

Exit Interview with Karen Condon, White House Correspondence Unit

Interviewer: Linda Sledge, Presidential Papers Staff

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Location: Room 490, Old Executive Office Building

Transcriber: Lyn B. Kirkland

Sledge: Exit interview with Carol Condon of the White House Correspondence Unit, in room 490 of the Old Executive Office Building. March 1st, 1979. The interviewer is Linda Sledge.

Ca- Karen, I'm sorry, can you tell me about your job experience before you came to the White House?

Condon: Actually, I didn't really have much job experience. I was a student at the University of Maryland. I had some experience in a doctor's office as receptionist work, and that was about as extensive as it was before I came here.

Sledge: What was your first position at the White House and how did you learn about it?

Condon: Well, first, I'll tell you how I learned about it.

Sledge: OK.

Condon: A girl I went to school with mother heard about the opening at the WAE in the correspondence department and he, she told me about it because she did not have shorthand, and so I came down for the interview and spoke to Bob Anderson, who is director of correspondence down there and he gave me the job.

Sledge: And is that the position that you hold now?

Condon: Yes, it is.

Sledge: When was this?

Condon: It was a little bit over a year, well, I guess it would be about a year and a half now.

Sledge: Do you remember the date?

Condon: September 1977. I am not sure of the exact date, I think about the 22nd, 23rd of September.

Sledge: OK. And then your last day here will be?

Condon: Tomorrow, March 2nd.

Sledge: OK

Condon: 1978.

Sledge: OK. Who did you directly report to? What was the name of your office and who did you directly report to?

Condon: Directly to Maureenine Hudson who is personal secretary to Bob Anderson, and then I was interviewed by Bob. You are talking about, is this after the position, after I was hired?

Sledge: Yes.

Condon: That was your Correspondence Department, is Maureenine Hudson, is who. I worked there for two to three months before they started detailing me to other offices and as of a year ago I have not been back in the Correspondence Department. I've been out on detail, a little over a year now.

Sledge: What office do you work in now?

Condon: I'm in Congressional Liaison right now. I've been there for five months and tomorrow is my last day in that office.

Sledge: And who do you work for there?

Condon: Ronna Freiberg, Tom Donilon, Evelyn Small are the main people I do work for.

Sledge: Can you tell me about your functions in that office and a little bit about that office set up in Congressional Liaison?

Condon: My main duties are basically secretarial, answering phones, typing, no shorthand, scheduling, greeting people, mail- sorting all of the mail, which is the most extensive part of congressional liaison, is the mail. I am in the correspondence part of Congressional Liaison and I will open all the mail, sort it, decide what agency it should go to or what office in the White House it will stay at. Let's see. That's about all I do. Occasionally I will draft responses, which is something I started learning after I was in there which I think benefits me, because I learned more that way. I learned more about the Congress and how it works. It was very interesting detail. I enjoyed it very much. Probably my most favorite detail, I think. I really learned a lot in that office. And, uh, that's about it, about all I do. And the basics, running around, Xeroxing, filing, all that.

Sledge: What else goes on in that office? Who else works there?

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Condon: Evelyn Small works there and she handles all the President's mail that comes from the Congress. She has a very difficult job, as I feel, in that office, probably the heaviest workload of anyone in that office. She has to handle the mail when it comes in, sort it. She runs a computered log every day of the President's mail, which he sees every day. She keeps record of it in a binder every day and, so for easy retrieval whenever an office will call about a particular letter. She drafts numerous amounts of responses to all the letters that come in and that's basically her job, the President's mail. Tom Donilon handles Frank Moore's mail, who is the Assistant to the President for Congressional Liaison and he will do the same thing but he does not need a computered log. He will have the secretary type out a daily mail log of Frank Moore's mail from the Congress. We deal with various telephone requests that will come in, for example, from the Hill, from the Congress. For example, a request for someone who is perhaps ill and dying. They'll request a presidential letter to be done and Tom usually will handle that. And Ronna, right now Ronna Freiberg is dealing with grants to different counties through the interest of a particular senator or congressman who is interested in that county who needs a financial aid. That is mostly what Ronna is dealing with right now. She is the director of the correspondence section of Congressional Liaison and she more or less has to give us the go-ahead on what to and what not to do. That's her main purpose in the office, so that's how that runs.

Sledge: Requests from the Hill, sometimes do they come from other offices and then referred to you or do they always come to Congressional Liaison?

Condon: They usually will come to Congressional Liaison. Very rarely will they go anywhere else, depending on the subject matter. We don't get that many of them. Most of it is correspondence in that office.

Sledge: OK. About how many people work in Congressional Liaison?

Condon: In the complete Congressional Liaison unit I would have to venture a guess that there probably are 20 to 25 people that I know of, that I have met. I would think 20 to 25, yeah.

Sledge: And what is the balance? How many of these are clerical and how many supervisory people?

Condon: I would think out of the 25, 12 are supervisory and the rest would be clerical, I would think as I can think of whose position is what, as I, of only the people I have met and know of or have heard of.

Sledge: OK, OK. What was a typical day like there for you?

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Condon: Interesting [Laughs] to say the least. Very busy, hectic, constant, just constant running around answering phones. There's always work to be done. You are never bored in that office that I have found and sometimes there is too much work to be done. A little bit of an overload which leads to overtime [Laughs] a lot of times. Usually Saturdays, some Sundays. I know that Ev and Tom and Ronna have come in numerous times on week-ends and I myself have come in on a few Saturdays and they stay very late hours, very late. I know sometimes they don't get out of there until 10:00 at night and they come in between 8:00 and 9:00 in the morning, so they're long hours, for sure. They're very dedicated, I think, in that office and I think they do a very, very good job, very efficient.

Sledge: Do you find your work there intellectually stimulating?

Condon: Yes, because it keeps me abrupt on all the issues in the government. What's going on politically. Very interesting office. I really enjoyed it very much.

Sledge: What aspect of your job have you found to be the most personally rewarding?

Condon: Well, I would think, probably the knowledge and also the people I have met, I would think, personally. I've dealt with some very interesting people and very nice people in this office and the whole time I have been here actually. I don't think I have met anyone that I disliked, being honest, really and I really have enjoyed it and I will miss it very much.

Sledge: What other White House offices does your office work closely with?

Condon: Congressional Liaison or Correspondence?

Sledge: Congressional Liaison.

Condon: We work closely with Presidential Personnel for the main reason that the Senate, this Senate and House of Representatives, will send recommendations to people for a particular board or commission which is, which go under President Personnel and therefore we will have to send incoming correspondence to them and refer it to them for appropriate handling. Another office we work with would be Jack Watson's office. They handle most of the state senators and state representatives. I can't think of too many more. We do deal with a lot of agencies depending upon the subject matter again of the correspondence where it will be referred to. We have worked a little bit with Anne Wexler's office, mostly now because of the grants because she deals with urban policy. And those are about the only offices in here that we deal with and outside of the White House, it's some agencies and the Hill, of course.

Sledge: Of course, yeah. OK. Can you think of something that you have found particularly difficult about your job?

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Condon: Well, when I first came to Congressional Liaison- are you speaking particularly of my last detail now?

Sledge: Yes.

Condon: I was not all that aware of all the members of the Congress. I didn't know exactly how it worked that well. I was fortunate enough to be here during the past election and was able to catch up on all the new names in the Congress and the Senate. That was the most difficult part, remembering everyone, remembering their affiliation, what party because you more or less have to know it right off hand. And a little more difficult was the drafting of responses to correspondence, but Evelyn Small helped me with that and I think I did pretty good [Laughs] towards the end.

Sledge: It sounds like you enjoyed it.

Condon: I did, really. Very much. Very nice people.

Sledge: How did you come to learn the members and the party affiliations?

Condon: Well, I would have to type responses all the time and draft, and when you are constantly typing letters to the same person or drafting responses to the same congressmen, senators you become familiar with the names and the party affiliations. It became easy after a few months, about two months.

Sledge: You didn't go home at night and study them?

Condon: [Laughs] No, not that dedicated.

Sledge: Of the White House itself, has your impression changed since you first came to work here?

Condon: I'm really not sure. I think maybe it has. A lot of people, when they ask me where I work and I say the White House, they just think, oh, boy, that's great. It must really be exciting, you know, and I think it is, to a certain point, but I don't think everyone realizes how much work actually goes on in the White House, how pressured everyone is in the working, and it can lead to morale problems, I think, and I have seen some of it in a few offices. People are just disgusted. They're tired of all the pressure that they have upon them but then, but then when you see them produce something then they're, it is completely different. It is so satisfying when something is accomplished. But I don't, that is, for my personal self, I didn't realize how crazy it was around here. And now I do. It is not all just fun and games even though it is a very exciting place to work.

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Sledge: We're almost through. Is there anything that you would like to say about your time here in the White House, that you would like to have remembered maybe? Anything that you can remember that was particularly interesting or that you like to think about?

Condon: I think the part I like to think about most is the people I've met. This last detail that I was on in Congressional Liaison and the opportunity to meet important people and to go to the arrival ceremonies for heads of state, those were the most interesting parts when I was working here I think. I enjoyed it very much.

Sledge: Is there anything that you would like to say about your other details that, which we haven't talked about at all?

Condon: There was one particular detail, also, that I was on, in the Visitors' Office.

Sledge: When was that?

Condon: The White House Visitor's Office. A year ago in February, which was a very interesting detail also.

Sledge: How long did you work there?

Condon: I believe I was on that detail for two months and that was a special detail because anyone who came to visit to the White House, I was able to view them. I would help with the arrival ceremony, setting up of things, and arranging tours for the congress, the Senate. Again, in that office, very much working with the congress. That was, that was a very interesting detail also. A few of the others, I can't really say much on them because I didn't stay in the offices more than one to two weeks. Didn't really have an opportunity to learn much about the office, more or less just going in for whoever was gone that week or whoever was sick. But those are the two details that stand out in my mind most. I enjoyed them both.

Sledge: What are your future plans, Karen?

Condon: Well, I'm going to be moving out of state to Florida and I hope to be working for a law firm. I am not quite sure yet if I will take the position. I will be living in Coral Gables, Florida, and my fiancé lives down there now so we'll be reunited [Laughs] and I am looking forward to it because I've never lived away from the Washington area before and I'm going to take the plunge, go ahead and give it a go, see if I like it or not. Probably come back. [Laughs]

Sledge: Do you have a permanent address that you could give me?

Condon: Yes, I do.

Sledge: Could you tell it to me on tape?

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Condon: Yes. My home address will be 10801 109th Court, Number G 309, S. Miami, Florida. The zip is 33176. And I have a phone number if you want it.

Sledge: If you could give me that?

Condon: Area code 301-595-4096. I just learned that.

Sledge: Thank you. It has been a pleasure.

Condon: It's been a pleasure with you.