do something that will be helpful to him in some way.

Trying to pass a bill. Trying to get somebody to change a position. That was Lyndon Johnson's constant MO. I only wish that C-SPAN Radio were available all over the country as it has been here in Washington for a number of years. It has changed a lot of people's view of LBJ and certainly it's given me, many years after his death, a clear recollection of this guy who was the most forceful human being I've ever known.

MR. HESS: Ron Nessen, that doesn't sound a bit, not a bit like Gerald R. Ford.

MR. RON NESSEN: No, he was not a bit like Gerald R. Ford. And I guess the stories that maybe best illustrate Ford's character, in keeping with the title of your book, Steve, "Organizing the Presidency," I would just tell you a few things about how Ford organized the White House.



He came to the White House as no other President had, unelected to any

national office. He was appointed Vice President when Agnew resigned, and then became President when Nixon resigned. So he came to the White House and he inherited the full Nixon White House staff with the exception of those who had left as a result of Watergate. A lot of his close friends and advisers that had come with him from his 25 years in Congress and his eight months or so as Vice President recommended that Ford clean house and get rid of all the leftover Nixon people and he said, "They didn't do anything wrong. Why should I fire them?"

He kept almost everyone and even Al Haig as Chief of Staff initially. So I think that was one reflection of Ford's character.

The result of it, however, caused a good deal of feuding on the Ford staff that lasted throughout the presidency because you had all these disparate groups who had never worked together, had never been through a campaign together which is an opportunity for a President to really try out staff people and see which ones are good or not. You had the leftover Nixon people, you had people who had come with Ford from 25 years in Congress, other people who had been recruited when he was Vice President and then you had some people who had never worked with Ford who were brought in, and I was one of those.

The other part of Ford's character that I think was reflected in the White House organization, initially we had what was called the "spokes of the wheel" organization. Spokes of the wheel means that you have nine senior staff members, which are the spokes, and the President is the hub. He's in the middle. And all these nine senior staff people have total access to the President at any time they want to that he's not in another meeting. We even had what were called peeking privileges, which means you go to the Oval Office door, you open it a crack and peek in, and if the President is not busy or with anybody you can go in and talk to him without an appointment.

The problem with the spokes of the wheel is, people are coming into the President, they're giving him information, he's giving them instructions, and nobody else in the building or in the government knows anything about it.

Anyhow, this system lasted for about a month or six weeks into the Ford Administration when he was finally persuaded that he needed to put his own stamp on it. He sent Al Haig to NATO and brought in Don Rumsfeld, who he had met in Congress, as the Chief of Staff, and began to reorganize. Don understood that spokes of the wheel wouldn't work in the White House and created a more hierarchical structure with the Chief of Staff as the filter between the President and the staff.

One other illustrative story about Ford's character I think also involved organizing the White House. The first winter that Ford had in the White House he had a cold and he spent a couple of days up in the residence, didn't come down to the Oval Office. And obviously, without a heavy schedule he had more time to think about his White House. He came back and fired Jim Schlesinger as Defense Secretary, replaced him with Rumsfeld; fired Bill Colby as Director of Central Intelligence, replaced him with George H.W. Bush; persuaded Nelson Rockefeller to announce that he wouldn't run for Vice President in '76; and promoted Dick Cheney to be the Chief of Staff of the White House.

I think what that illustrated was a little bit of a trait that Ford had which was when he had really major decisions to make, particularly those involving personnel, he often didn't consult very much with anybody else. He made these decisions largely on his own, and particularly when he had a little time to sort of mull over these kinds of decisions.

MR. HESS: You've made a couple of points that I want to come back to. One, of course, was the question of the accidental President, because it is interesting. On this panel we have three people who served accidental Presidents. Harry Truman, Lyndon Johnson, and you've described the problems of Ford. Perhaps we can give the others a crack at showing problems that happened with an accidental President.

The other thing that I thought was very interesting that perhaps we'll want to come back to was a group of us at the White House last night listening to George W. Bush on some of these same subjects, and Brad Patterson who's in the audience who was with me on the Eisenhower staff was there, and he can correct me. But I thought I heard George W. Bush say that he had 15 people who had the right of walking into the Oval Office. I was stunned by that. He said he thought it was working pretty well, and he thought it was working pretty well because of the character of Andrew Card, the Chief of Staff.

We can come back to that, but it certainly was counter everything we thought we'd been learning over time.

Let's proceed with Fred Fielding. Everybody is always interested in Ronald Reagan and how he ran his White House.



MR. FRED FIELDING: It's hard to isolate a story about Ronald Reagan because there were so many incidents.

Ronald Reagan was pretty much what you saw. He had a humor, he had a warmth about him when he was dealing with the staff not just when he was in public. And he always brought humor to it. I think the one thing people don't realize was how concerned he was as to how history would view him, in particular what he would do that would tie the hands or guide a future President. He never wanted to set a precedent that would inhibit a future President in his or her actions.

As I say, I could tell you many stories, and I guess we'll get into probably later -- although Steve didn't give us any script, I must admit that just so everybody understands, but I'm sure we'll talk about the assassination attempt later in the exercise of the 25th Amendment. So I won't get into that.

But I was sitting here thinking of stories to illustrate Ronald Reagan for you. As I say, he was always interested in doing the right thing and whether the presidential power would be eroded or whether it would be defined in a certain way. And we all know that Ronald Reagan went into the

presidency with set goals. Of course things happen that you never anticipate.

One of the things that happened early on, which was quite a test for this President, was the threat of a strike by the air traffic controllers, the PATCO Organization. When Ronald Reagan heard about the threat he called me and several others into his office and he wanted to discuss it. He wanted to know what these people had signed. Whether they had taken an oath not to do such a thing. When he discovered that that was the situation he brought his Cabinet together, the constituent groups that were affected -- primarily Transportation, Justice Department -- and he wanted a plan. This all happened very rapidly but very thoroughly. This was not on any script, this was not on any plan that anybody had going into the presidency. At every step he always wanted to know, am I doing the right thing? Is this legal? Is that consistent with the presidential powers? Is it consistent with history? And we went back and forth and we had all the negotiations, the up-front negotiations, the behind-the-scenes negotiations, and finally the President felt he had no choice. The struck and he fired all the air traffic controllers.

But just before he did he walked in, and I remember, he was a man of great resolve and he was going to do this, and he turned to me and he said, "Fred, I am doing the right thing. Aren't I doing the right thing?" I said, "Mr. President, you're doing exactly the right thing unless there's a crash in the first 48 hours." [Laughter] That was the realistic problem. It didn't matter what the law was, it didn't matter whether he was doing the right thing. He was setting a precedent. It was one that was important to him. But he also had a political risk that he was willing to take to do what he thought was the right thing.

MR. HESS: Gene, in your MO of Bill Clinton, you have a unique role on this panel because I think you're the only person who was with an Administration for the entire life of the Administration, and in this case it was two terms, eight years. Give us an MO, but maybe it's a changing MO. Maybe the Bill Clinton you knew when he was first inaugurated was not the same operation that you saw as he left office. Could be? No?



MR. GENE SPERLING: It's interesting because there actually are two parts I think of a job like I had and that Jim Steinberg had which was when you're the National Economic Adviser you are in a sense an adviser and briefer to him in the White House. Then you also play this coordinating role where you're trying to coordinate the rest of the Cabinet.

On the latter, I think President Clinton had thought quite a bit about that. I'm reminded of a conversation we had on the campaign plane, I believe in September of 1992, where he brought me and someone over and he showed us an article by Bob Woodward about Darman and Brady fighting. He said, "I know what this is like. I've been a Governor for 12 years. When your Cabinet members are fighting things don't get done. Look, they're hurting their own President in the middle of a campaign." He said, "You don't see that with Brent Scowcroft."

Somebody then came in and told him how they really didn't all like each other so much. He said, "I don't care whether they like each other very much. I am a pretty observant follower of politics and

they seem like they work in a team to me."

I think he came in very committed that his economic team was going to function more like a well-functioning National Security Adviser, and he picked Robert Rubin, who was a person known in Wall Street for making people's big egos work together and he created an NEC that lasted all eight years which was on the economic team. He didn't try to go see him one-on-one. You all met together and when you were prepared you came to him. So in that area I think having been a Governor and observed stuff he set up an NEC right at the beginning that served us very well for eight years.

The other part was different. That was the kind of Bill Clinton within the White House. There in the first year or two I think he found it very difficult not to over commit himself. There were so many things going on, there were so many things he wanted to do. And there you could feel in the first year particularly, first year and a half, a sense that he was overcommitted, working around the clock, not having any time to himself. I think that is something where he did grow over time. And I think Erskine Bowles particularly when he came in as Deputy Chief of Staff started demanding that he have a certain amount of time to himself every day. That was kind of a new thing. You had something that had to get done and there were two free hours on his schedule and he was going to protect that.

I think in terms of organizing the policy deliberations, I think having observed other Presidents and been Governor he had a pretty good sense of how he wanted to run his economic team and his national security team and hit the ground fairly well on those things. I think it was the scheduling, the managing of time, appointments. Those were the things that I think with the help of his Chief of Staff as time went on where he started to manage his time better, realized, as he often told us, that he only made bad mistakes when he was on little sleep and rushed. And we in the White House started to observe this too. We started realizing that when he made a bad mistake a lot of us would feel responsible, that we had overscheduled him, that we had put that extra event on.

So I do think there are some things you can look at from history and then I think there are other things that were just seen in the White House as on-the-job training. You're going to make your mistakes. You can see this current White House made mistakes and you can see them learning from them, and I think probably every President can probably do that in the first couple of years.

MR. HESS: I want to get into crises for awhile because we have representatives here who lived through some pretty interesting crises, and see how the White House responded or a President responded.

I want to start back again with George Elsey, but now the President is Harry S. Truman, and the decision Truman makes is dropping the bomb, and you were there. Tell me what was going on from your perspective.

MR. ELSEY: In terms of crisis?

MR. HESS: That certainly is a crisis and defining moment of the world, but the White House at

the time that Harry Truman was making that decision and what you recall personally being involved in that.

MR. ELSEY: Let me back up to Harry Truman's first crisis. That was the April 12, 1945 when FDR suddenly was gone.

MR. HESS: Fair enough.

MR. ELSEY: FDR had done absolutely nothing to inform Truman about anything. He knew nothing about the war situation. He had been denied access to all of the classified materials. Harry Truman didn't even know the Map Room or any comparable institution existed on April 12th of '45.

So crisis number one was becoming President with no preparation. While he admired Roosevelt and much of what Roosevelt had done, he held that against Roosevelt for the rest of his life. And he was determined that never again would a Vice President have to take over in the way he did.

He had no Vice President until his second term. There was no constitutional provision for appointing a Vice President, but as soon as he had a Vice President, Alben Barkley, he made sure that Barkley attended Cabinet meetings and that Barkley was well clued in on domestic and foreign policy issues in the event Barkley found he had to take over suddenly.

That really was the biggest crisis in Harry Truman's life.

I've often been asked about the atomic bomb decision. Wasn't that really a major colossal decision for Harry Truman? No. Not at all. First of all, he inherited an ongoing process that Secretary of War Stimson and all those who had been involved had known from the beginning that if a bomb can be developed, if it is operational, it will be used in "the war". Had a bomb been available while Hitler was still in power it most certainly would have been used against Hitler. As it was, there was no bomb until the summer of '45.

Truman did not want to use a bomb unless it was absolutely necessary. We didn't know, no one knew, the full effects of radiation and all that sort of thing. We just didn't know what would happen.

He and the British in consultation with the Chinese, developed what's become known as the Potsdam Declaration. It was an ultimatum to Japan issued in late July, just two weeks after Alamogordo tests proved that a bomb would work. Just two weeks after that the Potsdam Declaration was issued, a challenge to Japan -- unconditional surrender of your armed forces, or you will face prompt and utter destruction.

This was given worldwide publicity from Potsdam, Germany where he was meeting with Stalin and with the British. The Japanese response and this was their phrase, their government translator from Japanese into English, was to treat the Potsdam Declaration "with utter contempt".

As soon as our government realized there was no possibility of negotiation with Japan or any Japanese move to surrender, that was the final go-ahead to proceed with plans to drop the bomb, and we know what happened -- Hiroshima, Nagasaki. And just nine days after the first bomb, Japan surrendered.

Harry Truman didn't make the final decision on the bomb. The Japanese made the decision by rejecting the Potsdam Declaration.

So I've been asked many times -- Japanese television, Japanese correspondents, that sort of things, why and when was the decision made. I said the decision was made in Tokyo by your government. Never once when I've said that on a Japanese television program has that appeared. That has always been erased.

MR. HESS: I want to, Jim, to come in with the foreign policy decision or crisis that he lived through that's most significant, but I just want to go back to Harry for this reason.

I talked about three accidental Presidents, and actually we've heard about two -- Ford and Truman. In some ways I suspect what happened with Lyndon Johnson taking over from John Kennedy had the most meaningful questions of staff confusion, conflict, and so forth. Tell us a bit about that.

MR. McPHERSON: My feeling about Lyndon Johnson's presidency start from the conviction that the first year of that presidency, starting with November 22, 1963 in Dallas, was the highest mark of his, and the greatest contribution he made to the United States.

Lyndon Johnson's performance in that year from November of '63 through 1964 was masterful and it was a political performance. It was a politician's best. His reaching out as he did in countless telephone calls and countless meetings to people whom he despised and who despised him.

I was with him one Sunday, the second Sunday after the assassination. He came to my church and took me with him back to the White House and we sat in the Oval Office. There was a lineup of people outside. Joe Rauh, the great civil rights fighter who thought Lyndon Johnson was probably a racist, certainly a sellout artist for the South, and Johnson wanted to convince Joe Rauh that he was going to fight for civil rights and that he needed Joe Rauh to get the labor unions and the African-American groups, the NAACP, the Urban League behind him, behind his presidency because he would show Rauh and he would show those groups that he was even more committed to civil rights legislation than John Kennedy had been.

He had with him, when I arrived, the first guy he brought in was a wonderful man named Jim Rowe, a Washington lawyer, had been FDR's first Special Assistant and was a great operator in town. He's been Johnson's campaign manager for Vice President until after two or three months he couldn't bear Johnson, he couldn't bear the way he was being dealt with, and just quit. They had not spoken, these two intimate friends. Jim and Libby Rowe, Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson were Sunday evening picnic friends for years, and they hadn't spoken in almost three years because of that breakup. He had

Jim Rowe in and he said, “Jim, I made a terrible blunder. I behaved terribly towards you and I want to tell you I apologize. I need you. I need you to come back and be my friend.”

It was very emotional. Jim Rowe had tears in his eyes and said, “Mr. President, it was my fault. It was really my fault.” And Johnson said, “Damn it Jim, can't you be content to be the first person that the 35th President of the United States has apologized to?” [Laughter]

But he went after people. He buttonholed -- Lyndon Johnson didn't buttonhole. He grabbed people by the lapels, either on the phone or in person, to bring them with him. He caused the American people to feel, I believe, very much as people on a vessel in a tremendous storm would feel when the captain has been knocked out and the wheel is spinning and the vessel is just at the mercy of the waves. Lyndon Johnson grabbed the wheel and made the country go forward.

The victory over Goldwater, the huge victory in November, was in part because it was Goldwater that he was running against. A choice that the American people did not want at that time. But it was also a tribute to the guy who had served the country so well and showing the continuity -- Remember his first words when he went to the Congress within a week after the assassination were, "Let us continue," and he asked McNamara to stay and Bundy to stay and Rusk to stay and the whole Kennedy [kit'n caboodle]. He brought in a few people that were close to him. A wonderful guy who was his Chief of Staff, Walter Jenkins; Bill Moyers; then began ultimately to bring in a number of us who had been around him in the past but that was after a year.

He kept the Kennedy people there with him as long as he could because he wanted a sense of continuity, particularly since the assassination had occurred in Texas. For many people around the world it was almost a foregone conclusion that Lyndon Johnson had orchestrated the assassination and he wanted to show that that was not the case.

MR. HESS: Jim, now I want to get back to a policy decision that was significant for Bill Clinton and how he and his staff dealt with it.

MR. STEINBERG: For a President who focused during his campaign on the economy and on domestic issues, the President had to face a lot of foreign policy crises during his term. We all remember Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia. The President was tested, his team was tested quite a bit during the first term and it is I think a learning experience.

I think that no one who hasn't sat in the position of the President, in particular the whole issue of deciding to use force and put American soldiers at risk can appreciate how difficult those decisions are and how weighty it is for a President to take it on.

But it is also something that over time I think Presidents begin to develop their own sense of what's at stake and how to make those decisions. I think by the time we got to the Kosovo crisis it really illustrated what the President had learned and how he dealt with these problems.

The Kosovo problem was a slow motion crisis. In some respects even at the time of the Dayton Agreements in 1995, it was clear that Kosovo was on the horizon, and that while we had produced an agreement that at least offered some prospect of solving Bosnia, that we had touched on the edges during the negotiations with Kosovo, hadn't really addressed it, and knew that this was still the last piece that had to be dealt with before there could be a real hope of peace in the Balkans.

In the winter of 1998 Milosevic began the first round of ethnic cleansing. It was clear to the President at that time, February, early March of 1998, that we were going to have another military confrontation with Milosevic. But he also knew that if we were going to be successful and not repeat what had been perhaps the biggest danger of Bosnia which was not simply the horrible humanitarian tragedy in Bosnia, but the deep crisis in trans-Atlantic relations, that he had to find a way to move forward and be decisive with Milosevic but to bring the allies along.

So beginning in March of 1998, he brought together his national security team and basically said we need a strategy that's going to on the one hand be firm with Milosevic, but is also not going to be the United States confronting Milosevic. We have to do this with our allies. He instructed the Secretary of State to begin a process to try alone to bring the allies on board. For the next several months there were a lot of consultations, discussions about tightening the sanctions on Milosevic, and at the same time of course a lot of pressure from the outside as the situation began to deteriorate in Kosovo, to take some action.

But the President made clear that he knew that if, on the one hand if we didn't lead to bring the allies along, nothing would ever happen. We saw that in Bosnia. On the other hand if we didn't have the allies we could find ourselves in a situation where the United States was committed without the support of Europeans in a European crisis, and that we would have problems both at home explaining to the Americans why we were there, and also being effective against Milosevic who might be able to play Europeans off against us.

That strategy culminated in a decision by the Security Council in August of 1998 to give Milosevic an ultimatum to stop the ethnic cleansing or to face the prospect of force. That same commitment was made by NATO at the time.

Initially Milosevic backed down. There were deployments of some OSCE monitors to Kosovo in the fall of 1998.

The President once again brought the team together and he said I know this is only the next step in the road. I know we have to go through this. I know we're going to be challenged again. Ultimately we're going to have to deal with this decisively. But I know that I need to lead the alliance to get there.

Predictably enough in January of 1999 Milosevic again began the ethnic cleansing. There was a last-ditch effort to try to bring together a diplomatic solution, a conference in Europe at Rambouillet. That conference failed. At the end the President once again gathered his advisers and he said we've done what we said we needed to do over the last year. We've taken a lot of criticism because we didn't

act sooner. But when we made the decision and brought the allies along in August of 1998 we're now in a position that we can use force and we can do it with the support of others.

He turned around to his advisers and said are there any disagreements here? Everyone agreed that this is what we needed to do.

As you all know, in March of 1999 we began the bombing campaign. And as everyone knows it also didn't go very well in the first week or so. There were lots of problems with weather. There were lots of problems with target selection. There was tremendous criticism beginning to develop about whether this had been well thought through. There were allegations that somehow this had to do with impeachment or some of the President's domestic political problems, and the team was dispirited.

On the tenth day of the bombing where relatively few sorties had been run by the air campaign, there was no sense that this initial act of force was going to bring Milosevic around, the President once again brought the National Security team together in the Oval Office. The President could tell there was a sense of discouragement, a sense of are we really going to be able to sustain this. Are there going to be problems now with the allies? Are there going to be problems domestically? And before anybody had a chance to speak, and you could tell that people were, that the Secretary of State and the National Security Adviser were going to try to give him some sense and try to explain what was going on, the President looked at the group and he said, "I've heard a lot of talk about this being Madeleine's war. I've heard a lot of talk about this being about the impeachment. But let me just tell you, this is my war. I understood from the beginning what we were getting into. I understood from the beginning what the consequences were. And let me just tell you, we are going to win this war. I'm determined that we're going to win this war and we will do what is necessary to do it."

You could just tell that that was what the team was looking for. They had obviously advised the President to take this step, were prepared to take responsibility. But there was this magical moment of the presidency in which the President made clear that advisers are advisers. That he was the President. And that he had understood and had taken on board all of these questions that were going to be raised, that he had made his mind up and that he was going to take responsibility for it. I think from that moment it was very clear to everyone that we were going to be successful and people walked out with a sense of this is what a Commander in Chief did.

MR. HESS: This may sound awfully episodic in the way that we're doing this, but every time I look at these people I think of other important moments that they were there and it reminds me that I want to hear them.

I told Fred Fielding on the way in that I wanted him to talk about the assassination attempt on President Reagan and the possibilities of using the 25th Amendment of succession, particularly he was counsel so he would be involved in it and I'm going to turn to him for that. But then all of a sudden I look at Ron Nessen and I say hey, that decision with Gerald Ford was the conclusion, the end of the Vietnam War. Talk about it. Then I go back to Gene Sperling and say hey, there was a government shutdown in your field. I want to hear about that, too.

So I'm going to keep going this way even though somehow it's not the smooth tale, which after all you can all read in my book anyway. [Laughter] Fred, go on.

MR. FIELDING: You mentioned the assassination attempt and I guess that was the closest we've come in recent years to having another accidental President because the President was indeed on March 30th shot right after lunch. In retrospect, looking back, it was such a funny thing because that event was an inconsequential event. It was an event that nobody really wanted to go with the President, even though basically the White House staff was new and everything that occurred every day was a new event.

Nonetheless, this was not a big event. People were doing things and debating over who would go with him, and who would travel with the President. Of course he had to go.

Each of us remembers where we were when we got the word. I was actually in a meeting talking in my office with the Deputy Attorney General and all of a sudden I got a call saying there had been a shooting, and then I got another call saying the President was on his way to a hospital. So my meeting ended quickly. We went down, and of course the press had heard enough to know there was a problem at hand and so the pressroom was just chaotic. Everybody was jumping up and down. They had an assistant press guy standing on a desk telling everybody to please wait. We got him off the desk.

We assembled in the Situation Room -- now that you're all experts on the Situation Room.

Incidentally, I want you to know there still is a Map Room. The Map Room still exists but it isn't a secure area any more. It's called the Map Room.



MR. ELSEY: One reason is that I gave the last map that was prepared for FDR back to the Map Room years later. It's now framed and hanging above the mantelpiece. It's still there.

MR. FIELDING: We went to the Situation Room and the Cabinet members started to assemble and a handful of the senior assistants to the President came in. Richard B. Allen was the National Security Adviser at the time and he was basically the host of the meeting, if you will. As people were notified and started to come in we were getting information very sporadically. The Chief of Staff was at the hospital. The counselor to the President Ed Meese was at the hospital, as was Michael Deavers. All three of what we know as the Troika at that time, were all at the White House. So our information was filtering through Secret Service, through the Secretary of Treasury coming in and also through intelligence sources coming in across just basically land lines, quite frankly, from our staff people on the site. We were assembling and watching television like the rest of the world was and getting all these phone messages.

We knew that Jim Brady had been wounded. We didn't know initially whether the President had been hit, then we knew the President had been hit but we didn't know the extent of his injuries.

At one point it was reported to us that Jim Brady had died. Actually historians will note there is actually a tape recording of everything that took place, or almost everything that took place. That whole event, because there was a tape recorder, a cassette, right at the center of that long table and it was running the whole time.

The Vice President was away at the time and he was contacted and of course started to fly back. There was a lot of chaos there. The moment of crisis was that there were so many unknown factors. We didn't know if this was an isolated nut case, as you would say; we didn't know if this was a foreign policy issue; we didn't know if this was an organized assassination attempt. Forces around the world had to be put on certain alert. The National Security Directive for such incidences were enacted. We all know there was a little dispute in the Situation Room between the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense as to who was in charge.

But I think the most interesting thing that occurred during that whole event in retrospect was looking back and realizing that in that room by the time everyone had assembled and we were starting through the decisionmaking process and deal with it, was that it was a room full of strangers. These people were all put together for the first time January 21st. They were people who were intent on setting up their own organizations, their own departments, their own agencies. People that were really trying to learn their own jobs. And all of a sudden we were all together and it worked remarkably well especially considering that.

I think it's interesting also to look back and realize that the 25th Amendment existed. The 25th Amendment was not exercised at that time. But history should know that it was considered. Actually as counsel to the President I had been preparing a book, an emergency book in case an event occurred like this. It wasn't finished but we knew enough to know what we had to do if we wanted to exercise the 25th Amendment. Documents had been prepared and were finalized and we actually had the documents in the Situation Room and were prepared to do it if the decision was made to exercise the 25th Amendment or have it invoked.

The decision was made not to. Part of that was candidly that we did not know a lot of factors such as what had really happened here. The Vice President was not there. We wanted to make sure he was secure. We had a lot of national security implications that were obtaining at that moment and had been in existence right before that and subsequent to that. There were a lot of factors that went into it and one of the factors was we quite frankly didn't know with any degree of accuracy the President's condition as well.

But it was discussed, it was prepared, we were ready if that was the event. Then the Vice President returned, went to the Situation Room, got a briefing on that, and then a handful of us went to the Vice President's office and again discussed the 25th Amendment among other things. The Attorney General was there, so he and I briefed on that. Cap Weinberger was in the room and briefed on the national security situation. The Secretary of State was not in the room. The Chief of Staff was there and Ed Meese was there. The discussions took place and the decision was again affirmed that we would not

exercise the 25th Amendment or seek its invocation.

So it was a stunning day and one that would certainly burn in everybody's memory, but fortunately it wasn't a situation where it turned out that we needed another accidental President.

MR. HESS: These great moments in history through the eyes of presidential staff.

We're not in Saigon and the helicopters are spinning above the American Embassy taking out the last of the embassy staff. What's going on back at the White House, Ron Nessen?

MR. NESSEN: Let me go back a couple of weeks before that. This was the early spring of 1975. Most of the American troops had gotten out of Vietnam in '73 and the idea was that we would provide arms and training and other things to help the South Vietnamese try to win the war. But by the early spring of '75 it was obvious that the end game was there and the North Vietnamese were going to win.

Ford during his congressional career had established a family tradition of going to Palm Springs for an Easter vacation every year. He traveled a lot, didn't get to see his family much, and this was a ritual for the family. So he was scheduled to go to Palm Springs. Many on the staff recommended he not go. He was tired. He had been in office about six months then, and needed a break, and insisted on going.

So the inevitable happened and every night on television you'd see these terrible scenes of the North Vietnamese sweeping southward, evacuation planes, South Vietnamese soldiers with rifle butts clubbing little children off the skids of helicopters, and every morning Ford out there in his LaCoste polo shirt on the first tee with a horde of reporters shouting questions at him. It was terrible. I cringed every day when it happened. But as everybody on this panel knows, when the President says he wants to go to Palm Springs and play golf, he goes to Palm Springs and plays golf.

He came back and the end game really was there. The North Vietnamese were in the outskirts of Saigon. Tansanhut Airport was between people running up and down the runway trying to find planes to get out on, and it was by then within artillery range of the North Vietnamese, it was not possible to use the airport. So as you say, Steve, the helicopters began a lift of the remaining Americans from the rooftop of the embassy in Saigon.

And this went on quite a bit longer than had been anticipated. It was a very emotional time for everybody. And as people on the panel can tell you, at emotional times there's always a little dark humor. The President had an irrepressible young photographer named David Kennerly in the Ford White House and I remember him during the helicopter relief saying, "Well, I have good news and bad news. The good news is the Vietnam War is almost over. The bad news is we're going to lose." So this was the kind of dark humor you had.

Finally the helicopter pilots were becoming fatigued and they had to end the lift of Americans.

The U.S. Ambassador Graham Martin said he wasn't leaving unless he got a direct instruction from the President. So Kissinger called him and said you have a direct instruction from the President. So he got on the helicopter and left.

The assumption was that Graham was on the last helicopter out. So now was time to make an official announcement and so forth. We then called a press briefing in the theater of the Old Executive Office Building and I read a statement from the President. I had been a war correspondent in Vietnam for NBC, had lost friends there, was wounded there, I had my own personal emotional reaction. When I listen to the tape of that briefing now I can hear my voice going up about three octaves trying to keep control.

Then Kissinger came in and answered questions and briefed on the end of the war and then we walked off the stage of the EOB and off the platform and there waiting outside was Brent Scowcroft to say I have bad news.

The first line of the President's statement that I read was, "The evacuation of Saigon is over. All the Americans are gone." Well it turns out they weren't. There were about 45 Marines left in the embassy compound. They hadn't been forgotten, they'd just been left behind as kind of a rear guard until all the civilians had been evacuated, then the helicopters were going to come and pick them up, but the statement was not factually true.

So then we had a debate over what to do. It was sort of a technicality. In a couple of hours the Americans really would be gone. We had a little debate. And Don Rumsfeld, who was then the Defense Secretary also, I'll never forget. I can still hear his words. He said, "This war has been marked by so many lies, let's not end it on one."

So then we put out a statement that said whoops, mistake. There are 45 Marines still there. They will be gone in a few hours and we did correct the statement and didn't let the war end on a lie.

The one other thing about the end of the Vietnam War, Steve, and I think this is really indicative of Ford's character. He wanted to provide help to bring out and help to resettle Vietnamese refugees -- Vietnamese who didn't want to live under the communist system or who were in danger because they had worked for and helped the Americans as part of the government or in the military. Congress voted down the bill that would have provided a couple of hundred million dollars to bring the refugees over and resettle them. And I walked into his office with AP wire copy announcing that the House had voted this down. I'd never heard President Ford curse, and he said a bad word. And then he undertook what I think was the best example of moral leadership in his Administration which was to turn around public opinion, turn around congressional opinion about the refugees. He visited refugee camps at Fort Chaffee and another one in Florida and spoke on the issue and finally persuaded Congress that we had an obligation to bring out and resettle these people whose lives were at risk, Vietnamese people whose lives were at risk if they stayed in Vietnam.

So those are some of memories of what was going on during the end of the Vietnam War.

MR. HESS: Gene, I want you to talk about the moment that government was closed, of which you were very much a part, and I offer you the option if you wish in terms of crises we have known, to tell us if the crisis that we called Monica affected the White House that you were so much a part of.

MR. SPERLING: It's interesting, on your first issue when you see like a thumbnail sketch history you always hear Bill Clinton lost the Congress in '94 and then in December he masterfully out-dueled Newt Gingrich with the government shutdown. Of course when you're living through those things you don't think at that moment you're masterfully out-dueling. You're waking up every day with a nervous pit in your stomach and you have no idea whether you're going to be influential in a decision that will be looked back in history as a terrible, terrible mistake.

I think there are a couple of lessons. One, I think for me there were lessons and I think from the policy shop there were lessons in the shutdown that did apply later when the Monica Lewinsky issue happened which was losing the Congress in '94 was a public humiliation. You had to go to work every day, you have to have questions, was the President relevant. And one of the things was to learn in a situation like that to, it sounds corny, like something a football coach told you or something, but to just keep your head down and just do your job every day. And during that year a lot of incremental strategic decisions were taken. President Clinton deciding to put out his own balanced budget plan. Constant suggestions that Newt Gingrich was not going to compromise. Things that set up a situation that when the crisis hit the public was now more willing to see it as President Clinton's having moved to the center and now holding the line against the Speaker who at that point was seen as being too strident and extreme.

I will tell you the story that I told, in January of 2001 we had a Cabinet retreat at Camp David where everybody told one story to the President. And the shutdown story that I so remember is that right as the government was about to shut down Dole and Gingrich asked for one final meeting. We thought this was putting the President in a horrible situation to have to meet at 10:00 o'clock at night and it looked like he was unwilling to take whatever offer they'd given, so we said to Leon Panetta, our Chief of Staff, this is putting the President in an unfair position. Leon Panetta said well this is a terrible thing for the government to shut down. We have to do everything we can. It was a very responsible thing for him to do but of course we were very worried. The President's in a tough situation.

You went into the Cabinet room meeting, and it was a very historic meeting, and you saw the different personalities in the U.S. Government at that point. Leon Panetta and Bob Dole, two old veterans, were very willing to try to figure out how we could work something out. When Dick Armeey saw Bob Dole starting to compromise he jumped in and made clear we're not compromising, and he went on and criticized President Clinton for being so critical and on cutting Medicaid which was a program that gives health care for poor families.

Now the whole time President Clinton hasn't said a word. I'll be honest, I was a little nervous that he might compromise too much in that situation. This was the one moment that I would describe as a "West Wing" moment in the eight years where he was President Bartlett sitting there.

He turned to Arney and he said, "I'm never going to go along with your Medicaid cuts. I've been a Governor, I know what will happen to those poor women. I don't care what happens. If you want to do that, you're going to have to put somebody in this seat. I don't care if it all comes tumbling down around me. I don't care if my popularity falls to five percent in the polls. I'm never going along with that.

That turned out to be perhaps maybe one of his finest moments both substantively and politically because taking that tough line did do well for him.

We're sitting there and we just want to cheer. [Laughter] So we get into the Oval Office and now realizing we're going to have a government shutdown and I go up to the President and say, he had just sat down, "You were just tremendous. I've never been so proud of you."

He kind of looked at me and says, "Well, that's what the younger folks think." Alice Rivlin comes up and says, "No, it's not just the younger folks, Mr. President, that was your greatest moment." Alice was our OMB Director at the time. And everybody starts telling him that. At which point Vice President Gore says, "I think what we're all saying, Mr. President, is we wish the American public could have heard what you said. You should go on TV and say what you said word for word. I wouldn't change a single word of that. Except for one thing. When you say, I don't care if my popularity goes down to five percent." The Vice President says, "Why not just say I don't care if my popularity goes to zero?"

At that point Clinton reached over and grabbed his arm and said, "Sorry Al, if we hit four percent, we're caving." [Laughter]

I told that story because to me it represents a few things. One, and I'm sure everybody here would say this. You keep your humor during the worst of times. You couldn't survive. It was a good moment. It was a moment I truly admired President Clinton. But also the uncertainty of what you're going through at that time. You do not know what you're doing. You're doing the best strategic things you can at each of those moments.

I think the way that prepared me was, that was my hardest year in the White House by far. During impeachment you already had a certain number of accomplishments under your belt. The budget was in balance. We'd had a balanced budget agreement. The '93 deficit. NAFTA. National Service. A lot of accomplishments.

In '94 you're looking at the possibility of being a failure. That's much tougher. So having survived that I think when we got to the Monica situation there was a strong ethic in the White House that the policy shop just went on. If you did your job policy-wise that things would work out okay. The President would say do what the American people elected us to do. And we'd always say that publicly and I'm sure everybody thought that's just some line, but that really was the mantra inside the White House.

I remember at one point, sometimes it was just very hard to work on your stuff in these critical moments, so I walked down the hall, I was on the second floor where the counsel's office were, and all the meetings would happen. I poked my head in and said, "What's happening?" And Rahm Emanuel said, "Get out of here. Out, out."

I said, "I just want to --." He said, "McCurry and them have to go down and tell people that the policy guys aren't spending one second worrying on this, and I'm enforcing that." [Laughter]

So I can remember going home and watching NightLine to try to find out what happened across the hall, or happening to go to a party and calling desperately to somebody, I'm about to go to a reception. Did something happen today?

So I think it did prepare us and it's an aspect that you just go on doing your policy job with this faith that if you do that right somehow things will work out. I guess that is kind of, was probably our MO through all the difficulties we had in the White House.

MR. HESS: Now you know why Gene Sperling is a writer and a consultant to the West Wing television program. I'm occasionally asked about that and I always say, "Well, it doesn't seem right, all of those people rushing around. When I was in the White House it was very very quiet. The atmosphere was shh, the President is at work." So these things change over time.

Also I note Rahm Emanuel is about to enter the House of Representatives, one of your boys made it, and for me entering the White House in 1969, I can claim that two young people that entered with me also did well in the last election. Lamar Alexander, who's office was directly above mine and sitting outside Bryce Harlow, who's become the Senator-elect from Tennessee. A young woman, Liddie Hanford as I knew her, now Elizabeth Dole who was the Assistant to the Consumer Advocate, has now become the Senator from North Carolina. The moral of the story is I guess there is life after working in the West Wing.

MR. SPERLING: I do often get asked is the West Wing TV show realistic and I say, you know, it is actually quite realistic in a lot of ways except for a few things. One, we weren't as witty. We didn't walk as fast. And we weren't as good looking. [Laughter]

MR. HESS: I want to give our group a shot at this question which they can pass on if they wish. That is advice to George W. Bush. He's now been in office long enough that you have seen how he is managing the affairs of his government. You have all been there. Jim's story about a foreign policy decision of Bill Clinton's suggests to me that he perhaps has some thoughts for George W. Bush along the same lines. Do you want to start?

MR. STEINBERG: I think the most important lesson that I take away is that ultimately the presidency is about the President. We tend to see a lot of drama about the Cabinet and discussions among advisers and it makes for good fodder for the press and there's a gossipy kind of quality to it. But I think it's really important at the end of the day that people understand and see policy flowing from

the President.

I think what we've seen from President Bush is some positive evolution in that direction on the foreign policy side. Since September 11th there's been a greater sense that the President himself is taking charge of this. But I still think they need to go, I would say, one step further, to make clear that that's where policy is being driven from. That the President is getting advice from advisers but he's not just refereeing and sort of deciding between them but it's really emerging from him. I think that ultimately the success of the presidency as he moves forward on this very critical decision about Iraq in particular is for the President to make clear that he's obviously getting advice, we know there are different views within his national security team about various issues, but that this is his mark, it's his vision about America that he's leading on and that the Cabinet and his national security team is carrying out what he wants to see done, and that ultimately the test will be on his shoulders as it comes down.

MR. HESS: Fred, you were as close to the Administration as anyone on the panel. You were involved in the transition and the vetting of people for appointments to the Administration. It strikes me frankly that this group comes as close as any group in a very long time to the famous definition of a White House aide that Louis Brownlow produced in his report for Franklin Roosevelt of having a passion for anonymity.

They seem to be an interesting group. Tell us how you view them.

MR. FIELDING: It's funny you say that because I was thinking that when you posed that question.

He has assembled a very interesting Cabinet which has a lot of experience and it brings a lot to bear and he's utilized his Cabinet and it's been an interesting study to see when you basically started out with a domestic agenda presidency that is no longer that, yet the domestic agenda still exists.

But I think one of the keys here is just what you said. He's assembled a White House staff that isn't feuding -- publicly or privately, and is working as a team and each one does their task, they do it quietly, they don't have people that are leaking indiscriminately as opposed to leaking discriminately. But it seems to have a cohesion and it seems to have an ethic to it and discipline to it which is quite a credit to the President. It would not exist if he were not a leader right now.

So I agree with you, he's assembled a very effective White House staff that is not inhibiting Cabinet government and is also serving him I believe very well.

MR. HESS: Ron, on the other hand in terms of press relations, and you who both covered the White House as a reporter and then were a press secretary, have you any sense that the same sort of discipline, buttoned down, ultimately he's going to pay a price for?

MR. NESSEN: No, I think the opposite, Steve. I think there's some similarities between the way the press treated Ford and the way it treats Bush. That is very low expectations, a sense that this

guy really isn't bright enough to be President. He's a bumbler. He can't speak the English language very well. And I think Bush benefits to some extent from low expectations in that he almost always exceeds the low expectations for him.

The other part about -- well let me say I've spent a little bit of time in recent months with Mike McCurry and I understand that what we did in terms of press relations was completely different from the problems now, because we had no 24 hour a day news networks, we had three networks, their newscasts were at 6:30 every night, and we had morning newspapers primarily. All we had to worry about was one story a day, make sure everybody has the story by 6:30.

It's not a 24-hour a day process, and this really changes the equation in terms of White House press relations. But I do think that the one thing that will help Bush and I agree with this, I have been on both sides of this relationship. He apparently does what he thinks is right and that jives with his beliefs and he doesn't pay a lot of attention to the criticism and the low expectations expressed in the media.

MR. HESS: Gene, the one area of the White House staff that seems to be coming in for criticism is of course the area that you were once responsible for, that's the economics. Not asking you for your assessment of their policies, we know that. But asking you rather for what they should do, particularly the concern that some have that they don't have a forceful economic spokesman.

MR. SPERLING: It seems like virtually every television show I go on somebody asks me do you think Paul O'Neill should resign or if he should get rid of my successor, Larry Lindsay, at the National Economic Council. And it may surprise some to know that I've never ever supported calling for any of them to resign and I in fact think that they are all quite capable and well-qualified people.

I think my advice to him is that while of course he differs from us on policy, I think that as President Clinton learned from looking at some of the things that worked well, at Bush I, I think the way the economic policy process was organized, the coordination really that Bob Rubin set up and I ran in my second term, but really was just keeping the kind of ethics that he had, would serve the President well.

On the issue of low expectations, I think what President Bush really, his message to the public in 2000 was no, I'm not Bill Clinton in terms of I'm a Rhodes Scholar and I know every little policy issue, but I'm a good solid guy, I'm going to bring the best people around me, and I have kind of a straight four, and I'll make the good decisions. I think the public is very open to that type of leadership.

And I think that on the national security side while you see this constant battle with Powell, etc., there is at least a little more sense that there is this known team.

So what I would do is I would try to find a way to get them much more organized, proactive, organized with themselves, and then this is difficult, integrating the economic team with some of the political advisers. The political advisers actually understand the economic challenges. The economic advisers understand some of the political message, and get that back and forth so that they come to the

President with a plan that makes economic sense, that makes political sense, and I think that during these type of times when the economy is weak people want to see that sense of competence in that organization and when one Cabinet member who may be very qualified says one message, somebody else seems to be saying something different. Those kind of conflicting signals can hurt you.

So I think the problem is not the individual people. I think somehow on economics the whole is not as great as the sum of the individual people.

So I think he may not want to consult us, but Mr. Border from the Bush Administration, others who study the organization of the policy shop, I would advise him to look at that on the economic team.

MR. HESS: In closing I look out at the audience. I'm so pleased to see so many young people. To tell you how I got to the White House staff, I had been drafted in the Army in 1956 and rose in the ranks from private to private first class and came out of the Army two years later. While I was in the Army my mentor at Johns Hopkins, Malcolm Moos, became the speechwriter to the President and invited me to join the staff. So for someone who was a private first class on a Friday and by Thursday had a sergeant driving me, that was a definition of heaven. And when students ask me how do you get to the White House I always say be very nice to your teachers.

At any rate, I hope you've gotten a sense of the excitement of this public service and the importance of it. I hope that you'll go away, I know the people in Brookings of course are already there in their feelings for how important public service is, but somehow we hear rumors from out there that the next generation hasn't caught onto this. That's the message we leave you with.

The book is called Organizing the Presidency. As I think George Elsey said before, we're in the business of selling books at Brookings as well. We hope you'll get a chance to read it.

We thank you for being with us here today and we want to thank Harry McPherson, George Elsey, Jim Steinberg, Ron Nessen, Gene Sperling and Fred Fielding. It's a pleasure being with you.

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