

Exit Interview with Thomas Donilon, Congressional Liaison in Frank Moore's Office

Interviewer: Marie Allen, Presidential Papers Staff

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Transcriber: Lyn B. Kirkland

Allen: Let me check to be sure that I have got your name spelled correctly. Is it D O N I L O N?

Donilon: That's correct.

Allen: Is that right? OK. Could you tell me when you first came to the White House?

Donilon: In late June of 1977.

Allen: What were the circumstances of your getting a job here?

Donilon: I was a student at Catholic University. I received my BA in May of that year. I had a professor recommend me to Frank Moore's office, interviewed with some writing samples and was hired on June 20th, I think.

Allen: What were your duties on Frank Moore's staff?

Donilon: Initially I began doing Frank Moore's correspondence....paper work. I was involved in receiving all the written things he got from the hill, logging it, and taking care of the disposition for him....presidential messages, members of congress, drafting notes and sending them out in general, general back up work.

Allen: What was the approximate quantity of those things you mentioned? Did you do mostly Frank Moore's personal correspondence?

Donilon: It was congressional liaison correspondence. Yeh, that was about 90% of my day.

Allen: How many people were in the little congressional correspondence unit you were in?

Donilon: Three.

Allen: And how were the functions in that....?

Donilon: One was the director of all functions, Rhonna Freiberg. The other was at that time Kathy Baker who did the President's congressional correspondence and I did Frank. I replaced Michelle Taylor who went to become the Public Affairs Director at the Federal Highway Administration.

Allen: Could you describe a typical letter, the process by which you received it and the draft process?

Donilon: It ranged widely from asking Frank a question of substantive matter where we would go to the domestic policy staff of the United States for a response, to asking for a meeting with the President where we would follow up by going to, at that time, Tim Kraft, doing the briefing papers and arranging for the President to see the congressmen, to asking for birthday letters, messages to Knights of Columbus events, autographed photos, everything under the sun. I think it can best be described as a favor log...if you look at it, if you study it. Favors that we do for various congressmen.

Allen: Huh, huh. Expand on the favor log. What, what.....?

Donilon: Well, say, they are always asking something from Frank. When they go to the President, the congressman is more than likely expressing an opinion on an issue, and the congressman is asking for something either for us or for the White House to deliver on like get a speaker for this group of teachers who are coming in and we would secure that. All these wide ranging things.

Allen: Did you get involved in trying to carry out these matters as well as drafting letters?

Donilon: That was my job, yeh. Right.

Allen: So in addition to letters, you did substantive research for briefing papers?

Donilon: Right.

Allen: And you got on the phone with congressmen and with White House personnel and arranged for speakers, when needed?

Donilon: Right, and arranged for Presidential messages and basically followed up on whatever they asked us.

Allen: And these presidential messages, which I suppose were requested by congressmen, you would get involved with?

Donilon: Initially they often went to Olivia Hatha Coolidge, the message office. That changed, you see, because under the reorganization that summer, as you recall, the President cut his staff from 500 and something to 351 and we lost a lot of people. We couldn't handle the volume of public requests in addition to congressional and we've had a running battle. Congressmen in previous administrations had gotten just anything they wanted and the President set down some strict rules that were enforced and it was difficult to explain to congressmen, so we made some deals with her to get exceptions for congressmen for some of the rules----- some of the

traditional things that they got from presidents such as messages to retiree events and things like that or meetings with democratic groups. It would be embarrassing for them not to have one if they have been asked to get it.

Allen: Hmmmm. So, you would get exceptions occasionally.

Donilon: Right

Allen: Especially for congressmen that were high on your list of supporters.

Donilon: Right.

Allen: How much of your time did you spend actually writing and how much did you spend on the telephone working out these things?

Donilon: Half and half. Initially it began as probably around a nine or ten hour day. You see, I didn't really know what I was doing. Up until now we are working 16 hour a day....six or seven days a week. Frank's staff initially changed an awfully lot at the beginning.

Allen: Can you describe that?

Donilon: Initially there were only seven people. Right now there are forty-one people on the congressional liaison staff. When I started here there were only two house lobbyists, lobbyists I guess is the correct word, congressional liaison officers who actually went to the Hill every day. There were 2 in the house and 1 in the senate. There are now 5 house officers.

Allen: Excuse me. (A beeper goes off.) You were just saying that under the reorganization...

Donilon: Well, initially there were very few people actually going to the Hill and we would get into a lot of trouble because we couldn't cover all the things that were expected of us. Now there are five. From two initially, there are now five congressional liaison officers who actually go to the Hill; there's two in the senate, as opposed to one, and now we have a specialist, Bob Beckel in foreign affairs who covers both the house and the senate. These two people have corresponding administrative assistants and we've added to our staff and congressional response has become a special correspondence unit now.

Allen: You were involved in congressional correspondence in special projects?

Donilon: Well, now it has changed radically. The job is not recognizable at this point. [Allen laughs] Neither is the congressional liaison unit since a year and a half ago.

Allen: And the direction that it is in now is what? Does it have a special title?

Donilon: It has expanded greatly. Thanks to the numbers I described, there are a lot more people that go to the Hill and lobby and work directly with congressmen. I guess the change in our unit

came in February of last year when we took on the.....Ron Fiber and I directed the President's efforts in that congressional election. We arranged about 1000, uh, 1100 appearances by administration officials on behalf of congressmen, congressmen and congressional candidates, who served as liaison between the President and those candidates. About 150 candidates came to see the President in his office and I think we arranged 1100 appearances by the cabinet, the first family, and the White House senior staff on behalf of the people running.

Allen: The two of you arranged all of this?

Donilon: In close cooperation with people in Tim Kraft's office and all the cabinet members' schedulers.

Allen: Could you describe how you would get a request for a Presidential appearance and what the procedure was for getting it?

Donilon: Well, a lot of them was through letter. It asked that we have a fund raiser or we have a certain problem in our district; it's a farm problem. Could you get Secretary Bergman to come out? Many times I think it went this way. We work mainly with the non-incumbents because there were 55 open seats and that was where the battle was going to be.

Allen: There were fifty-five open seats?

Donilon: Yeh. Fifty-five seats where the incumbent had retired and that was where the battleground was going to be in terms of loss and gain in the House. The President, as most democratic presidents had done, would not get involved in a contested primary. After the primary we would make contact with a democratic nominee, invite him down to see the President. He'd come and usually we'd arrange any other meetings in Washington he needed through the DNC and the House campaign committee and then we would talk to him about how we could be of help. And our unit served as a coordinating unit for schedules, making sure that he'd ask for Secretary Califano and we would put in a request for Secretary Califano to go out there, usually through a memo or by telephone and we met with all the cabinet schedulers about 8 or 10 times during that period. Scott Burnett was kind of the liaison with them in Tim Kraft's office and if they needed the speaker's bureau we would meet with them and give them directions and give them specific requests as we got them and try to keep an eye on over all travel to make sure people weren't running into one another. (Allen laughs.) For instance, a senator in one state asked for Secretary Kreps to come to Chicago Sunday night and Ab Nixon, the congressional candidate, asked for Secretary Califano. We wouldn't want them to be competing against one another, so we would keep track of that

Allen: Two of you were keeping up with this during the election period.

Donilon: Right.

Allen: Did you have any major problems in this operation?

Donilon: I don't think so. We had a lot of little problems.

Allen: What was the most difficult part of it?

Donilon: The coordination. The volume.

Allen: Who were the offices you were working primarily with? You have mentioned Tim Kraft.

Donilon: Kraft.

Allen: You mentioned Tim Kraft and Scott Burnett.

Donilon: Who works with Tim?

Allen: Anybody else on the White House staff that you were involved with frequently?

Donilon: No, well, yeh, to some extent Jack Watson's staff. There were also 30 some governors' races and they would be arranging appearances for them and we wanted to keep contact with them on what they were up to and where they were asking people to go... Frank, Frank Moore's office, was made the focal point by the President in a couple of cabinet meetings saying this was where the requests should be funneled for coordination.

Allen: What about on the Hill? Who were your primary contacts on the Hill at the time?

Donilon: At that time, the guys who were marginal who had a....by that I mean the people who could have lost, who had difficult races, those were the people we had contact with mainly. We developed the DNC, of course, did political intelligence work for us along with the House Campaign Committee. We targeted a list of districts where there was trouble, where we needed to go and help. The President himself traveled 22 days under that program.....targeted by this group.

Allen: Hmm. Sounds like an incredible effort that you pulled off.

Donilon: It was a lot of work. It was very well coordinated, I think. It went well. There were meetings nightly in the Roosevelt room.

Allen: Who was a part of the meetings?

Donilon: Scott Burnett, Lana, myself, Bob Russell who was Frank's administrative assistant, Tim Kraft sometimes, when we were discussing the President's schedule, Phil Wise.

Allen: After the campaigns were over, how did your work load change or shift?

Donilon: Well, we decided to take on another project, the coordination of grant announcements. It had become a serious problem that grant announcements weren't being handled properly through the agencies. Additionally, we weren't getting any credit for them because we weren't doing anything. We weren't telling any congressmen where to get ten million dollars for a city when we announced it. Most of the major projects are now announced through our office. We did an agency review of all the grant processes, decided which ones we wanted to plug into, and now they send 'em to us to take care of the announcement. We'll have a lobbyist take up a packet of them when he is meeting with a senator so we can try to get some credit for it.

Allen: There is a computer system now to handle that tracking process, isn't there?

Donilon: Not on grants. There is a computer system to handle tracking of legislation called CLASS.

Allen: And what does that do? It tracks major legislation?

Donilon: It tracks presidential priority legislation.

Allen: But the grant process is something you do manually and with the help of the agencies?

Donilon: Right. It is right now. I think it will be computerized at some point.

Allen: What other new things have you gotten into in the last year?

Donilon: We are working closely with the senators who are running in 1980. At this point we have had a series of meetings with them and with their administrative assistants and campaign people...Bob Russell, myself and Rhonna Freiberg. I have met with them to see how we could help them. There is a danger in losing the senate for the democrats in 1980. There are 34 senators running; 24 democrats. It was brought to Frank's attention that we decided we should try to do everything we can to make sure we don't lose the senate. We have been working in close cooperation with those senators running in 1980...those 24 democrats.

Allen: Hmm. And you've been doing this the last six or seven months. Are there particular senators that...well, we shouldn't get into that. No, I guess not.

Donilon: No. [Laughs]

Allen: What was your involvement in some of the major legislative pushes of this administration, like, for instance, the Panama Canal treaty?

Donilon: I wasn't involved much. Again, I did mostly special projects. The legislative stuff was handled by the congressional liaison offices.

Allen: OK. So the list I have of the major legislative pushes are perhaps a little outside of what you would have been involved in?

Donilon: Right.

Allen: OK. OK.

Donilon: It all relates to legislation. It improves our relationship with congress. Gives us some bargaining chips.

Allen: Yeh. Have you seen changes in the relationships between Capitol Hill and the White House?

Donilon: Sure.

Allen: There is a lot of talk about a more assertive congress.

Donilon: Congress is more assertive. Half of the members of congress are new since 1974. They're independent. Seventy-seven members of congress go back to '74. Half of those districts had not seen a democratic congressmen since the Civil War and they are independent. They didn't come up through the party organization. They're bright. They're young. It used to be that there was one committee chairman in each area that had all the power and the President could cut a deal with him on legislation. That's no longer true because the subcommittee chairmen have gained a lot more power. The second thing, there are a lot more points, a lot more stop gap points, points where you need to stroke people. And three, the special interest groups have become much more prolific... thousands of them and they impact on all those points. You are not only battling against, not only trying to win your cause on the merits, but battling the efforts of the many interest groups, so congress is a much more difficult place to deal with, but I think our relationship have improved greatly since the staff has been expanded. The President's admitted he has learned a lot more about congress. If you look at the President's schedule it has changed dramatically. He spends more time with Frank Moore related things than almost any other thing, when it comes to foreign policy type. He is spending a lot more time with congressmen. He is having dinner with them. The last week or so he played tennis with them... a lot more briefings, consulting a lot more fully. The energy speech he is giving tomorrow night is in Boston. It was developed in a process of extensive consultations with senators and congressmen. The President has learned a lot about congress. This unit has changed and the congressional liaison office has changed accordingly.

Allen: The date that you gave for the major reorganization in the congressional liaison office..?

Donilon: That's been gradual I think. Hiring... additional people... various points.

Allen: You mentioned several special projects you were involved in. I wonder if you got a chance to add any others that you would ...

Donilon: Well, the campaign took up most of the time all last year.

Allen: And the grants...

Donilon: And the grant stuff has taken most of the time since then

Allen: And the senators. These are the kinds of special projects you've worked on. Did you have any involvement in the presidential campaign of 1976?

Donilon: No, I was a senior in college.

Allen: By the way, where did you graduate?

Donilon: Catholic University.

Allen: And you graduated in seventy....?

Donilon: '77

Allen: I understand that you are planning to work in the Presidential Campaign of 1980.

Donilon: Right.

Allen: Can you tell us a little bit about

Donilon: I won't know until Monday morning. I'm working on the delegate selection.

Allen: Prior to the 1980 convention?

Donilon: Right.

Allen: What will you be primarily involved in?

Donilon: It will be a process of learning the rules, getting us on the ballots in all the different states, getting our slate of delegates ready and making sure the President has enough delegates in the summer of 1980 to get nominated.

Allen: That is a significant project to work on. [Laughs] Would you be working mostly with Evan LaBelle or Laurie Bach, or who do you...?

Donilon: Laurie and Evan, I think, spend most of their time raising money and probably working more directly with the director of field operations, Chuck Parrish, who is the executive assistant to Cecil Adrus in Interior. He and I are in an office in the basement over there about two

feet away from each other with Chip Carter about two feet in back of us...a corner about the size of this room. Typical campaign headquarters. I'll work with Tim Smith mainly. He's the general counsel.

Allen: Do you expect to visit all over the country?

Donilon: I don't know. I know initially it will be a Washington project.

Allen: Hmm.

Donilon: Once we start trying to put together our slates of delegates, just getting the names of people.

Allen: Several years from now I'll be coming back to talk to you again about your 1980 experiences.

Donilon: I hope they're pleasant.

Allen: I hope they will be and I look forward to talking to you at that time. Anything else you would like to say about your experiences of working in the White House?

Donilon: I don't think so. We've covered a lot of it.

Allen: OK. Thank you.