HEDLEY DONOVAN
EXIT INTERVIEW

This interview with Hedley Donovan is being recorded in his office in the West Wing of the White House on August 14, 1980, at approximately three o'clock in the afternoon. The interviewer is Emily Williams of the Presidential Papers Staff.

WILLIAMS: Mr. Donovan, the first thing I wanted to ask you was about this initial contact with the then-governor of Georgia, Jimmy Carter. You had met him in 1971, and then when he appeared on the cover of Time, that was credited at that time with giving him national exposure, which he had not previously had. What was it about this man?

DONOVAN: I had first met him, I guess it was 1971, at a time when we were considering a cover on one or all of several interesting new governors in the South: I think [Robert C.] West in South Carolina and I forget who the others were. There were about four of them. Carter was invited to lunch at the Time and Life Building in New York for various senior editors to meet him. Naturally, the Atlanta Bureau of Time was pressing strongly for their governor and other correspondents for theirs. And we concluded that although we wanted to discuss all these governors in the story that Carter would be the most interesting one to focus on. I think it was, in fact, the first kind of major national publicity he had.

Then I saw him, oh, perhaps two or three or four or five more times while he was governor. He invited my wife and me down to stay with him in the mansion one weekend. Then I saw him in New York a couple of more times. We were both members of the notorious Trilateral Commission; I saw him at two or three of those meetings. So I suppose by the time he was nominated in 1976, I had met with him half-a-dozen times over meals or in some way.

WILLIAMS: What was there about him that impressed you particularly, or your staff of editors at Time?

DONOVAN: Well, journalistically he was a very interesting figure. His attitudes about racial questions were enlightened by comparison with Governor [George C.] Wallace; it's easily forgotten now, but he was still an important national and Southern figure. That seemed significant. He [Carter] was not an all-out liberal by any means and seemed to have struck a kind of interesting balance between a certain kind of prudence in fiscal and economic policy, with some aspects of liberalism, all kind of wrapped in what a lot of people have described as a sort of revived populism. Whether totally admirable or not, he was at least a very interesting and somewhat different political phenomenon and all these things appealed to our journalistic interest.

WILLIAMS: Then how did it, your White House appointment, come about? I know that you had just retired as Chairman of the Board, that is the correct title?

DONOVAN: No, it's not. I was Editor-in-Chief of Time Incorporated.

WILLIAMS: As Editor-in-Chief of Time last spring, 1979.

DONOVAN: And a number of publications, not just Time.
WILLIAMS: Not just Time because you had also worked for Fortune and Life.

DONOVAN: Time incorporated owns Life, Fortune, Sports Illustrated, People, [and] Money.

WILLIAMS: All very well-known publications.

DONOVAN: And so the job as Editor-in-Chief is to have the final editorial responsibility for all those publications, not just Time and Life.

WILLIAMS: Okay. Well, just having retired from that position last spring, early summer, then you came on to the White House staff last August. Now, could you sketch for us how that came about?

DONOVAN: The President got in touch with me about mid-July of last year. This was following, I believe it was the week after his famous retreat at Camp David where he had had a number of people in to ask what he should do and kick ideas around. A number of them suggested that he should broaden his circle of advisors and at least two or three suggested me specifically as somebody he should try and get, since I'd just retired and was more or less defenseless. So, he called me up and asked me to come down here and see him, which I did a couple of days later. He made a very strong and persuasive appeal to me to take this as a service, not to him personally or to his administration but to the Presidency and the country. And it was very difficult indeed to resist. I did ask for a couple of days to think it over, and I consulted two or three friends in the administration and two or three out. Everybody seemed to feel that it would be a very good thing for me to do. I thought it would be very interesting, certainly totally different and a great opportunity to see the government and the Presidency from the inside after watching it from the outside for many, many years as an editor. So I told him I would do it. I had a vacation plan that I wanted to stick with; so this was approximately mid-July or July 20th, so we agreed on August 15th as the day I would report to work.

I think the President and I both understood equally and very clearly from the beginning that it was a very unusual assignment. He hadn't had any position like that in his administration or on his staff, and I obviously had never done anything remotely like that. So we were kind of feeling our way along an open-ended way. It was understood that every two or three months or so we would sort of check up and see how we thought it was working. In practice we had one such review, I think about October or November. I had some doubts at the time as to how effective it was turning out to be. The President had various suggestions of ways it could be made more effective. And that was really the last time that I discussed with him seriously whether I would go or stay,

because I just didn't feel like bothering him every couple of months with conversation.

WILLIAMS: This discussion would have been before the hostage crisis.

DONOVAN: Yes, it was about October. Then in part because of the hostage crisis, then Afghanistan, this, of course, became a very busy and difficult period, and I wouldn't have wanted to leave in any circumstances that might have remotely suggested some dissent from the policy. Also, I was, in fact, quite busy in all kinds of meetings and discussions relating to those two questions. So although the job has been amorphous just in the nature of it, it's mainly been a very busy occupation--a lot to do, a lot of people to talk with, meetings to go to, and so forth. But again, I think from the beginning I certainly realized, and I'm sure the President did, that somebody who was set up strictly as an advisor with no operating functions may, at times, be in limbo. I have been in the position myself, as editor-in-chief, of occasionally having consultants and advisors who don't have line responsibilities. And occasionally you have to remember, "Oh, I guess I better take so-and-so to lunch next week and ask him for [any] advice he might give about something." It does have that aspect.

WILLIAMS: Built into it.

DONOVAN: Yes, whereas if you've got an operating role that brings you into the President's office every day, or every other day, or four times a day, that's a totally different organic relationship.

WILLIAMS: So was your access to the President solely at your request for meetings or--?

DONOVAN: Well, we had an arrangement that roughly every other week we would have a scheduled meeting just to make sure that we didn't go too long without some conversation. If I had some specific thing I wanted to bring to his attention or ask him about between meetings, I could get to see him any day promptly, when I asked him. So I might come in for five or ten or fifteen minutes, in between these set meetings about some particular thing. He also encouraged me to write him memos whenever I was moved to. He very seldom called me at random.

Then I've attended every week the so-called Friday morning foreign policy breakfast, which consisted of the Vice-President, Secretary of State, [Secretary of] Defense, [Zbigniew] Brzezinski, Hamilton Jordan, Jack Watson, Lloyd Cutler, and myself. So that was about seven or so people. Those were very interesting and important meetings, usually lasting an hour-and-a-half, an hour and three-quarters, and a fair number of things would get decided at those meetings in the foreign policy field, with quite free discussion around the table. The Secretary of State normally would bring an agenda. In a sense, he would be the lead-off person in the discussion. The President usually had a list of things he wanted to bring up if the Secretary of State didn't bring them up. But everybody else, if they had anything on their mind, could bring up some other topic. And coming out of those breakfasts fairly often somebody, the Secretary of

State, or Defense, Brzezinski, would be assigned, "You follow it up," or "Let me have a memo on that next Monday" or whatever. Some questions were deferred for further study. But those were serious, working meetings. Also, [they] had the virtue, I think, that the departments and agencies principally concerned in the foreign policy and security field were or should have been kept quite well informed as to what the others were doing. Occasionally things fall between the cracks, as we can see in this flap about whether or not [Secretary of State Edmund] Muskie was adquately informed on the nuclear targeting. But given the number of questions that could fall between the cracks, my impression in a year is that very few of them do that. That doesn't mean that all of the decisions are right. But I think in general the concerned departments were adquately informed about what was going on. I occasionally would draw an assignment out of one of those breakfasts, though much less often than the people with operating departments. But theyalso gave me a lot of information about what was on the resident's mind in foreign policy which then would be background for me in the kind of conversations I might hold with him, or memos I might send him. It was very helpful to know what he was most concerned with at a particular point in terms of what would be the relevance or irrelevance of advice I might give him.

Some of what I have done here in terms of advice to him, I probably could have done just as well if I were in my previous occupation in New York or my previous life in New York and just come down here two or three times a month to talk to him and give him some impressions. But some I could not have done without the inside information of what was going on at the top level of the government, because unless you knew something was going on you might have no reason to perhaps say, "Do this," or "Don't do this."

WILLIAMS: Right. You wouldn't have had the background information. Then did you also have a good deal of contact with White House Senior Staff members, at least one of whom is in that [breakfast] group, the Chief of Staff?

DONOVAN: Well, yes. I had quite a lot of contact with Brzezinski, I suppose more with Brzezinski and his people than anybody else. And for several months during the Iranian and Afghan crises we were having almost daily SCC [Special Coordinating Committee] meetings here in the Situation Room, which Brzezinski presides over and which are NSC [National Security Council] vehicles for detailed coordination of policy. Those might be attended by anywhere from ten to fifteen or eighteen people. And, say, on something like the Iran and Afghanistan sanctions, well then, the Agriculture Department was involved, the Justice Department was involved in the handling of Iranian students in the United States; the Treasury Department was involved in it. So there were a number of departments to work with in it. Those were quite intensive and serious discussions, and the minutes of those meetings would go to the President the same day of the meeting. Usually by the next morning's meeting of the committee we would have back the President's comments from the minutes of yesterday, some of which might be, "Good idea. Pursue this," or "No, let's pull off of this."

WILLIAMS: But immediate feedback from the President.

DONOVAN: Yes. He's very fast in dealing with paper of any kind. If he were in town today, which he isn't, and I sent him a memo right this minute, I would either have a reply before I left the office this afternoon or it would be on my desk when I got here in the morning. He starts work earlier than I do.

WILLIAMS: That must be very satisfying to have a boss who responds in that way.

DONOVAN: Well, as you know, he's disciplined. Although he may not follow your advice, you know he's received it and paid attention. He knows what you've said.

WILLIAMS: So was most of your work this year on foreign policy rather than domestic?

DONOVAN: Yes, it was, as it turned out. When he and I originally talked about the job, he was not excluding any field of domestic or foreign policy. And I, in fact, rather thought it would be more domestic than foreign. I had a lot of interest in productivity problems and inflation and tax policy. I had done a good deal of writing and editing in those fields in the past. I talked quite a lot about those things with the President in the first couple of weeks I was down here. But then, just as events unfolded, including the Soviet brigade in Cuba, for instance--.

WILLIAMS: Right, that would have been one of the early ones, I guess.

DONOVAN: That was two weeks after I arrived. I suppose three-quarters of my time and more has been involved with foreign policy.

WILLIAMS: And then was Iran something that you were specifically targeted for--doing work on that? Is that something that your expertise was used for?

DONOVAN: That was one of the things. I didn't have any particular background or expertise on Iran, but it became a very absorbing crisis and problem to the administration. So anybody who was involved in intimate advice to the President about foreign policy would have had to think a lot about Iran, and likewise Afghanistan.

WILLIAMS: You mentioned the Trilateral Commission. Were you at all involved with David Rockefeller over this?

DONOVAN: Yes, well, he was the chairman.

WILLIAMS: Well, with the Iran crisis is what I'm asking.

DONOVAN: No, no I was not.

WILLIAMS: I see.

DONOVAN: I was involved in getting together a group of foreign policy alumni at the time of the Soviet brigade in Cuba question to meet with the President and get briefings from the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] and the State Department and the Department of Defense. And that included about fifteen former secretaries of State and Defense, top-level people from several administrations and from both parties, including: [Henry] Kissinger, Jack McCloy, and other foreign policy figures, several of whom had been involved with the Trilateral Commission, but then that's almost everybody at one time or another.

WILLIAMS: It's been a large group, yes. Then part of your duties were, as spelled out in the original release, to be advisor on media relations. Was that simply because of your--.

DONOVAN: No. No, it was not. It was not spelled out. In fact, that was excluded in my mind. I didn't want to be considered super swami about the media, so I told the President I did not want to be second-guessing Jody Powell or [Gerald] Rafshoon.

WILLIAMS: I see. That corrects some information that we had then in some printed sources. I see.

DONOVAN: And I also absolutely did not want to be involved in the political campaign in any way. The President accepted that perfectly well. I'm a political independent, which he knew when we started doing business. And he's respected that completely during the year, as have others on the staff here.

Aside from those two exclusions, it was understood that I was free to suggest or discuss or criticize or praise or whatever in any field of substance in domestic or foreign policy and that we would try to do it without my concerning myself about the domestic political consequences. Obviously any kind of policy has domestic political consequences, either good or bad, but it is possible to approach it from the standpoint of the merits of the policy as you see it and really not pay any attention as to whether this is good or bad politics. At the same time, it will have political effects, but those are in somebody else's department.

WILLIAMS: There are other people who can tell him from that standpoint. Then you said you were free to suggest. Were you the person who suggested the Commission on the Agenda for the Eighties? Was this an outgrowth of these Camp David discussions?

DONOVAN: I'm not positive whether I suggested it or whether the President did. When we had talked the first time he even discussed the job with me and then after I first arrived, I suppose we had three or four conversations in which I was saying that I thought one thing his administration badly lacked was any public vision of the future or attention to things beyond next week or next month, in ways that would both animate public opinion, but also encourage instructive debate or imagination about some of this. The President agreed with me, and that fitted somewhat with some of the things

apparently that some of the people had also told him at this retreat. I honestly can't remember whether in the course of one of these conversations I said he could, for instance, have a commission, or whether he said it first, or just how the commission evolved. But I suppose for perhaps three months last year I spent a quarter of my time on that. It turned out to be much more of an operation than I had imagined, forming a Presidential commission, getting all the pertinent people here to agree on who should be on the commission and who should not be, and then persuading [those] to come on in getting the thing--.

WILLIAMS: You were in charge of getting the members to agree to serve?

DONOVAN: Yes. Then after we chose the chairman, who's Dr. [William] McGill, who's the retired president of Columbia, then he and I worked together a great deal for a month or so on problems of staffing, how to organize the panels on the various topics the commission would tackle. Then by about February the thing was organized and running. So all that kind of liaison work I'd done during the organizing was pretty well wrapped up. Now in the past six months I've occasionally dropped in on their meetings or listened to one of their panels, just to get an impression of how well their work is coming. But there hasn't been much for me to do about the commission since about February.

WILLIAMS: The establishment was your prime role.

DONOVAN: Right. And they're due in December to report to the President. The chairman of the commission and the chairs of the various panels will be in effect the final editors of the report.

WILLIAMS: Do you think it's going to be something that will be effective in broadening the experience--you've alluded to some of the criticism that came out of Camp David was [about] the lack of long-term vision, that the President was surrounded by too many people he had had in Georgia. What, at this early date, is your assessment of that sort of work?

DONOVAN: I think that whether the report is seen as a broadening of the advice reaching the President will depend first on whether it's a good report. Then if so, then among other things, the list of names presumably included in the report would, indeed, be quite broadening of the sources of his advice. The hazard, as you know, about that kind of commission is it's easy to end up with a least common denominator report where you have a lot of different points of view on the commission beautifully representative of a great many constituencies.

WILLIAMS: Because it had a very broad mandate.

DONOVAN: And getting them to agree on something that's more than just platitude is not easy. I think there are enough really good people there so I hope they really will say something. They've worked, and worked very hard. So I'm fairly hopeful about it,

though it's a very difficult assignment. There have been some Presidential commissions in the past that came up with perfectly worthy but dull reports that just sank like a stone. And there have been some that I think have been quite effective, so that's a mixed set of precedents.

I was on one of Lyndon Johnson's task forces, one of the so-called Great Society task forces that he set up in '64. They had a much shorter-term focus, unlike the ten-year span of this commission. They were really looking at things of the next two or three years and were quite specifically aimed at coming up with legislative recommendations, which is not the focus of the commission either. But several of those panels were really quite [worthwhile]; in fact, I was on the educational panel, which John Gardner was chairman of, and a lot of what that panel recommended, in fact, became the basis of the education bill that was passed and enacted the next year. But those [reports] were more sharply aimed at getting something up for Congress.

WILLIAMS: So you would not foresee that kind of result coming out of this commission?

DONOVAN: No. A ten-year focus makes it almost impossible to go at it that way. We have a very well-balanced commission in the sense that they're bipartisan, and also it's bipartisan within the parties, the whole spectrum of each party. Then the reporting date was deliberately set for December so this could not be construed as some sort of campaign document or think tank for the Carter campaign. It's pretty well insulated from the campaign.

WILLIAMS: That's no doubt worked to the benefit of the commission's--

DONOVAN: Well, I think so, and, in fact, some of the best people on the commission I don't think would have come on if it hadn't been set up that way.

WILLIAMS: I see. As a final question, then, I might ask you to extend that evaluation of broadening, would the commission possibly be able to broaden the long-term view, to the work you did. I think the popular conception, whether it was true or not, was that one of the reasons Hedley Donovan was being brought into the White House was to broaden the President's advisory possibilities, the information coming in to him. Do you think you have fulfilled that?

DONOVAN: It's very difficult for me to tell you. He'd be the only one that could be the judge of it from that point of view.

WILLIAMS: And he gives tough report cards, as we learned last Sunday on "60 Minutes."

DONOVAN: It's not violating any confidence because the White House made public part of his letter [upon Mr. Donovan's announcement of his retirement from the White House Staff] that he has given me a fairly good report card as an advisor. As to how

intimate an advisor--one barrier has been the political campaign. That's naturally and inevitably been a tremendous preoccupation of his, and so if I have excluded myself from those conversations, I have excluded myself from a fair bit of what's been going on in the White House this year. Obviously, the campaign preoccupation will be increasing in the next three months, which is partly why I chose to leave at this point.

In the political questions, I think it's generally agreed that there is where the influence of "the Georgians" is the greatest. He has tremendous trust in Jody Powell, Hamilton Jordan, and in Rosalynn, Charlie Kirbo. So in running his campaign he does deal with, on the whole, a very narrow circle. I suppose the only major non-Georgian voice in those matters would be Fritz Mondale. But in other things, foreign policy [or] domestic policy more broadly construed, I don't think he's particularly or excessively dependent on the Georgians. The Cabinet is from all over the country; Brzezinski's from Poland, and so forth and so on. In some ways that was kind of a bum rap. It is true that in strictly political matters the Georgians have his confidence and vice-versa, not surprisingly.

WILLIAMS: They've succeeded before.

DONOVAN: Not surprisingly, since they've succeeded before. He's their handiwork and they are his.

WILLIAMS: Now, when Jody Powell announced that you would be leaving the White House he said that he did not think that this position would be filled. He did not think the President would be appointing a successor was perhaps the way that it was worded.

DONOVAN: I think the context was "not before the election."

WILLIAMS: Right, right. My question would be, having held a similar role, do you think there's a definite place for it? You've talked about the limitations somewhat of not having a portfolio. Do you think there's a place for this type of advisory role?

DONOVAN: Yes, I think there's a place for it. If the President asked me, and the nominee that he had in mind asked me, I could suggest some ways which perhaps might make it a more effective role. But I think in the nature of it, you know, [if the advisor was] somebody who's panting for some further or higher government office, it wouldn't work. Or somebody that is anxious to reach out for operating authority or more staff, or a bigger office or something, then he would find himself in competition with people who would think he was trying to muscle in. I think the President is very astute about those things and realizes that somebody who does not have any further visible ambitions has a greater chance of being accepted by the rest of the staff and not regarded as a threat in any way. The penalty of that is that it also means that without having operational responsibility, it won't come about naturally for that advisor to be included in a certain number of things. No one would think, "He has to be here." Unless the President thinks or orders it as a regular practice or says, for instance, "Please get down here and join this meeting," which he seldom has, it's not going to

happen in the normal course of things.

WILLIAMS: Because your relationship is with the President, you reported directly to him.

DONOVAN: Yes, my only product here during the year has been one-on-one advice to the President. As far as I know, nobody elsewhere in the government has felt in any way encroached upon by my doing that. But it also is true that since they don't see any results of anything I've said to the President which is the nature of that kind of confidential relationship, then it could be that they would also conclude, "I'm not sure what, if anything, he does." Then that can lead to not being taken sufficiently seriously. So it's very complex, these relationships. It could be that advice is more effective, say, from someone like Charlie Kirbo, who isn't here at all, but is an old, trusted, intimate friend who comes up here two or three times a month or whenever the President asks him. But nobody here could conceivably feel that Charlie Kirbo was trying to muscle in on their province. At the same time, everybody knows that he's a very old, old friend of the President's. So it has weight in that sense, where my position was more artificially created, as the President and I were not old friends. He and I sort of decreed that as of a certain date I would become a senior advisor, but it's a little hard to make that happen in reality. I'll be interested when you interview him in what he says about it.

WILLIAMS: Yes, do you realize that when we talk about how complex your role is how complex it's going to be when we do what has to be a series of very long interviews with the President? You'd have to take it issue by issue. But I appreciate in your last week here your talking about the complexities of your work.