

Exit Interview with Ann Crites, White House Comment Office

Interviewer: Keith Corona, Office of Presidential Papers

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Location: Room 415, Old Executive Office Building

Transcriber: Lyn B. Kirkland

Corona: Good afternoon, Ann. First of all, I would like to ask you what positions have you held since you have worked here in the White House and how long have you worked here?

Crites: I started March 1, 1976. I was the Volunteer Coordinator for the Greetings Department and the White House Comment Office.

Corona: OK. Did you have any previous job experience that helped prepare you for your White House duties?

Crites: I believe my experience being a professional volunteer, so to speak, did equip me for that job. I believe that is why I was selected for that job---because I was so knowledgeable about the volunteer community, the various organizations that I had to draw from when you are picking volunteers because I was very conversant in those fields and so very knowledgeable about volunteer agencies and how they functioned.

Corona: Was that here in the Washington area?

Crites: Any volunteer group.

Corona: Was that previous experience in this area?

Crites: No, my previous experience has been other states, but basically the structures are the same and if you are not one who gives to the Girl Scouts, Community Chests, Red Cross, hospital aides, what have you, you are not thoroughly conversant about how you go about recruiting people for a volunteer agency and I had even been President of Friends of the Truman Museum. So I knew volunteers, so that is why I think I was selected for that job.

Corona: OK. OK. So you said your office has always been staffed by volunteers. I'm sorry, you did not say that your office has always been staffed by volunteers. Why was the system changed and who staffed it before the volunteers were hired?

Crites: I am not sure if there was a Comment Office or Greetings Office that was staffed by volunteers in the past. However, with Jimmy's open administration it was thought that a

volunteer's situation might be something that the public could relate to more easily than perhaps a paid staff member.

Corona: So, you think the present system is a good one?

Crites: Yes, I think this system is excellent.

Corona: If at all possible, could you describe a typical day in the Comment Office?

Crites: Well, my day would start about between 7:00 and 7:30. I would read the leading newspapers, the editorials and scan the news items, select those items from the various newspapers, place them on the bulletin board for the volunteers because the volunteers in the Comment Office received the calls from the public. Everyone wants to speak with Jimmy Carter. They would be screened at the switch board and then come upstairs. The volunteers came in at 9:00. They would man the phones in the Comment Office and the volunteers in the Greetings Office would start working at 9:00 also. The Comment Office just answered calls in general to give service. We would get bizarre calls, we would get telephone calls from very responsible citizens. For an example of the type of calls that the Comment Office would receive, early on, we received a call in the Comment Office from Arlington Cemetery from a very hysterical woman who had discovered, upon going to Arlington Cemetery, that they were in fact going to bury a relative of hers in the wrong spot and we were able through the resources at our command to help that woman reach the right people so that before the funeral service took place the situation had been rectified...and these are the type of calls we did receive. People would call in and just want to talk to Jimmy Carter.

Corona: What were your office's hours?

Crites: We worked from 9:00 in the morning until 5:00 in the evening. If the President gave a speech, had an announcement after hours, we would work an hour to three hours after the speech, comments; appearances before Congress. During very stressful times, such as the Bert Lance incident, we did man our office seven days a week as many hours as was required and many times that was up to 18 hours.

Corona: How many volunteers do you have working for the office?

Crites: All right. At that time I had, during the regular season, I will explain that, I had 278 tops. That would usually go down to 238 during vacation times or times when children were at home in the summer time. During the Christmas card project, it was also my responsibility to recruit those volunteers who would write the Christmas card project, like the cards for the President. Last year I recruited upwards of 13,000 ladies who came in on a regular basis to write the cards for the President. Excuse me, 1300 ladies. But that was part of my duty too. I was not actively involved in the operation of the project but I did have to recruit, schedule, train, and monitor their activities, receive their clearances for them and what have you.

Corona: You mentioned the Greeting Office. What is the Greeting Office?

Crites: The Greeting Office is simply that. It is greetings from the President such as a birthday card, an anniversary card.

Corona: Through the mail, then?

Crites: Yes. Uh huh.

Corona: OK. The reason I asked you about the hours is because I thought maybe an office of your type might be manned twenty four hours a day being, of course, that people on the west coast have a day that starts later, plus you probably get calls from people overseas too, and I thought the time changes might result in your office being...

Crites: Well, we did have a recording device that would play when people did call and there was a good deal of controversy about the fact that perhaps that office should be opened 24 hours, particularly with the incidences you have mentioned, but because it was manned by volunteers it was not possible to do that. Of course, the White House staff was cut and the budget was cut and because of that there simply, as I understand it, was not money in the budget for two full time staff people in that office and, of course, I could not stay 24 hours a day and when you work with volunteers they have a certain clearance and you must be physically in the room with them. A pass holder must be with them while they are here, so that is why it was not manned 24 hours. But we thought that with our system, even if they leave a name and telephone number, we would try to get back with them and see what it was they wanted to talk to the President about.

Corona: I assume that you did get many calls from foreigners. Are many of your volunteers able to speak different languages?

Crites: Yes, when I recruited the volunteer office, when it was put together, I did recruit people who could speak more than one language. I tried to recruit people of all ages, all backgrounds, both men and women, so that we would get an unbiased opinion.

Corona: Right.

Crites: When they were speaking back to the people but many of them didn't speak more than one language and often when we did receive calls from people who, for example, spoke only Spanish, fortunately, on most occasions we were able to accommodate the people.

Corona: For example, if I had a lot of spare time on my hands and I wanted to be a volunteer, I assume the procedure would be for me to write, maybe to your office and you would call me in for an interview.

Crites: That's right.

Corona: What sort of questions would you ask me?

Crites: Well, I would want to know why you wanted to work in the volunteer office. I would ask what type of experience you had in your background, how much time you had to volunteer, were you aware that if you came to work here you could not then seek a paid position, which early in the administration we did have a number of volunteers who thought this would be a marvelous opportunity to search for a job. So this is the format that I used for interviews and I would ask them various questions about what had happened in the administration and I would try to determine how well versed they were with current affairs.

Corona: Right. How was your office organized? I know you are the supervisor.

Crites: Yes, uh huh.

Corona: So how was it organized? Who did you report to and how many people worked under you...including staffers?

Crites: I was with the Inaugural Committee and I had a friend on staff, Jane Simpson, and Jane Simpson had the office to begin with. It was thought perhaps that Jane Simpson would be Susan Clough's assistant but because of the cutting funds and cutting staff Jane did not get that particular job, so Jane was given the Comment Office. When Jane had it, it was manned by agency people, people on loan here from agencies.

Corona: Federal agencies?

Crites: Yes, uh huh.

Corona: Law students, maybe?

Crites: Yes, a few law students.

Corona: Were they paid or...?

Crites: No.

Corona: They were volunteers also?

Crites: Well, I don't know the system that was used with the agencies. I know that they can borrow people from agencies to do certain jobs here in the White House and I think maybe 95% of the staff was agency and the other 5%, as you say, was law students. I believe there was a young man there who just dropped in and volunteered and because he had been at the campaign, you know, a well educated young man, he had that unique position, but then they began to reorganize the Correspondence Unit and the Comments Office was placed in the Correspondence Unit and Jane Simpson was given the job as Agency Liaison, I mean Oval Office Liaison, to

correspondence and because I had also worked with volunteers at the Inaugural Committee I think I just naturally fell into the position.

Corona: OK. What is the average number of calls per week to the Comment Office?

Crites: There really wasn't one, there wasn't an average. I think the smallest number of calls we received were about 150. During peak times, particularly during the Bert Lance incident, the B1 incident, the Three Mile Island incident, the calls would go up to 9,000 or more. But at that time I would recruit extra personnel to come in and we were able to handle more calls than we would ordinarily. For example, I had access to 22 lines with possible access of eight more. During that period of time we could handle more calls because it was, what I had termed, a stressful time.

Corona: So, what you are saying is that you could man a maximum of 30 phones at a time with calls coming in from all over the world, literally. You already touched on this, but I'm sure events such as the Panama Canal treaty and Andrew Young's resignation and the Iranian crisis resulted in your need for you all to have more people on the phones.

Crites: Yes, uh huh.

Corona: The most recent, I guess you could say crisis that has occurred, would be the Iranian crisis, being that the Iranians are holding 45 or 50 American hostages at the present time. What kind of calls do you get in regards to that issue?

Crites: I don't think that calls that came into the office were any different than the calls we had received on any other issue that would threatened the democracy, our national independence, or our national security. You have a certain number of people who just call in with good support for the President---"we're with you, we think you're wonderful, we're praying for you." You would have a certain number of people who would wish him well, but would say, "Jimmy, take the marines and go in and get them out." You would have a certain number of people who just did not like what he did. You know, they thought he should be more aggressive. You have the usual number of critical calls that come in, but I can't say that the calls have been divided into categories any more than, the number of months I was with the office, than they were on any other issue. You will find that people fall into different categories and if you are going to call the White House rather than write, you have the same opinion.

Corona: Right. Tell me about Andrew Young's resignation in the summer of 1979. What kind of calls did you get on that?

Crites: Well, we received the same type of calls. The office had a personality of its own, due to the type of calls that you would get. There were a number of people who called the President and said "Stay by Andrew Young". He needs you, we think he is doing a wonderful job." We

would get a number of calls that said “You really should get rid of him. He’s and embarrassment. Can’t you control him?”

Corona: Right.

Crites: And you would get a number of people who would just call in and say, “you know, this is the worst job of handling a situation I have ever seen in a President. It is not an on-the-job learning experience.” So they were critical, they were supportive. The same people, good Christian people around the country, would call in and say “you know, it must be very difficult. He’s a friend of yours ...but we are praying for you.”

Corona: Right. And I’m sure the Mid-East Peace agreement last spring, late last spring, also you got calls about that issue.

Crites: Right.

Corona: OK. I am sure you also have people who are regular callers.

Crites: Oh yes, yes, uh huh.

Corona: Do you tend to recognize them quickly by name or by voice?

Crites: Yes. We got so, after a while, we knew who the callers were. They had names. It is strange, in among these very serious calls and calls appealing for help you would have---you can’t call it comic relief-- but they did help relieve the tension, we had, for an example, Coco, who called constantly. We never knew who Coco was, but he thought he was an angel of God and he would call in and say “Tell the President now that I cannot be reached for the next few hours. I am doing something for St. Peter.”

Corona: Oh.

Crites: But you would get people who called in, they all had names. I would say in talking to the White House operators, I have found that those operators, of course, have been here through several administration. Many of these people just make a habit of calling.

Corona: Right.

Crites: And with the Comment Office, of course, they had a sounding board.

Corona: Right. Were most calls from Washington, D. C. and vicinity?

Crites: No.

Corona: You don’t always know where people are calling from, anyway, right?

Crites: Most people will tell you where they are calling from. They'll say this is a long distance call from Georgia...California. I would say that in this area, the largest number of calls that we did receive were from the Virginia area ...Alexandria, Arlington. A large number of calls from Montgomery County in Maryland.

Corona: Right. What other White House units work closely with the Comment Office? Obviously the operators would work closely with you, but what other offices?

Crites: I believe Bob Anderson's mail unit works very closely because they have to supply us with the supplies---the greeting supplies. They also keep the tallies of how many we send out a day because they must make reports. The report that was made was supplied to all staff people and early in the days of the Comment Office we found that we could help the Correspondence Unit because many times the calls would be the forerunner of the type of mail that they would get in Lili Bell's unit. We would find, for example, that if it wasn't a current issue going on that something would bother a group of people, say, in Iowa. It would not get national attention but those people would start calling. Well, these calls would show up in a brief synopsis on a report, then the mail unit could get their responses ready. So, I think the mail unit and the White House operators and staff people were always interested. I'd get calls a lot of times from various staff people saying "How are the calls going today?", "What are the comments today about such and such a subject?" So, I think that's who we worked with.

Corona: I assume you get a lot of calls then about Senator Kennedy, probably people who are Carter supporters calling and complaining about maybe things Senator Kennedy has said.

Crites: Oh, yeh.

Corona: Other people too who are running against the President at the present time, Democrats and Republicans.

Crites: Right, right. I think that is to be expected.

Corona: I agree. Are your volunteers instructed to give callers specific information about the administration's policies on a given issue?

Crites: Could I have an example?

Corona: Let's say for example, the Iranian crisis. The President's position, say several weeks ago, was let's play this out carefully and see what's going to happen next. When people call in and they say that the President should send in the marines and they're very emotional about this issue. Are your callers instructed to tell them "Well, the President has decided that it is best at this time not to do anything?"

Crites: We try to give them truthful, factual reasons as to why these things are being decided in this manner.

Corona: OK. Are all of most of your calls recorded?

Crites: We have a system of writing them...we have changed the system several times since I have been here, for recording the types of calls. As far as electronic recording, we do not have that, but we would have tally sheets, we would have issue sheets, we would have what we call problem sheets. Problems sheets, for example, would involve those people calling in who had not received their January social security checks, so that was written up. We would try to get that to the right person on the staff so that they could be followed up and this person would get their social security check. So, there was a method of recording various things.

Corona: Earlier you used the term “regular season” and told me you were going to explain.

Crites: Oh yes. For me, the regular season was September through May. This is when you will find that most women have the greatest amount of time. They have children home in the summer time Christmas season, surprisingly enough, is part of the regular season, because they make arrangements to get down here during the Christmas season, but the regular season, as I call it, was when I had the largest number of volunteers. However, on the off season, or the summer season, when almost everything was dead in Washington I did have almost a different set of volunteers who worked only in the summer time. They would come back from Florida; they were students who wanted the experience. I had some students that were going to be trial attorneys. This was absolutely marvelous for them to get the unrehearsed or unexpected response on the phone. So I did have a summer season and then a regular season and often with two different sets of volunteers because of personal circumstances that they might have.

Corona: So, what you are saying then is that most volunteers are probably women who may be housewives?

Crites: No, when I recruited, I recruited with this in mind. This is an open administration. Jimmy has always had an open policy. We knew that this Comment Office would be getting information finally to the President...the information that came into this office would eventually go to the President, so when I did recruit, I had, for an example, an attorney, a women attorney, who took time from her practice to come down here because she wanted to give to the administration. I had a recently retired gentleman who had been active in journalism. They wanted to come down and just give of their time. So I had...the youngest, of course, was eighteen. I had women up to 80 years old. I had men in that age bracket also. I had, I think, just every race. I had Orientals, blacks, whites, Puerto Ricans. I recruited with an eye to having a good balance ...

Corona: Right.

Crites: ...in the department, so they were not all housewives. My school teachers would come in and work in the summer time. So, I did have career people, I had house wives, I had people from every income bracket, so I did recruit with an eye that when we ultimately put these figures

together or these opinions that we had gleaned from the public together, it would be an unbiased, factual report.

Corona: OK. You said that the President was given a summary of your offices activities. How frequently?

Crites: Weekly.

Corona: Did you compile that summary?

Crites: The information that I handled, I began the figures, I began the summaries, and it went through several hands, and finally it ended up on Hugh Carter's desk and it was his responsibility to get it to the President, so it did go through several hands.

Corona: OK. What disposition has been arranged for your office's official files?

Crites: They're given to central files.

Corona: OK. Even the daily tally sheets? Those aren't always kept, are they?

Crites: Well, they're kept on record. I believe they are kept in the chief correspondent's office but I am quite sure these records are kept.

Corona: Did you maintain any personal files?

Crites: No, I didn't have that kind of job where I needed personal files. (Laughs)

Corona: What are some of your most memorable White House experiences?

Crites: Oh my. I think the most memorable experience is being part of the White House staff and being part of a very exciting period in history. Memorable White House experiences remain the Bert Lance incident, the B1 bomber, the nuclear situation at Three Mile Island. I heard from the public on a very personal basis. The people who call in get very personal about their opinions, and I think all of these have been very memorable. I remember how thrilled I was to get tickets to the box for the first time.

Corona: To the box?

Crites: To the Kennedy.....the box at the Kennedy Center, you know, that are available to staff people on a rotating basis. I think the Halloween party last year...

Corona: '79?

Crites: '79... was an outstanding success. It was very nice. I can't say that I enjoyed the Christmas party for the staff because you could never bring your family with you.

Corona: Did you get to meet the first family?

Crites: Oh, yes, uh huh.

Corona: On several occasions? When did you first meet the President?

Crites: When did I first meet the President? I think I met the President in 1974. The first time...so.

Corona: OK. Were you involved in the 1976 Presidential campaign?

Crites: Yes.

Corona: What were your duties and to whom did you report?

Crites: All right. I worked in the West Virginia elections. I was the volunteer coordinator for that state. I traveled the state, recruited, trained, monitored and scheduled volunteers over the state of West Virginia. I also worked in southern Pennsylvania in Pittsburgh. I worked in southern Ohio and northern Kentucky doing the same types of things. We had a large number of volunteers in West Virginia, and for an example, just before the election we received a call from Pittsburgh and we took 300 of our West Virginia volunteers into Pittsburgh to show up a crumbling situation there.

Corona: Is that what you would call a peanut brigade?

Crites: Yes. Uh huh.

Corona: OK. Who did you report to during your?

Crites: J.D. Breckly was the state coordinator from Atlanta.

Corona: For West Virginia?

Crites: Yes, for West Virginia.

Corona: Do you plan to be involved in...?

Crites: Yes.

Corona: The 1980 campaign?

Crites: Yes.

Corona: In what capacity?

Crites: I am going to work with the campaign in Florida.

Corona: Oh, OK. Thank you very much for your help this afternoon. Just for the record could you give me your forwarding address and phone number.

Crites: I would be happy to. My address would be 11000 A1A, Hutchinson Island, Villa del Sol # 3C, Vinson Beach, Florida. My phone isn't connected yet.