

Exit Interview with Rhonda Bush, Director of First Lady's Correspondence

Interviewer: David Alsobrook, Presidential Papers Staff

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Transcribed by: Lyn Kirkland

Alsobrook: Rhonda, first of all, what positions have you held at the White House? I know you have had two different positions that I know of.

Bush: Well, disregard the one that I had for two months before I really started working here. In April of 1977, Mrs. Carter asked me if I would be willing to handle her correspondence, so from that time until August of this year, 1980, I was the director of Mrs. Carter's correspondence. I was a part of the political team which oversaw the actually processing and receiving of the mail, the analysis of the mail and the replies sent to the public. In this position I was responsible for, not so much her personal correspondence or those letters which actually the First Lady would sign, but more over the general public's responses we received from the White House. We handled the approximately 2000 pieces of mail a week, a combination of the First Lady and the First Family. All mail that was addressed to the President and Mrs. Carter was considered Mrs. Carter's mail. An interesting part of this job, which we had to kind of build our own system, is that this is the first administration in which the First Lady's correspondence was taken out of the East Wing and instituted as a unit within the White House correspondence which is located in the EOB [Executive Office Branch]. This change was recommended to us by Mrs. Ford's transition staff as something that they would change were they here again. And it worked beautifully. The mail comes in in the EOB and it goes out in the EOB, all the processing is done there, and it's only logical. I felt as an additional arm of the East Wing. I was their contact for EOB services. I was able to handle the mail according to their criteria, according to their priorities, but yet doing it over there made it much more effective and time effectiveness is important.

Alsobrook: Even though you were physically located over there, did you have an immediate superior over here you reported to? How did that work?

Bush: Approvals for card texts, enclosures that we used all, came to the First Lady through her office, which was Madeline MacBean. So I used as my primary contact Madeline and that was to get First Lady approval on policy changes or wordings of new letters, particularly First Lady letters. Other contacts over here depended on the job. Anything that handled her projects, I would discuss it with Kathy Cade. Any press related correspondence would fall under the

jurisdiction of Mary Hoyt, etc., so I used her staff as they were set up in their individual offices and their responsibilities were already defined.

Alsobrook: How about staff over there? How many people did you have working with you over at the EOB?

Bush: It ranged from five on my immediate staff to one on my immediate staff. That's not counting....we always had one person responsible for reading all of our mail. Sometimes the volume would increase to the point where we would need two people to read the mail. My writing assistants and those who helped me draft the letters, ranged from three additional staff members to only one. I drew heavily for support on presidential correspondence in the White House correspondence unit which would perform the typing and the filing services, enclosure storage. I, in that aspect, acted as part of the team in which we could, the political team could, define priorities for processing and I had my say, as far as Mrs. Carter's say, in how they did that, what enclosures we used and at what time should we send them.

Alsobrook: You had somebody in mail analysis who ran all First Lady mail?

Bush: That's exactly right. We had one analyst in mail analysis to read Mrs. Carter's mail. Now, that changed you know over the years. At one time we were all centrally located and my analyst read it within my office, and just organizational management changes you know made it even easier to make the first Lady's analyst a part of the mail analysis. The more we were there the more integrated we became.

Alsobrook: Rhonda, after you perfected that system of dealing with First Lady mail, would you describe for me, like the mail comes in and tell me everything that happens to it?

Bush: Well, the mail is separated in the mail room where they would separate the "President and Mrs." mail from the President's mail. Also, they would be watching for things the First Lady's office had informed the mail room they wanted to see directly...specific codes and the address, particular return addresses which would make it reasonable to send over here immediately, like from Mrs. Lillian Carter from Plains, Georgia, they wouldn't send to me. After it was separated, the mail was to be delivered to the analyst responsible for reading our mail within mail analysis. She was provided with form letters, not only my form letters but form letters for the East Wing staff so that what's coded with a combination code of letters and numbers, depending on initials and series numbers in the form letters. We'd send those letters requiring a simple form response to reply processing. We had frequent meetings with the East Wing staff and our analyst to give them some kind of criteria. If this and this and this, then they'll get this form letter, but if it is a president of a national organization, I'd like to see that in my office. So, within those choices, she had the choice of coding for a form letter, sending directly to an East Wing office, sending directly to me. She also sent to me those things which would need work from the White House

staff. So then that became one of my responsibilities was liaison with domestic policy should they see one of our letters or any of the other branches of the executive office. Some letters would get simple enclosures. Like if someone was writing for a recipe card, we would send them a recipe card. There would be no need for a response.

Basically we analyzed the mail down to the point where there are seven major types. And we could never think of a letter that wouldn't fit into one of those types or combination of types. Support: people were writing in just to give you their support. Problems and questions: they didn't get their social security check or "how do I apply for a HUD [Housing and Urban Development] loan?" There were invitations which is pretty self-explanatory, "would you come to our annual conference?" We had complaints, we listed as one. We normally reserved those for complaints about the handling of the mail. For instance, if someone got a square dancing letter when they were writing on water projects, which happened, of course, in such a large operation. You know, we would count that as a complaint. Views, pretty self-explanatory also, even if they were contradictory views. And then we had requests: recipe cards, autographed pictures "Can we get a picture of Amy? What about the children's books? Would you just send me information?" And then we had one rather broad category called unanswerable which would be offensive or abrasive letters, illegible letters, letters with no addresses, simple appreciation letters which would need no response.

Alsobrook: So you turned a lot of that over to the Secret Service...I mean if it was abrasive or threatening?

Bush: Yeah, the Secret Service has guidelines that remain constant throughout each administration, and the analysts are well trained in the threatening letters. There's a whole different category, and we generally stepped back from any of those. As few people are involved makes it a lot easier for them.

Alsobrook: Right. Did you keep files on, like in central files, I know they keep prolific letter writer files. Did you have that sort of thing too for First Lady's correspondence?

Bush: Prolific letters were normally destroyed. We didn't keep all of their prolific letters. Once someone became known as prolific, then his letters would be included in unanswerable. They were boxed and destroyed. They would save them up until they got a big enough quantity, not just ours, but even the President's ...

Alsobrook: Yeah, bulk mail.

Bush... just to destroy all at one time. Another thing, an institutional change that we made, was that until this administration the First Lady's mail had always had separate filing procedures. They had their own staff within central files to file just the First Lady and the First Family mail.

This made a problem in such that we were integrated to the point where it didn't make sense for us to have to check two different files under the same name to be able to get a complete file on a writer and it was a rather arbitrary choice on whether he wrote to the President and Mrs. or just to the President and we would have to check two different places to get a complete file. We had them over the course of a year integrate those files, so that although the First Lady enjoyed having a separate staff in central files, they filed the actual papers in the same place that the President's papers were. That meant that if anyone in the building, if they didn't know to check two places, may check in the central files, if the man had never written to the President, but they would know that he had written to the President and Mrs. and had a very extensive file. It solved a lot of problems for us, and probably solved a lot of problems for people who never even knew there were any problems. [Laughing]

Alsobrook: [Laughing] let me ask a little bit more about the volume of the mail. You said there were approximately 2,000 a week that y'all handled.

Bush: That was a yearly average. It would go way up in December because people would be sending their Christmas cards to the President and Mrs. Carter or to President Carter and his family. So our mail would go into the tens of thousands every week, which was a whole lot of mail for our very little unit. Amy's mail ran from 200 to 600 letters a week from a variety of people: school children, mothers, grandmothers who saw her as a sweet child and was writing her letters and asking her questions. Mrs. Carter's mail varied from 1200 to, in the Christmas season, tens of thousands.

Alsobrook: Now Amy had some forms letters too, didn't she?

Bush: We answered eighty percent of Amy's mail with postcards: a picture of Amy, and on the back we had off set a message she had written in her own handwriting. After Amy's mail was read and it was decided it could be easily answered with a postcard, the text was a very general one. It says, "Thank you for writing to me. I enjoy hearing from my friends. I like living in Washington, and I'm glad that you are my friend. Love, Amy Carter." It was a very, very general thing that could be used for many purposes.

They would be sent to a room where there was a volunteer operation in force, and volunteers would come in once a week and address Amy's postcards. So it wasn't, it didn't take a great deal of staff time. There wasn't any paid staff at all involved in addressing these little postcards that cost us like 1 ½ cents apiece. [Laughing]

Alsobrook: Were there certain issues, too, that the First Lady was involved in, like care for the elderly and mental health that really elicited a lot of response?

Bush: Her very prominent projects was evident in the mail. We did most of our agency referrals through the Department of HEW [Health, Education and Welfare] and later HHS [Health and Human Services] because of health problems, mental health problems, elderly problems. Yes, even our views... we kept a week by week tally and summarized it into yearly analysis of the views and within that views type, what was the subject, and it invariably ran high for mental health and elderly issues. So it was an indication to me that her East Wing staff was doing a very good job in getting her projects and priorities prominent in the public eye.

Alsobrook: Did she ever answer any letters in handwritten form? Seems that most of the letters I've seen of hers were typed. But she did do some handwritten?

Bush: Yes, she has done some handwritten letters but that would be pretty much out of my realm. If someone, I mean if it was a letter that Mrs. Carter would sit down and handwrite in response to, then it would have been one that we would have sent over here without an answer for her staff to give to her with their recommendations.

Alsobrook: What kind of criteria would you use in deciding what type of letter would fall into that category? Personal or...?

Bush: Well, as far as the personal letters, I mean I had a good working knowledge of the type of people with whom she was associated with before being First Lady—a lot of the prominent Georgia names from the Governor's office and personal family friends. Other than that, it would amount to the letters that we would send to her directly would be appreciations from people with whom she had had some contact, a White House invitation or a White House overnight stay in which they would express this in the letter and we knew that she had had contact and knew who these people were or very prominent Americans whose names anyone would recognize. We either sent directly to her staff or to her.

Alsobrook: Did you keep a copy in your files?

Bush: No. Of the incoming letters, I would trust this staff to handle them just as well.

Alsobrook: What was the most difficult thing about your job over here, if there was one thing?

Bush: Well, it was a constant learning experience. I had had no management experience. I knew the resources we had and I knew what we needed as an end result and it was a learning experience in being able to make that happen. We initiated a great many changes in the operation of the White House correspondence unit. We streamlined the process; we updated the technology and they became rather sophisticated in their word processing machinery. This whole aspect of streamlining the processing and taking this entire just working on itself operation and changing it into what we needed in a very efficient way. It was a learning experience. One of the constants, we always had to be on top of what enclosures are we running out of. Which ones do

we need? Scheduling the entire first family to appear together for a picture. That was a very difficult thing to do [laughing]. Therefore, we used the two first family pictures for four years because it is so difficult to get all of the grandchildren together at one time.

Alsobrook: Rhonda, it almost sounds like your experience during the transition and also in Georgia before you came up here helped prepare you for the role that you played in the EOB. Is that a fair assumption, do you think, just by your familiarity with the family and the friends of the family? Did that help a lot?

Bush: It would be my familiarity with the family. It wouldn't be because I had worked for them at a great length before coming up here. I had no part in the transition and worked for only two and a half months in the general election in 1976, but I did know the family. I knew who their friends were; the names were familiar to me. I knew Mrs. Carter and I knew how she would want people treated. How she would want the general public's response. The warmth of our letters, making each individual realize their importance and that we were sincerely glad to hear from them. These are the sort of things that I think helped the most, and of anything during this administration, I think one of the most important marks that it left was that it was a completely accessible administration as Jimmy Carter promised in 1976. Never before were there as many just ordinary American citizens be able to come to the White House, to learn in the White House, to have briefings in the White House. This was a thought very foremost in all our minds as far as responsiveness to the public. And even if it meant time delays, we had to--we were their door to the White House. It had to be accessible, this was the people's presidency and that was very important to us.

Alsobrook: Is that a theme that Mrs. Carter has always stressed with her staff, to keep this sort of thing in mind?

Bush: Not specifically for Mrs. Carter. I knew that she would want it that way and it was the general feeling was the campaign in '76 which permeated everything that we did for four years, public accessibility. This was also true, I did a short stint as a supervisor of the comment office and this office was manned by volunteers. It was a phone bank operation for incoming calls instead of the normal phone bank for outgoing and if a citizen called the White House the operators could put them through to this office where volunteers, trained volunteers, would answer the phone and you could say your piece. It could be views, requests. Just as a letter, and all the categories a letter could be, but it would be on the telephone. They would be given instructions on how to write if that was necessary. We kept very detailed notes on what the people were saying and wrote this up in a report every week for the President's senior staff so that they were very aware of what the people were saying when they called to the White House. It was another sign of their accessibility. You had someone to talk to here.

Alsobrook: Of all the things that you have worked on since you have been here, are there certain specific projects that have given you a great deal of personal satisfaction as you carried them out?

Bush: We took, and I was just naturally assumed to know about these things, so I had to go and find out how, but we took the White House gift unit, which when we came, was an office of fifteen people who would open, catalogue, categorize, acknowledge, and work with the National Archives in storing the gifts to the President. So fifteen person operation we streamlined their operation, gave them some computer support and now there are three people doing this entire job. This whole project I took very personal and helped the gifting go through this transition. I also would serve with them as liaison to the First Lady for approval on the gifts, the White House gifts that they would retain there for the First Lady and First Family's use. I was also their liaison with the family and First Lady for gifts received that may be useful or wanted by them, also in preparing yearly reports for the National Register, the Department of State, the Ethics in Government, all the tax forms related to the gifts of the President. So, this was a whole separate unit that I became involved in, and I do feel like we've done a lot in the consistency of the records that we've generated. And I was very proud of it.

Alsobrook: Are you still serving the liaison function in terms of the First Family?

Bush: Yes.

Alsobrook: Could you tell me very briefly about what you have been doing over here the last few months?

Bush: This office is Mrs. Carter's East Wing office. She's the first First Lady to ever have an office in the East Wing. Her office is primarily concerned in offering the First Lady personal support. I act as an assistant to her personal assistant so the types of tasks we do would be the very personal ones. We send her and act as a liaison with her to the rest of her staff and the rest of the President's staff. And during the campaign, it was liaison with the First Lady and the campaign staff. As far as giving information to her, receiving information from her, and the follow up on her requests that she would give either of us or other members of her staff. It's difficult, very difficult to describe the individual tasks because it is so changing. We respond, it's a responsive office and our whole objective is to provide the First Lady support. In that position I am also responsible for providing the First Family support. This can range from reserving the box at the Kennedy Center for Annette Carter to confirming orthodontist appointments for Amy, rescheduling violin lessons for Amy and Mrs. Carter, or following up on a problem with Chip. So it can't be described by individual tasks, but it's been interesting for me. It's a bird's eye view of the First Lady and the way she feels about things.

Alsobrook: What was it like during the campaign? Pretty strenuous?

Bush: Which one?

Alsobrook: I mean, just working, working in this part of the White House during the campaign, I guess, when the First Lady was traveling all the time. Yeah, this campaign.

Bush: When she was gone there was little to do in our office except hold down the fort, so to speak. I mean, we would still be receiving calls from her friends or family and which I could carry through on even in her absence. What made it the most difficult for me personally is that I was volunteering an additional eight hours at the Carter/Mondale headquarters at night.

Alsobrook: [Laughing] Oh wow!

Bush: So it was like from very early in the morning until very late at night. I actually felt like I was moonlighting for several months when we were working two different jobs.

Alsobrook: Oh goodness. Did you also have to travel during the campaign too? Did you stay either here or at the national headquarters?

Bush: I stayed here or at the national headquarters.

Alsobrook: I'm going to ask you a few questions that are just your views. You know, this first lady has been written a lot by the press, an awful lot. They have really covered her activities in great depth. You know, in your own opinion how do you think future generations of Americans and historians, perhaps, will evaluate her role as First Lady?

Bush: I think that the history will show her to be one of the strongest and most active First Ladies. Mrs. Carter did not undertake projects because it was a traditional thing for a First Ladies to do. Rather she was a rather unorthodox First Lady in that she took upon these projects because they were very personal to her. It disturbed her to see the mentally ill in our country being treated the way they are. She knew that focus had to be given this particular problem and it was a national effort. She was influential in getting some very landmark legislation through congress. But it was for the weak; it was for those citizens that couldn't do this work, who didn't have influential lobbyist or help in this sector. I think that history will see her as a very strong and active First Lady, certainly in recent times the most.

Alsobrook: Has she changed a lot in the four years she has been here?

Bush: I think so. I think she has become even more gracious, even more beautiful, even stronger. She can deal well with people, whether she is grasping your hand for three seconds along a rope line, a 10 minute meeting in the map room, or testifying before congress. She has a very wide range, and I think that she has grown stronger.

Alsobrook: Has this experience changed your views about government and about how it works?

Bush: Oh, yes. Mostly because I know more about it: the legalities separating the different branches of government, the organization of the executive branch, which in my opinion far, is just unweilding (sic.). And those types of things which are ingrained and a President can do nothing about because it's in the system, it's in the American system, and it's evolved this way. It's more like an animal than it is an institution. It's certainly changed my perception, just because I have been inside of it and was looking out.

Alsobrook: Can you tell me anything about your future plans?

Bush: No!

Alsobrook: [Laughing]

Bush: I really can't. For so long I've just invested all my time and effort into this one cause. I just need to have the time to be able to reflect on those things which I could do, which causes I can now fight. I have no hopes, dreams, or ambitions at this point. I am hoping that inspiration will come.

Alsobrook: [Laughs] And finally, could you give me a permanent address and telephone number, if there is such a thing?

Bush: I could always be found through my mother.

Alsobrook: OK. Why don't you give me that one?

Bush: She can be reached at 404-972-3951 or by writing to writing to 951 Guys Court, Lilburn, Georgia. 30247.

Alsobrook: Now, how do you spell Guys Court?

Bush: G-U-Y-S.

Alsobrook: And did you give me the zip code?

Bush: 30247

Alsobrook: Well, thank you very much. One of these days, we'd probably like to come back and talk to you after you've had a chance to think of your experience here, and maybe ask you some more detailed questions about various projects you worked on, but I appreciate your taking the time today.

Bush: Certainly. My pleasure.