

Exit Interview: Joseph W. Aragon, Special Assistant to the President

Interviewer: David Alsobrook of the Presidential Papers Staff

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Transcribers: Lyn Kirkland and Winnie Hoover

Alsobrook: Could you tell me a little bit, first of all, Mr. Aragon, about how you came to work in the White House?

Aragon: Well, of course, the President asked me to join the staff just prior to the inauguration, and I think that came about because of work that I had done during the Presidential campaign as the National Director of Voter Registration and “get out the vote” efforts and, previous to that, work that I had done with the Democratic Party where I worked for three years under the chairmanship of Robert Strauss. During that period I got to know then-Governor Carter and Hamilton Jordan and a number of the other people who ultimately became his campaign staff. I think that the President Elect in kind of surveying folks for his new administration felt that I would be of some value to his administration by joining his personal staff and he asked me to come on with him.

Alsobrook: You mentioned the Voter Registration Drive. Is that the one that Andrew Young had some connections with at one point?

Aragon: Yes, sir. As you may recall there was a national chairperson, a chairman of the Voter Registration Drive, and that was Congressman Andy Young. I was the director of that project, which meant that I had day to day responsibilities for the national operation of the registration, “get out the vote” efforts.

Alsobrook: Could you tell me perhaps in very general terms what some of your duties were in this White House?

Aragon: I’d say that they were probably two-fold: first, to act as a continuing staff resource to the President and to special projects that the President or Hamilton Jordan might designate. That’s very broadly stated. The second would be my role as an advisor to the President and other members of the staff on issues relating to, if you will, the politics of the Hispanic community in the United States. So broadly, those two functions: a continuing staff resource for the President and a second and specialized role to provide advice on the Hispanic community.

Alsobrook: Along that same line, could you perhaps list or describe a few of these major responsibilities in regards to Hispanics?

Aragon: Well, let’s see. It might be better to come at it the other way and talk about projects that I was involved in because it was only in the context of those that from time to time I would bring the Hispanic community into play in those issues. Let me explain what I mean. My first assignment at the White House by the President was to conduct a fairly quick evaluation of the government’s

anti-poverty efforts and basically that meant that for several weeks I conducted— with a small staff, a very, very thorough evaluation of the Community Services Administration, which is the successor to the OEO, and basically tried to determine where the strengths and weakness were in that agency and tried to determine how effectively it was administering the 500 million dollars that it received for its operations each year and, beyond that, to make some very specific recommendations about how the agency might be improved, what kind of a new management team we or the President should try to bring in and what type of long term budgetary and legislative changes should be made. So, there is an example of a specific assignment. It affected Hispanics, of course, because they are a large part of the low income group of this country, along with a lot of other folks.

A second assignment that I received was much more long term in nature and it was to work on a day to day basis with Hamilton and with other members of the White House staff on the Panama Canal Treaty ratification effort. As you know, that was almost a year long effort. My specific responsibility was to try to generate public support for the President's initiative so that ultimately the right kind of political climate might be created across the country and up in the Congress to permit the final approval of those treaties. So, there are two examples: one short term, one much longer term, of the things that were assigned to me.

Of course, during that same period of time I was doing a lot of other things that came along— working on small task forces that were focusing on issues coming into the White House, whether that was, for example, some kind of a programmatic or legislative proposal that was being suggested by a member of the Cabinet or some agency, or possibly even some outside group, and to basically provide some kind of political evaluation or assessment of the merits of that proposal and what might be done with it by the President.

As far as Hispanics were concerned, in all of these issues that I worked in, I always tried to find some kind of a role for the Hispanic community to play. In the case of the Panama Canal treaties, that was one example, because even though I dealt with foreign policy still, Hispanics have cultural roots and a certain tradition there and there was an interest to be preserved and protected there. But I also worked on the anti-inflation program where there is a more immediate direct interest. I worked on civil service reform where we have a very direct interest because of our under-representation in the government structure. Tax reform is another example. There were several of these legislative initiatives that the President undertook where through my involvement, I was able in addition to bring in the Hispanic community and make them part of the larger political coalition of the White House.

Alsobrook: And that really is connected with the question I wanted to ask you about the mechanics of bringing a group of Hispanic Americans in to the White House. What kind of advance work did you have to do to prepare for a group coming in to visit the President? Did you get involved in that sort of thing too?

Aragon: Uh, yeah. Well, it was really the same approach that I used with every other group that I've worked with—religious leaders, businessmen, labor leaders, senior citizens, women's groups. I worked with a whole panoply of these sub-groups—constituencies, if you will. And, basically, the way we would do it was to look to those groups that had expressed a continuing interest in Presidential initiatives and, more often than not, there was a specific interest that had been

expressed in the issue that we happened to be working on at the time. For example, in the case of inflation—now this is an issue that affects everybody all the way from the Wall Street banker to the guy out in southern California who is working on the assembly line. What we wanted to do was to provide people an opportunity not only to hear what it was that the President was considering in terms of an anti-inflation program, but also to try to get input from them as to what they might contribute to the whole process and how they might broaden our understanding--and thereby, the President's understanding—of how best to design this new effort to fight inflation. That meant that we would contact people who had expressed an interest and then offer them an opportunity for a briefing at the White House. Then we would line up a series of senior government officials, people like Charlie Schultz, Mike Blumenthal, and others. We would schedule a briefing at the State Dining Room, or the East Room, or the residence, or possibly, if it was a smaller group, in the Roosevelt Room. Then, on the appointed day we would bring in these major opinion leaders and provide them with a briefing and listen to their thoughts and try to get that feedback and bring it back in.

Alsobrook: During the early days of the administration did you work closely with the Office of Public Liaison in carrying out some of these functions?

Aragon: No, not really. They were conducting a whole series of meetings that were valuable, but I think that those meetings were more designed to try to get input from outside groups, as opposed to arranging to have those groups come in and be briefed on a specific issue. In other words, if conservationists wanted to get their message to the President, Midge Costanza and her staff, more often than not, would provide an opportunity for them to come in and say: "Here's what we think about the issue of conservation and, furthermore, here's what we think the President ought to do about these issues." It was an important source of input but it did not get so much into this briefing side that later emerged as part of the operational mode of the White House.

Alsobrook: As you think back at some of these meetings when people came in, are there certain ones that really stand out in your mind?

Aragon: Well, I think that probably the most interesting ones were those, of course, where the President was present and where he not only made his presentation but also responded to questions. I think that probably the best examples of those kinds of briefings would be found in the Panama briefings that he did because there the President demonstrated consistently in briefing after briefing after briefing that he was totally informed on the most subtle nuances of these treaties, what their provisions entailed, and what the impact of those provisions would be ultimately. By taking on the most difficult questions that came up—some of them highly technical—from very skeptical people who came to the White House, he was able to demonstrate a total mastery of the subject matter and I think persuaded many people that this was a decision that he had reached, not because it was simply the culmination of a process and now he had to sell treaties, but because he thoroughly understood these treaties in a most sophisticated way and was convinced that they were in the best interest of his country. It was because of that that I think many, many people ultimately turned around in their own view, saying that a president who obviously had that good of an understanding of the intricacies of these two treaties, was someone who was making his decision on the basis of information and a lot of thinking, as opposed to just some kind of visceral presidential reaction of "I've got treaties, now let's ratify them."

Alsobrook: You told me a little bit about bringing people into the White House, but did your job also involve your going out into the various parts of the country and speaking to groups?

Aragon: Very little, frankly. There were many people in the administration who were doing that in the case of Panama, obviously, with inflation and so on, but my job was more along the lines of trying to help structure a plan or some kind of a mechanism that would ultimately produce an informed public understanding of the issue and thereby generate support for that issue. In the case of Panama, for example, we established a Speakers Bureau at the State Department and there were hundreds and hundreds of speeches that ultimately were made. This is true in the case of inflation. I set up a Speakers Bureau for the anti-inflation effort and that bureau, which is still underway, is sending high level government officials and then more technical people out all over the country to explain the President's approach to the problem of inflation. So I didn't personally do a lot of speaking, but a lot of it was done by others.

Alsobrook: Are there any personal appearances that you made, like in, say, reading something for the President, that really stand out in your mind?

Aragon: I was thinking of a trip that I made to England last year to talk about the President's first year and also to talk about Jimmy Carter as a candidate, and to talk about the campaign obviously. That was interesting because the group I was addressing was one that had a tremendous amount of interest in the presidency and was surprisingly—intimately knowledgeable about how the White House functions. It was clear that they had taken a lot of time to inform themselves, but who did not have a good enough understanding of the President, and therefore, did not fully understand how he was going about his presidency.

These were members of Parliament and European journalists for the most part. And that was interesting, because in the case of Britain, for example, their idea of presidential politics is not at all like ours. Elections over there are totally unlike the way that we conduct ours. They were surprised by the thoroughness of a campaign organization, how much detail goes into it and this was made especially, I should say, important to them, more graphic to them, when I talked about how Jimmy Carter as candidate had traveled all over the country talking to people who probably never thought he would ever think of them again, much less remember their name or anything like that, who a few days later, or a few weeks later, would get a call from Rosalynn Carter inquiring about the health of Ellen, the wife.

All of this, and the thoroughness of that campaign, really surprised the Britons. And that was one of the more interesting things, because it was clear to me, not only from what these members of Parliament said but also these journalists, that whenever a new President comes into office in this country, the entire world just waits, sitting to find out what is going to happen because our own social and economic and political health so completely affects their future. At that time there was a lot of discussion about the President's decision on the neutron bomb and there was a lot of concern about that. That was an interesting trip that I did make.

Alsobrook: On one occasion, too, I think you were down in Miami at Homestead Air Force Base when a group of American citizens with their Cuban relatives returned.

Aragon: This was the very first group of American citizens and their relatives that had been released by or permitted to emigrate to the United States by Fidel Castro and I went down to represent the President and to greet this first group, and that, obviously, was an interesting experience and a very dramatic thing, sensitive, of course. The Castro regime has released a large number of political prisoners and has really liberalized its emigration policy.

Alsobrook: You described a number of your duties. Will it be possible for you to tell me how you spent most of your time?

Aragon: Well, first of all, most of my time was spent in the office as opposed to traveling. Secondly, I'd say that a large percentage of my time was spent in preparing memos that were basically trying to summarize where we were in the process. If the issue was Humphrey-Hawkins, an issue that I did do some work on, the objective there was at some given point to try to gather together all the information that was available about what our political situation was and what was going on within the government to try to bring about the passage of that legislation.

So a lot of time was spent doing that kind of work, a lot of time was spent drafting memos for Hamilton and for the President and for others, on issues that might come up that had not necessarily been anticipated but that needed to be addressed. I recall the writing of one, two or more memoranda on the issue of the "boat people." That came up; I guess it was in the first year, the last of 1977. That was becoming very much an issue of national concern, a lot of media coverage, and the question was, you know, "What are we going to do about extending the quota that had already been set for Indochinese refugees? Should it now be increased in order to accommodate these late-coming refugees, these boat people, who were in such desperate straits?"

So I was responding to things like that, as I said: a proposal being made on the consumer cooperative bank, or the Hire Program, and a whole series of other short-term issues; a lot of analysis; a lot of writing; working with task forces; spending a lot of time in the Roosevelt Room on these things; heading up sub-groups, that, well, in the case of civil service, for example, helped to put together a White House task force that brought in every department of the White House and every department in the government that was somehow involved in the legislative effort. That group would meet maybe twice a week, Monday and Thursday. At one point, Hamilton asked me to convene a sub-group of that larger group to meet every single day to monitor the progress of the larger group and to make sure that everything was staying on track and that he had basically a day to day report of what was going on. So there was a lot of that.

Alsobrook: Would most of the questions concerning Hispanic Americans come across your desk?

Aragon: A lot of them did, but I think that this White House has operated differently from previous administrations, in that if it was an issue that related to something Stu Eizenstat's staff should be working on, that's where it went, or Frank Moore if a legislative item and so on. So I pretty much tried to minimize my own involvement in that. First of all, the President felt very strongly about having the entire White House staff operate on a very, very broad base--not only Hispanic Americans but Black Americans and others. He disfavors any narrow approach to that. He doesn't want to ghettoize the White House and he doesn't want to ghettoize government. So he

was quite insistent that that be done and always quite insistent that my role be one that really cut across issues. It just wouldn't be healthy to restrict it that way.

Alsobrook: Was this the way the policy was when you came in the first day on the job or did this change any during the time you were here?

Aragon: Well, I think it changed, not because of any internal decision but because when I first came into the White House, Hispanic Americans— organizations and political leaders I think probably were under the impression that the Carter White House would operate just like its predecessors had in that regard. If my name was Hispanic, I must be the person who was going to handle all their issues, but over time they discovered that not only was that not the case, but beyond that, it wasn't in their interest for that to be the case and so ultimately, as they got to bring their own concerns directly to Stu Eizenstat, which they did—this was part of the process, of course—or to Jody Powell or to Hamilton, Brzezinski, or Jack Watson, all of these people who had themselves personally involved in listening to or trying to address the concerns of these Hispanic organizations, they realized that this was a much, much better way to go about dealing with their problems than going to one person and just totally overloading the circuits on that person, which is what would have happened. So I actively discouraged that kind of funneling of concerns. If someone brought a problem to me, if it was something relating to someone else, that's where it got sent. There were some people who, I think, because they didn't understand this, probably got a little bit upset, but two years later it's hard to find anybody who still feels the same way. They much prefer this greater access to the White House staff.

Alsobrook: You are talking about people in the Hispanic community in the United States who would write you or visit with you?

Aragon: Sure. Many of these people I had known for years, too, and if it was a problem relating to jobs or unemployment, not only would we make sure that Stu or somebody on the staff addressed this issue, but we also tried to make sure that Ray Marshall [Secretary of Labor] or one of his people addressed the issue and for the most part, it's worked very well.

Alsobrook: You mentioned your role in the Panama Canal debate and treaties, were there other elements of foreign policy that you devoted as much time to as you did that?

Aragon: No, no. I'd say that I just kind of touched on things, as I mentioned, and there were a few little items like that, but I would say the vast majority of my time was invested in domestic issues.

Alsobrook: Did you spend any of your time working with the Illegal Alien legislation?

Aragon: Sure, I doubt that you could find anyone in the White House who didn't work on that issue because this was something that the President felt very, very strongly about. You may recall that the very first head of state to visit this country; in this administration anyway, was Lopez Portillo, President of Mexico. It was obviously not an accident that that came about—the President could have had any head of state in the world—but he invited this particular one because of his concern for improving US-Mexico relations and obviously the issue of undocumented workers is one of the most troublesome and historically sensitive issues between our two countries and so,

shortly after he came into office, the President appointed a small interagency task force to work on this thing and he asked Bell—Attorney General [Griffin] Bell—and Ray Marshall and [Juanita] Kreps and Vance and all of their staffs to participate in this and for months and months this group worked and ultimately turned out a set of proposals, legislative proposals, designed to comprehensively deal with the problem. I worked with that group during that time providing my own input to the President and to the working group itself.

Alsobrook: This was during the early days of the administration?

Aragon: Yes, this was mostly during the first year. This is an example of one of those things I was telling you about that during the Panama effort I was involved in other things. That is an example of one of them.

Alsobrook: So you were working on this at the same time you were working on, say, Panama? In the same way, I think during this same period, the Justice Department was involved in some discrimination suits around the country involving Blacks as well as Hispanics and maybe even other minorities too. Did you have some involvement in those too?

Aragon: Not very much, but I was involved over a two year period. I was kind of in and out of this issue, and that's the issue of police abuse, which probably is the most volatile issue in the Hispanic community today. There has been a steady increase over the last three or four years in reported incidents of police abuse against Hispanic Americans. Because the President was very, very concerned about this, he asked the Attorney General to stay very, very alert to this problem and to make sure that the Justice Department followed up quickly on reports of police abuse and from time to time I would get involved in this issue to help bring about meetings.

Alsobrook: Are you speaking of police abuse in cities such as Houston, for example?

Aragon: The City of Houston, yeah. More often than not, in the southwestern states and the southwestern part of the United States.

Alsobrook: I have just a couple more I need to ask you.

Aragon: Sure, go ahead.

Alsobrook: Along this same line, I found it so interesting too, did you also get involved in the legislation and other matters involving agricultural workers? I think the H2 program is one of them involving California migrant workers, agricultural workers.

Aragon: Yeah, I'm sure that I wrote a memo or two on that but I wasn't actively involved. There was a Presidio, Texas, case for example, that was very controversial, but my involvement I guess took the form of the work that I did on this task force because any attempt to deal with the issue of undocumented workers has to take up the issue of temporary workers or the H2 program, but I did make some input to that as well.

Alsobrook: You obviously worked in government before you came to the White House. You told me a little bit about your earlier experiences. Could you describe in your own words the difference you found in working in the White House to working with the DNC [Democratic National Committee] or some other area of government?

Aragon: Remember, of course, that this is the very first time I have worked for the government—these last two years. Prior to that, although it was the DNC---partisan activities--- it has not been part of the federal government. But there is a very, very definite change that I perceived in the political temperament and I attribute that in large measure to the President's own approach to the presidency and his view of American politics. I think that he understands very well how much the American people want to have public officials and a government that they trust and that they believe will truly look out for their interests. I think that in recent years that has come into question and this has produced a great deal of widespread skepticism among American people as to whether or not the government is really serving the interests of people the way it should. And so a large part of the President's time and effort, as I see it, has been spent trying to restore the confidence of the American people in their government and in their leaders. I think this is changing, not only because the President is making these efforts, but also because it is clear to a lot of folks that the standard is higher and that if they are not prepared to live by that standard, that the American people simply will not tolerate it. So there is a higher standard of conduct that is expected of people. This has taken the form of ethics legislation, disclosure requirements, and so on. I think it is all very, very healthy because it means that the public will have reason to trust its government again and its public officials. I think that that kind of trust is indispensable to the continuation of a political democracy, because once people believe that the system they have been living by does not work, then they start looking at alternatives. When we open that door it seems to me that anything can walk through. I think there has been a change, and I think it is a positive change and the President has a whole lot to do with that.

Alsobrook: Could you tell me your future plans? Things that you can divulge?

Aragon: Very, very briefly...when I leave government, I am going to return to California to private life. There is a family business that my family owns out there and I will spend the next few years trying to be a successful entrepreneur and I look forward to it. I have enjoyed my government service but I look forward to private life too.

Alsobrook: Could you also give me a permanent mailing address and possibly a telephone number?

Aragon: At the moment I can't because I have not actually gotten the place where I am going to be staying, but I should have that in a couple of weeks. You can always get it from Vivian Lichtman who works with me and will stay on at the White House. She always knows how I can be reached.

Alsobrook: I was going to ask you: formerly I think you worked at UCLA and you went to law school at USC.

Aragon: Yes, I did.

Alsobrook: Do you work with the alumni association? Perhaps would that be a possible contact?

Aragon: Oh, absolutely. I have a lot of family out there in Los Angeles and Long Beach. If you can't reach me one way you can always reach me another because there are a lot of people we know and that know us. We don't intend to keep it a secret we are there. [laughs]

Alsobrook: Well, I appreciate it. I wish we had more time so we could talk about your earlier career but perhaps we can do that at another time.

Aragon: That's good enough.

Alsobrook: Thank you.

[end of tape]