

Exit Interview with Scott Burnett, Director, Speaker's Bureau

Location: Room 415, Old Executive Office Building

Interviewer: David Alsobrook, Presidential Papers Staff

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Alsobrook: It's on a cassette, but if you could just say "testing" one second while I pick you up.

Burnett: Testing. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5.

Alsobrook: Scott, first of all, today, how did you involved in the '76 Carter Presidential campaign?

Burnett: You know, I went to college at Kansas State University and I got involved in a congressional race there with an incumbent member of Congress and he left office and a woman named Martha Keys took his place in Congress. I worked for her in 1975 in Topeka. On March 1, 1975, Jimmy Carter came to Topeka with Rosalynn and Jody Powell to make a Washington Day speech and I talked to him for a long time that day and I told him I would like to help him in the Midwest. About three weeks later Tim Kraft came to town and he was the Midwest coordinator for Jimmy Carter and we got to be friends and so all of 1975 I helped Kraft on the weekends and I took several jobs with Martha Keys when I lived in Topeka but I told her I wanted to help Kraft out. One day in December of '75 Hamilton called and asked me if I would like a job on the campaign and so starting on February 1st, I became, I took a chunk of the Midwest from Kraft. He was pretty much the Iowa coordinator by that time. I took Kansas, Missouri, and Iowa, or, Nebraska and I helped coordinate those through June of '76 and then moved to Atlanta and then went to New York and I worked in the fall of '76 with Kraft in Atlanta and then we came here on November 15th and started the transition, then moved over to the White House the day after the inaugural.

Alsobrook: How would you describe your daily campaign in the fall of '76?

Burnett: The first half of the year, they were field operations. We were actually running campaigns out there. The second half of the year I was assistant to Kraft helping to select personnel for the field operations all over the state field operations. I helped coordinate those, take care of problems, and helped provide staff as we geared up in August and September for that fall campaign.

Alsobrook: Do you remember who some of the people were that you worked with very closely?

Burnett: Yeah, the closest people were Tim Kraft, Roy Bach, Alicia Smith, a guy named Steve Patulus who was on loan from the United Auto Workers, Phil Wise, and Jay Wade. The entire field operation was on the 24th floor of the building where we were headquartered in Atlanta.

Alsobrook: That's the Colony Square building?

Burnett: Yeah, yeah. Those were the main people I worked with.

Alsobrook: Were they all Midwesterners like yourself?

Burnett: No, Kraft is from Indiana and had spent the last 10 years in New Mexico, and Alicia was from Connecticut and Laurie is from Iowa.

Alsobrook: Oh, yeah.

Burnett: Steve is from Uruguay or somewhere but is in Michigan now. Phil and Jay were from Georgia, well, Phil was from Georgia and Jay was from Virginia. So people were from all over the country.

Alsobrook: Are there certain things about the campaign that stand out in your mind as you think back about '76? I know you are in the midst of another campaign now.

Burnett: The early days were a real experience. The first half of the year was the first time I had been involved in a national operation. It was pretty interesting. It was difficult to communicate with the Atlanta office sometimes, difficult to get what we needed but a pretty enjoyable, really new experience. The second half of the year was pretty frustrating. It's, I think, very difficult or almost impossible to run a national campaign at a national level. I think it has to be done at the state level, so I was real frustrated in the fall of '76. It begin to feel like we weren't in touch with what was going on in the states. The next experience, the transition, was just a real frustrating time for everyone. No one knew if they were going to work in the administration, where they were going to work, or whether they were going to work at all and so everyone was wondering, do we have a job and nobody talked to you about it. So it was a mixed year. It was just the most amazing year I think I will ever spend. It was just very enjoyable with all the people and the experience.

Alsobrook: Was your background at Kansas State in political science?

Burnett: Yes.

Alsobrook: When did you first learn that you would be coming to the White House? Do you recall that?

Burnett: It was about ten days before Christmas. Kraft had said not to say anything but Greg Snyder had had some problems with overdrafts and some bank failures and things here and the president had talked to Kraft about being his appointments secretary and Kraft had indicated he was going to come over here and would need some staff so just right before Christmas 1976, I thought it might happen, but I didn't know for sure until after the first of the year.

Alsobrook: Was Tim the one who told you that you would be coming over here?

Burnett: Yes.

Alsobrook: Did he describe your duties for you at that time?

Burnett: No.

Alsobrook: Did you have any preconceived notions about what the White House would be like before you got here?

Burnett: I did. I can't hardly remember them now. [Alsobrook laughs.] I expected an awesome, kind of unbelievable type world, and in many aspects it was true, but the thing that's amazed me about the White House, the most amazing aspect of it is the communications system, the telephone, and the WACA operation. That's just incredible. You can call anywhere in the world but on the other hand, you know, it's difficult to get your office clean. [Alsobrook laughs.] So even in the White House it's not, some aspects are bad, but the White House was really a pleasure after the campaign because there were plenty of pencils, paper, and typewriters, and ribbons here, and in the campaign there is never enough of that and I expected...well, we just didn't know what to expect. We were all really scared when we came here. We didn't know whether we were allowed to walk across the street or where our access was and it just took time to learn all that.

Alsobrook: Do you remember the first day that you arrived here?

Burnett: Oh, yeah.

Alsobrook: What sticks out in your mind?

Burnett: Well, the most unusual part of that day was I called a cab and I thought I should get here early so I called a cab to come get me at home at 7:00 and it came by and there was a guy in the back and I got in the front and he put the paper down and it was Hamilton Jordan and I rode my first day to work with Hamilton, and I think that was a Friday, January 21st. And that day was just kind of sorting out what I was going to be doing and I found out that I would be working for Fran McGordy. I hadn't known that before and that she would be the Deputy Appointments Secretary. And the first day was just trying to sort out how things worked here. I didn't ever go across the street into the White House proper until about 5:00 the next day I decided to do it, January 22, when we were pretty sure it would be all right. We asked some people if we could go across the street and they said yeah. So, I remember Alicia and I went across the street and that was my first time actually in the White House.

Alsobrook: OK, and so, how did your duties emerge out of these first few days? What kind of things were you doing?

Burnett: Once I got here, Tim and Fran had talked about my being the director of the Speaker's Bureau so I started to assume those responsibilities. The woman that had done the Speaker's

Bureau before was in the office the day I came in and she was boxing her stuff up, so she gave a little briefing on what she had done and I just started to get into it and found out how the letters came in, how the President didn't, he wasn't going to be able to accept hardly any of the invitations and how the worthy national events would come to me to be filled or to look at to try to fill with an administration spokesperson.

Alsobrook: OK, so really, what you were mainly responsible for in the Speaker's Bureau?

Burnett: I was responsible for taking out of the, I guess the President gets about a thousand invitations a week. I was responsible for taking 20, 30 of those of national importanceexcuse me. [There is noise. He appears to fumble with a beeper.]

Alsobrook: Go right on.

Burnett: Out of all the invitations that come into the President, those of national importance would come to me and I established liaison with the Speaker's Bureaus or with the executive assistants to the cabinet members to the agencies and tried to then find somebody who would be good for the speaking engagement.

Alsobrook: What kind of staff did you have?

Burnett: For a long time I was by myself, with just a general pool in the scheduling office. I was able to use the pool that answered the phone and typed some, but I did the work by myself. I had an intern most of the time and they were always pretty good and then as the years went on and the job changed, I got more staff until I had four or five people before I ended that job and then started doing general work for Sarah Weddington. That was just a couple of months ago.

Alsobrook: Did you report directly to Phil Wise? Is that the way it was?

Burnett: No, I reported to Fran.

Alsobrook: OK. All righty. Did the job change in terms of duties or responsibilities during the time that you were in it?

Burnett: It just changed to the extent that we started to do more and we were able to get more done as we got to know the way things worked better. It was definitely clear that experience helped a great deal. Then the 1978 political season caused our job to change quite a bit. I worked with Ronna Freiberg and Tom Noland and doing a service for candidates that were congressional incumbents or candidates. We helped get administration speakers that could go out and help them, and so we did quite a bit of scheduling for congressional candidates in 1978. Lots and lots of appearances by cabinet or staff on behalf of members of Congress or candidates.

Alsobrook: So you were spending more time on that than you had previously?

Burnett: Yeah, we spent quite a bit of time doing that.

Alsobrook: At one point didn't Jerry Rafshoon's office get involved in the Speaker's...?

Burnett: Well, to the extent that he was going to try to provide current talking points to the Cabinet and to the agencies on Presidential proposals. It never seemed to be very significant or to get off the ground too much to me.

Alsobrook: This was back, what, about a year or a year and a half ago?

Burnett: A couple of years ago, I think.

Alsobrook: What is the most difficult thing about the Speaker's Bureau job?

Burnett: Convincing the Cabinet and the agencies that the events I was asking them to do were important, and when they balked, the other difficult thing was getting internal White House to back me up on my request for so and so to do something such as that. So it was those two things that were the most difficult.

Alsobrook: So what would you do in a case like that, Scott? Would you have to get Hamilton Jordan or somebody like that?

Burnett: Sometimes I would go all the way to Hamilton and get him to call "X" cabinet person and say, "You really got to do this and that." Lots of times it would involve getting Kraft to call or it would involve somebody else here to call and say, "This event is important and you need to go do it on behalf of the President."

Alsobrook: How about in terms of personal satisfaction, a sense of accomplishment? Were there certain elements of this job that gave you these feelings of satisfaction?

Burnett: I really enjoyed the project we did in 1978 on behalf of Congress. We really did some substantial good in helping elect members of Congress and helping incumbents. I also was very satisfied when we were able to fill an important event to help promote the President's policy. And then I was also frustrated by it because we couldn't get cabinet cooperation on it and I got real frustrated because I couldn't get internal cooperation sometimes. Folks were too busy to pay attention.

Alsobrook: Uh huh. OK. What were some of the other White House staff units you worked with almost on a daily basis?

Burnett: With Jack Watson's office a lot. I worked with Anne Wexler's office after she got here, and then I worked with the individual offices if the person in that office was a good surrogate speaker for the President. For example, I worked with Hugh Carter to the extent that if I wanted Hugh Carter to do an event I would work with him and his staff. But in general, a wide area, I worked with Jack Watson's office quite a bit.

Alsobrook: How about media liaison?

Burnett: Somewhat, not a whole lot.

Alsobrook: All righty. Did you have any special assignments in addition to your everyday chores at the Speaker's Bureau during this early period?

Burnett: Yeah, there were quite a bit of—Kraft had been the political field director for the 1976 campaign and I got quite a few special assignments from Kraft; just to take care of this person, take care of this person, give this person a tour, get this person set up with a meeting over at HUD to talk about housing. In the early days I got along quite a bit taking people into the Oval Office for the President to greet them and for brief handshakes, so I've done that a lot, going in there. And those were all the types of special things that Kraft wanted done. Now I was a close person to Kraft so lots of times he would have special projects that he would want done of more of a political nature, but things that were important, just showing people that we appreciated their support in '76.

Alsobrook: So, how long were you actually in this particular job, Scott?

Burnett: Until about—it changed over the year somewhat. About a year ago I started to receive more staff and it became a little higher degree, a little more emphasis was put on it by the senior staff and it continued to change. And then until about two or three months—well, I guess it was around Christmas time, I left that. I think it was in January sometime; I just don't remember. I left that job and Jay Wade took over. And then about Christmas I transferred from scheduling operations to Sarah Weddington's office because it made more sense to politically think about where we wanted surrogates that would help promote the President's policy, so it made more sense to be in Sarah's office.

Alsobrook: OK, so, you've been performing a similar function then in Sarah Weddington's office.

Burnett: Yes. The Speaker's Bureau became part of Sarah Weddington's office six or eight months ago and then I left it three or four months ago and Jay took over.

Alsobrook: Jay?

Burnett: Wade.

Alsobrook: OK. Could you tell me a little bit about the job that you've been holding the last few months?

Burnett: Basically the last three or four months I've been doing special projects for Sarah, some of the liaison to the agencies. I particularly do Sarah's case work liaison to the Agriculture Department. I also coordinate a thing called the State's Callers Program which is—Kraft originally set it up but about 25 people within the White House that are responsible for calling on the states and talking to mayors, governors, Democratic elected officials, state reps, state

senators, the Democratic party organization. We found that after we had been here a while that there was no one real person designated to take care of Nebraska, to take care of Missouri. They were all taken care of on a piecemeal basis. If it was a mayor or governor, Watson would work with them. If it was Congress, Frank Moore would work with them. There wasn't any one coordinating person to kind of know what all the activities that were going on, so Kraft had me set this State Callers Program up that I continued and became more active in after I left the Speaker's Bureau for Sarah Weddington. What I did the last two or three months was make sure that the state callers were aware of national events here in town where people would be coming in from their states. I do two or three mailings a week of current talking points on issues that are affecting the President so that state callers would have as up to date information about what the administration was doing as possible.

I'm also responsible for five of those states in the States Callers Program: Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, Iowa, and North Dakota. So I have established lots and lots of contacts in all those states. For example, about a month ago, the Home Builders of America were having what they call a spring board of directors' meeting. It turned out to be a couple of thousand people. I obtained a list from the homebuilders of all their two thousand people coming to Washington. My office cut the list up and we sent it to each of the state callers saying, "These homebuilders are going to be in Washington such and such dates and I suggest that you try to get to know them, try to set up any meetings in the White House or in the agencies that they need to help them explain their plight that the homebuilders are having right now." And specifically, being the state caller for Missouri, I got the Family Theater and set up David Rubenstein to come in and spend an hour listening to the problems that homebuilders are having right now. And it was a way to make the average American that's involved in the auto industry, the home building industry, they tend to feel more a part of the federal government if the federal government cares to hear about them. So we do a lot of those programs. I set up, oh, six or eight months ago, for 35 Jewish leaders from St. Louis to come in and meet with Kitty Sherman to talk about energy and we went over to the Cabinet Room and the President greeted them. From the state responsibility that I specifically have I do a lot of that type of constituent liaison and then I help direct all the rest of the programs for Sarah.

Alsobrook: You know, it almost reminds me of some of the type of projects that were going on in the early days of the administration in Midge Costanzo's office too, some of the outreach.

Burnett: Yeah, it was kind of what she was doing. Yeah.

Alsobrook: You know, these talking points that you give your state callers. Do you draw these up yourself or do you have other people doing them?

Burnett: No, I've got a kid in the office that is responsible for on a daily or every other day basis making sure that he goes to Media Liaison, to the Speech Writers, to Watson's office, to Weddington's office to scour the complex to make sure that when talking points come out that

we are one of the first to receive those so that I can get them in the mail for the state callers so that they are going to know that two days ago the President issued a major, uh, the President proposed a major initiative on the welfare system and they have the talking points on what these initiatives are.

Alsobrook: Uh huh, uh huh. So the talking points really are just a combination of things out of all of these offices. Right?

Burnett: Yes. Yeah.

Alsobrook: Do they look anything like some of those printed forms that come out of Media Liaison?

Burnett: A lot of them, that's what they are. They come in all shapes and forms. Some of them are Jim Perk's background or some of them are Stu Eizenstat's or David Rubenstein's talking points type thing. They look different all the time.

Alsobrook: Let me take you back to 1975 again. Do you remember the first time you ever saw or met the President?

Burnett: Sure.

Alsobrook: What were the circumstances?

Burnett: It was March 1, 1975, in an auditorium in Topeka, Kansas. He was sitting on a stage with Rosalynn and had quite a bit of time and I went up to him and talked to him for 15 or 20 minutes and then listened to his speech later. The next morning I then attended a little breakfast where he and Jody and Rosalynn appeared. And that's the first time I ever met him. I remember that very well and over the next couple of months I started working with Kraft and every once in a while we would see Governor Carter in one of these various state meetings so I got to know him pretty well.

Alsobrook: Uh huh. Did he remember you after you came to the White House? Did he make the connection from being the candidate?

Burnett: Yeah, yeah. And I probably have seen him once or twice a month every month since 1975, so I think he is well aware of where I'm from and what I've done. I saw him today and I took some folks in from North Dakota as part of my liaison work with North Dakota. I took an elderly couple in to see him, to greet him today and we chatted just a little bit and I told him I was leaving.

Alsobrook: I am sure it really impresses these people, some of these folks from farm communities and so on, you know.

Burnett: Yeah. North Dakota people don't get a whole lot of attention, so I am sure they really enjoyed today.

Alsobrook: That must be kind of interesting for you too, you know, to do things like that.

Burnett: Yeah. I have had a good experience. I've really enjoyed the White House because I have taken lots of people in to see the President. I took the rock group Crosby, Stills, and Nash in to see him and just various people from all walks of life are going in there together. The whole White House thing has been a unique, very enjoyable experience because I have met people from all over the country.

Alsobrook: I want to ask you a philosophical question about politics. What was it politically that attracted you to candidate Carter back in '75?

Burnett: He talked about the fact that government doesn't have to be so complex and it doesn't have to be such a ruling part of our life. He talked about being able to cut down on paperwork a little and that type of thing. I don't think the President or any one person, that one person being the President, is able to change the direction of the country drastically, so what I look for in a President is someone who can start to slowly turn this country around towards where it needed to go. I thought Carter had the right idea then and I still very much do. I think he has very slowly started to turn our heads towards the types of issues we should be facing. Ford and Nixon knew there was no energy policy and just ignored it. Carter knew he couldn't ignore it and wasn't going to ignore it. Every Democratic candidate and President and Republican candidate and President have always ignored the Middle East problem. We've just always sided strongly with Israel and Carter knew that wasn't going to bring peace there and so he had guts enough to bring us to a middle, he brought us to what I think was a common sense solution to the Middle East thing and I think he has done that in many other areas and that's why I don't think—you know he's soft spoken, he's not a dramatic leader but I think he's moving this country in the way it needs to go and I think a lot of our current problems he's caused because he has turned our heads and our attitudes towards solving some long range problems and he has told us for years that this wasn't going to be easy but that he was going to have to do some things to solve some of the problems and I think he has got us headed the right way.

Alsobrook: Scott, years from now if somebody asked you of all the things you worked on while you worked in the White House and you could single out one thing that made you feel the best about your role here, what would you tell them—that you would like to underscore, of all the things you worked on?

Burnett: Well, I don't think it can be any one thing. It's just that I was very proud and pleased to be able to provide services for American people through the office of their President and do it in a good conscientious way that I thought took care of people's needs.

Alsobrook: Uh huh.

Burnett: So that's the general thing that I am pleased about doing.

Alsobrook: Could you tell me a little about your immediate plans after you leave here?

Burnett: I am going to leave here Friday and move to St. Louis and become a member of the Democratic National Committee staff and be a voter registration coordinator for the state of Missouri.

Alsobrook: Uh huh.

Burnett: I will do that immediately.

Alsobrook: What do you think the future holds for you?

Burnett: I probably will have an active part in the fall campaign. Then I intend to move back here and I hope to take it easy for November, December, and January through the inaugural and then I want to move back to the Midwest, either Kansas or Missouri, and get involved in the agribusiness; some sort of farm interest connected with banks and managing forests or banks. I'm from a farm. We raised cattle and hogs and wheat all of my life and I want to get back there. I'm not wild about Washington.

Alsobrook: Do you think there is a tendency to burn yourself out sometimes?

Burnett: Yeah. Most people I work with are headed there now, but I think that the adrenaline will start to flow from now through November the 4th and will get us through this period, but people are shot. I think they are really tired. Kraft's done this non-stop since early 1975 and most of us have been pretty constant at this thing for years now and I can sure see that people are tired. When we first came to Washington we had a lot of get-togethers and parties and things and we don't any more. It's rare that we will have more than just two or three people get together for supper. We used to have a lot more parties and a lot more fun but people are just tired now.

Alsobrook: Do you think, maybe, that's one of the unglamorous, non-glamorous aspects of White House work that the public doesn't always see out there, you know?

Burnett: Well, yeah. That whole thing is that you don't have a lot of time to yourself and you don't go home at 5:00 and your social life suffers because you need to pay so much attention here. That's one of the hazards of having a busy job that the public doesn't perceive, I don't think.

Alsobrook: Is there anything about your work that you have done here that perhaps my questions haven't elicited that you would like to add? Anything that you feel like is important, any role that you have had, or any decisions? Anything like that?

Burnett: No, I don't think so.

Alsobrook: Can you give me a permanent address and telephone number so that future libraries might call you up out in Kansas?

Burnett: Yeah. My permanent address is Arlington, Kansas, 67514 and my permanent phone number is my parents which is 316-538-2681 and my father is Harry C. Burnett in Arlington, Kansas.

Alsobrook: Alrighty. Well, I think that covered all my questions. I appreciate your time.