

## **Exit Interview with Jerry Doolittle, Speech Writer to the President**

**Interviewer: Marie Allen, Presidential Papers Staff**

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**Transcriber: Lyn Kirkland**

**Allen:** First I would like to ask you about some of your experiences before you came to the Carter Administration. What types of jobs did you have that prepared you for this job?

**Doolittle:** I was a newspaper man and a magazine writer and I worked for four and a half years for the USA overseas in Laos and in Morocco...literally in Laos as a press attaché' there during the war. Since then I have written a number of books.

*[They stop the tape momentarily.]*

**Allen:** Go ahead, you were telling me about Laos and your newspaper experience.

**Doolittle:** Well, that's primarily my background----- as an editor and a columnist, writer of amazing articles and books, and a certain amount of press work in the USA overseas.

**Allen:** Now, you've had the reputation of being the President's joke writer, I understand. Now how.....were you known for the jokes that you wrote during this earlier period?

**Doolittle:** No, no, although, I did have a column that I always used to think of as humorous in the Washington Post. There was some disagreement about that between myself and my editor sometimes, but not particularly, no. I just fell into it because in the very early days Jim Fallows and I were the only two people there and it was the last thing that he wanted to do, so that the mantle of greatness fell on me... It was just three or four days after the inaugural that the President accepted an invitation to speak before the Washington Press Club, I think it was, congressional dinner. It was an after dinner kind of thing...humorous remarks. Jim saddled me with that and I was never able to escape in the future.

**Allen:** [laughs] Did you work in the campaign or transition period?

**Doolittle:** Yeh, I worked in the campaign down in Atlanta, in the press headquarters there. I was the guy who essentially told people they could not interview Governor Carter because there were thousands of interview requests and I would tell most of them no or stall them or put them off, or else not make them too mad. Every week or so I had the chance to say yes to somebody, but mostly it was screening, sifting, and arranging and scheduling interviews and also writing answers to written questionnaires for written interviews from various publications. In fact, I once, I am sure the President never knew it, but wrote what amounted to a final chapter, an

updating chapter, of Why Not the Best in the French addition because it came out in French. I doubt if he knows that was done.....but it is there anyway.

**Allen:** You wrote a final chapter?

**Doolittle:** It is not really a final chapter. It was a questionnaire form. The French publisher sent in a list of 15 or 20 questions he wanted answered to update the thing. It was due to come out during the campaign; I think it did too, and I prepared answers for all of them. I mean, they were actually approved but I'm not sure that anybody focused in on what they amounted to, which was sort of a short final chapter to his autobiography.

**Allen:** So you didn't actually do speech writing during the campaign .....

**Doolittle:** No.

**Allen:** ...but other types of things?

**Doolittle:** Yeh. And, during the transition, I worked in the press office, and I still did not write speeches but I was to have gone over with Pat Anderson, who was then chief speech writer, and I wrote speeches for him and he used all my stuff and I volunteered, and then Pat withdrew I went over with Jim instead.

**Allen:** That leads right in to my next question which is, "how did you get involved in the speech writing office with the President?"

**Doolittle:** Well, that's what I always wanted to do..... because that is what I do.....write. As I said, I talked to Pat and told him of my interest in it and he said "OK, let's do it." And then when he disappeared from view I went to Jim. Well, he told Jim that if you decide to hire another fellow and myself...and then I thought about it and went to Jim myself. I'm a show off for stuff like that...a book or something.

**Allen:** Have you written a book?

**Doolittle:** Oh, yeh, I've written two.

**Allen:** Can you give me the titles?

**Doolittle:** One is called The Southern Appalachians and the other is called Canyons and Mesas...books on the wilderness areas.

**Allen:** Published by....?

**Doolittle:** Time/Life Books. And there is another that I guess will be coming out in a year or so--a novel. I don't have the check in my hand yet, but I've been made an offer by a publisher for that.

**Allen:** What will the title of that be?

**Doolittle:** I haven't given it a title---not yet.

**Allen:** Would you like to say anything about what it is about?

**Doolittle:** It's not terribly.....it's about a woman journalist and a reporter in Washington during the Kennedy and Johnson days.

**Allen:** Well, I'll look forward to seeing that when it comes out.

**Doolittle:** If you'll buy it, I mean, I'll autograph it.

**Allen:** Really?

**Doolittle:** If you buy six or eight of them, I'll autograph them all.

**Allen:** You know, we'll probably want one for the library. One thing I am really interested in as we build our library collection is any books by staff members. I'd like to get a record copy of those for the future library. I'm always glad to get a title so we can order them. We've ordering books right and left.

**Doolittle:** Jim wrote a book once. I don't know if he gave you the title of it.

**Allen:** What's the title of it?

**Doolittle:** It is sort of a staff study for the Navy when he worked for the Navy but it came out in a book. In fact, it is out in paperback and it is called The Water Lords.

**Allen:** I'm glad you told me that too because he didn't mention that before. If you think of it and you get a publisher's blurb about your new book, send it to us. Drop it in the mail to us so we will have the information to order it. You were describing how you got involved in the speech office and you initially got involved through Patrick Anderson and then through Jim Fallows. Would you elaborate on what you said earlier about how your role became the joke writer's role?

**Doolittle:** Well, Jim in the very early days was working on the first fireside address, you know, the famous cardigan sweater one, and there were just the two of us here then. The others who were to be speech writers, hadn't showed up and this sort of levy for jokes was laid on us because he was going over to the Press Club dinner banquet and I did a sort of little structured, relatively coherent speech with jokes in it which I thought was mildly funny and showed to Jim and he thought was funny, and showed to Jody and he thought it was funny, so he took it in to the President.....and had no reaction from him. I went out to listen to him give this thing, not knowing how well he could deliver humorous material because he stayed away from humor during the campaign, almost exclusively, maybe occasionally unintentionally with a reluctant heart [Allen laughs]and stuff,, but he did his best to keep off it. And then at the end, at the

speech itself there was a succession of congressmen and senators who got up and talked and each one was worse...more painful to listen to than the last, so he didn't have a very hard act to follow, although Barb Murkowski was there and she was very funny. At any event, he finally came on at the end of all the rest of them and started talking and he told a joke about his brother Billy, and a joke about walking down Pennsylvania Avenue after the swearing in ceremonies. Neither of which were mine, and one or two others which I didn't recognize at all, and I thought, well, I had failed utterly at my first time at bat and I've just been sent to the showers . And finally he used a little bit of my stuff in the middle and then a few more much later and it ended, so I felt good about that. So, the next day I got back, well, Jim got back the text back from the President and he had written in the margins "very poor" and "I had to do my own speech in the car on the way over."

**Allen:** [Sighs and shudders and says "Oh! Oh!"]

**Doolittle:** So with that encouragement, I continued.

**Allen:** [Laughs]

**Doolittle:** They couldn't find any other volunteers. I don't know.

**Allen:** How did you get the inspiration for jokes?

**Doolittle:** I would just sort of read the papers and daily news summary with the thought in mind that someday, you know, the dread call might come and I would be forced to try to bring up some jokes and if anything mildly funny was going on....I don't know.....whatever was current ....there was the \$50 rebate in the early days of the administration was one. It seemed ripe for humor. Or there was Amy's tree house and Amy going to school with secret service agents; anything that I thought might somehow be hammered into a joke. I would make a little note and stick in a file or clip out the item or something and when the day finally came I would go through all those things and try to make something out of them. We tried, because these things were always being sent back saying they were terrible, do some more, or not funny or something, so we would apply to some other humorist. We would circularize, call up people, humor writers on the west coast, Broadway, show business, or television guys and solicit jokes from them and they were almost universally terrible. [Allen laughs] I would look at these things. Rick Hertzberg, one of the speech writers, knows a lot of TV people and he'd get 'em to cooperate and he'd send these things ...who is this guy? Does this guy make a living doing this stuff? And he'd say "yeh, this guy just turned down a job with \$250,000 a year with Bob Hope because he couldn't stand the salary cut "and this guy over here is estimated a million dollars a year. He's a producer or writer for some TV show I had never heard of. But they were living in a different world. These political concerns were not theirs. These guys make a lot of dough. A \$50 rebate, they don't focus on that. Whatever was current political humor in Washington was as remote to them as current show business humor would be to me. They were working an entirely different street, not just the plaza. There are guys who try, for one reason or another, to be funny on Washington

matters; Mark Russell, a comedienne, Dick Train, Eddie Cantor, he's a press secretary.....oh, Jim King from the campaign.

**Allen:** I tried to interview Mark Russell before he left here.

**Doolittle:** And those people you would call up and try to pick their brains as much as you could but ultimately, most of it seemed to fall on me because I was the one getting paid to do it.

**Allen:** What did your job consist of? Was it primarily adding jokes to written material or did you have any kind of narrative writing responsibilities in addition?

**Doolittle:** Oh, I don't think the jokes took up two percent of my time. The rest was just the regular stuff that goes through the office. I worked on the speech for the Organization of the American states, one of the addresses to the UN, the Notre Dame foreign policy thing, the speech in Lagos on African policy. I don't know....everything. Whatever comes up? The farm speech he gave in Missouri last summer. Just a wide variety of stuff, anything.

**Allen:** How do you divide up the speeches for work by speech writer?

**Doolittle:** There was no real system. There are one or two areas of specialization, usually based on the interest of the person. I've tried to keep up with civil rights and health issues...and equal opportunity...things of that nature. ....education, but not because...not that other people wouldn't do speeches on those matters, but they're something I have an interest in and nobody was fighting anybody else for those things. We'd get together every couple of weeks or something, whenever a batch of stuff came in that had to be done in the future and Jim would say something like "We're going to need something on the CAT talks." And somebody would say "What does CAT mean?" You've expressed an interest. You do it.

**Allen:** [Laughs]

**Doolittle:** His only concern was to make sure that everybody had a roughly equally amount of stuff to do and nobody fought each other for things on a certain subject. I was all very harmonious.

**Allen:** Could you take one of your speeches and describe the process you went through?

**Doolittle:** Not really because every time it was different. We many times laid out the logical sequences of events--- little memos---and what the process ought to be --and deciding on a speech and what should go into it. From time to time the President would be dissatisfied with something that was done at the last minute and he would get on Jim and Jim would come back with yet another plan. How are we going to do it? The next time a major speech came up we would follow the plan and it would get shot down in flames. One scheme was for us to uh.....which was approved by all concerned.... was for us when there was a major address coming up, to circularize all the wise men we could think of and solicit their opinions,

historians, scholars in the field, and politicians, whatever the field might be. Start well in advance and ask each of them to submit his suggestions or her suggestions for what should go in the speech and then we would assemble all those things along with whatever ideas we might have along with quotations, historical quotations--- just a mass of material and send it all in to the President and out of that smorgasbord he would pick this or that and decide on the basis of the thinking, the collective thinking, of the wise men---what direction we want to go in. We went through that whole process once in the case of his Annapolis graduation speech in the spring and then two days before the thing I got a call at home, and Jim was out of town. The President asked me to come in that morning and see him and I went in there and he said “Well, you’ve done just what I wanted you to do in this and that’s fine, but I have decided to give a different speech than the one I told you about that I wanted before. I certainly do appreciate all that...but here’s what I want instead. So once again, it was done at the last minute and in that particular case he solicited suggestions from Brzezinski and Vance and maybe Andy Young and Turner and Brown and gone up and kind of stitched them all together at Camp David himself. So, something like that happened every time we tried to impose order on the process. Either we’d send in the outline that he said he wanted or otherwise agreed he ought to have and he wouldn’t look at it until the night before or something and then decide he wanted to do something else. It always fell apart for one reason or another and there was no typical way. It never worked in any explainable fashion. It just kind of grew. In some cases we would start with a draft. Often, with the foreign policy stuff with a draft from Brzezinski’s people, and then it would bounce back and forth 6 or 8 times between the NSC and the State Department if there are any issues of controversy between them, as there was in the African speech. They would fight it out bureaucratically and you’d get Brzezinski’s people would say there are four criteria that must be met in any viable Namibian settlement, or something, and they’d list four criteria and you’d get four different criteria back from the State Department and I’d say, listen, (19:50), I don’t care which criteria you guys want, but I’d love for you to have eight criteria, or some combination of these four. In that particular case I think I just sort of put them all in a bottle and shook them up and made each criteria double so that there were still four criteria. You know, I would say one criteria might be every citizen in Namibia must be 6’1” tall and another is that everyone must be 4’3” tall... [Allen chuckles].and then I’d send them back to the State Department

**Allen:** But not at the same time.

**Doolittle:** Sure, at the same time [Allen chuckles] and they would finally hassle it out and figured what it should be. And in the end you come out with a product that everybody has carefully agreed on and he gets on the plane and the secretary and assistant secretary Lewis and I worked on the plane, and Jim Fallows in this case, and one of these big around the world trips and they hassle it out on the plane and one side wins and the one side loses and the whole thing gets changed over at the last minute again only this time it’s on the plane instead of here, so the process was never the same twice in a row and never really anything less than chaotic.

**Allen:** You mentioned a good deal of direct input from the President, what other people gave you frequent input on speeches?

**Doolittle:** Oh depending, on the State of the Union, you'd circularize everybody and ask them all to throw their little lumps of jellied fruit and nuts, and everything into the Christmas pudding. In the case of the NSC we would usually get some sort of draft from Brzezinski's people and sometimes from the State Department as well, or maybe two or three pages of suggested stuff that the State Department wanted to get in and add to it, and then we would try to render what we had there into English. In the case of domestic things we would normally go to the man or woman in charge of that on Stu Eizenstat's staff and ask them what they thought we ought to say and check with the department or departments involved and ask them what they wanted to say and kind of put together the draft ourselves, and then send it in and hope for the best.

**Allen:** Are there people who were always involved?

**Doolittle:** Uh, yeh. Dave Rubenstein, sort of acting for Stu, would nearly always get himself involved, not in the foreign stuff so much, but in any domestic thing he usually would. I'd say Peter Gould was regularly involved in the economic stuff and Charlie Shultze, I guess, too. Always involved....let's see....who would be? I can't who else... I can't think of anybody else who would have involved themselves in every speech. Dave...David was the main one, yeh.

**Allen:** Was there one of the speeches you wrote that you felt a particular pride of accomplishment in...that you would pick out from the others?

**Doolittle:** Well, you can't say "wrote". There are sections of the Notre Dame Speech that I contributed...that comprised whatever small contribution I've been able to make to the administration, but it didn't amount to much...but I didn't write the speech. Every word of it passed through my typewriter. There were drafts from other people and it's always a group effort. You can't claim much pride of authorship, but the sections that I'm thinking about, which I mention and identify, were written by me.

**Allen:** And what was there about that speech that you feel pride about?

**Doolittle:** Well, I thought it was a successful effort to set off our foreign policy from that of Dr. Henry Kissinger whose fundamental believe is that democracy is doomed and whose fundamental...the main spring of his diplomacy, as it were, is we are surrounded by Indians shooting arrows and there's only one of us and there's twenty million of them and they have sharps repeaters and we have nothing but tomahawks or something, or clubs and we are bound to lose because unfortunately we are not all governed by Henry Kissinger without the insolent input of the congress and the people. I have felt for many years and still feel that it is a mistake to base your foreign policy on fear of the Russians who are not people who ought to inspire fear. They're not very good and their system is not very good and they've been at it for 75 years and they've been total flops at everything except building big, big guns. So, any foreign policy based

upon fear is something which ought not to inspire fear, just leads to paranoia, stupidity, and unnecessary military expense, and I thought, and I think that President Carter is not a victim of that sort of thing and actually, actually believes in his heart of hearts that we are superior in many ways to the Russians, as, in fact, we are, of course. But I don't think most American presidents have fully grasped that fact. Certainly the last two didn't.

**Allen:** Have you particularly enjoyed your foreign policy speeches then?

**Doolittle:** Not very much. The quality of prose in the foreign policy world is about the same as that in the academic world, which is to say, unspeakable. It might be worse dealing with, say, HEW or something. Their prose might be more obscene, but there is an enormous reluctance to think things through in clear terms in the foreign policy field and an enormous lust for things like enhancing international structures and economic security. It's just meringue that says nothing at all. Just the general quality of prose in foreign policy experts is sort of like a monotone MUSAC [Allen laughs]...no recognizable melody and nothing particularly pleasant about it...just kind of background noise. It just fills the space.

**Allen:** Do you remember a specific instance of the President's responding favorably to something that you have written that you could talk about?

**Doolittle:** Well, he once.... did say something about my contribution to the Notre Dame speech. He said something like it was most helpful or something like that. I don't know. That in itself was unprecedented....As you have probably discovered in these interviews, expressions of gratitude are not in long supply in this White House---or even of appreciation.

**Allen:** Do you recall a particular speech that bombed, as far as the President was concerned, that you can talk about? Don't go into this if you had rather not.

**Doolittle:** That bombed?

**Allen:** That you got an unfavorable response back on.

**Doolittle:** That the speech itself bombed or the President?

**Allen:** No, the draft.

**Doolittle:** Yeh, he was unhappy with the draft we did on the, that I did, actually, on the Panama Canal Treaty ---the TV address that he was to give, or did give, to the country and he worked that extensively and wrote a lot of that himself up at Camp David. As I thought at the time, I thought my first draft was best. An opinion he didn't seem to share.

**Allen:** Has President Carter, in your experience, written a good many of his own speeches?

**Doolittle:** Not written. He was involved a great deal, as I say, in the Panama Canal TV address and in the Annapolis graduation thing and probably in others that I wasn't involved in and don't

know about.....but he.....a large number of his speeches, and even very long speeches, are extemporaneous and he doesn't write them. He makes them up as he goes along. And he's extremely good at that. In fact, I think he's better at that than he is at the prepared speech.

**Allen:** What are the particular problems that you have found in writing jokes for President Carter's type of delivery? What type of joke works best for him and what doesn't?

**Doolittle:** Well, I've found that very brief one line jokes seem to work best. He never said that, but he would just look them over and make himself little notes on a 3 X 5 card---\$50 rebate, tree house---just a word or two to remind him of the thing. If the joke were a two part kind of thing, where you had to set it up, and then came the punch line, say, he would sometimes get it wrong. He would sometimes forget the set up or remember the set up and forget to say the punch line—or some damn thing. So, if it was all in one thing.....the ideal one liner is Hinny Youngman's old joke He said, "Take my wife, please." The difficulty---he did the humorous stuff always very well, but when he did have difficulty it was usually, in my judgment, from not having taken it seriously enough and he would just glance at it at the last minute and just sort of committed it partially to memory. And he should have committed it to memory because that sort of thing is better ad libed. I think he would have been better advised, perhaps he did, but I doubt it, to have gone through the thing in his head three or four times and get the order of things, the choice of words, better fixed in his memory. He would occasionally drop a word or a line which meant losing the sense of the point of the joke.

**Allen:** I have a couple of references to jokes the President has used. I thought I would ask you about them and see if you could sketch in the background of how you got the idea, and then perhaps do a little summary of the joke. When addressing a group of celebrities, Fred Astaire, and others, at the White House recently, the President joked about entertainers, politicians and the world's oldest profession.

**Doolittle:** I don't know anything about that. I remember I saw it, but it wasn't from me.

**Allen:** Do you remember after the Camp David summit the President said that the first thing that his mother had asked him was if Sadat was married? Do you remember any background to that?

**Doolittle:** No, I don't remember.

**Allen:** What about.....I may have picked all the wrong ones. At the DNC fundraiser in October the President told the story of Miss Lillian's definition of white lies in that interview with the reporter. That was something he came up with.

**Doolittle:** Yeh. It must have been

**Allen:** You don't remember that? And the President's jokes about GSA scandals when he was in North Carolina?

**Doolittle:** Those were probably mine. What was that about...the cops and GSA?

**Allen:** Something about the 42...babble, babble.

**Doolittle:** Something like that. Yeh, those were mine. I don't remember the process, but there was a time when the GSA stuff was all over the front pages, and uh, I don't think you can dissect the process. I was just trying to think of something humorous you can say about the general theory of GSA employees being crooked.

**Allen:** Can you recount for the record, you have the reputation of being the President's joke writer and I would like to get you to tell one joke for the permanent record if you can think of one that the President has used and liked that you can reconstruct.

**Doolittle:** Well, uh....

**Allen:** I've sprung this on you. I'm sorry, I should have warned you.

**Doolittle:** Let's see if I can remember one in particular. Oh yeh, I could have come up with a whole pot full of them, I guess. I'm trying to reconstruct this a little bit. There was a dinner, a roast or something like that, for Tip O'Neil back last winter, I guess it was. It was at the time when there was all that flap about Congressman Alberg up in Philadelphia who did or didn't or whatever...exert improper pressure on the President, or the President did or didn't exert improper pressure on the Justice Department to side track the investigation on Alberg and fire the Republican US attorney up there who had started those investigations, a guy named Marsden. All of these things, of course, lose their flavor if they are removed from context, but anyway, I submitted this thing. He did use them about how he really did owe a lot to Tip O'Neil, being his mentor. He came to an unfamiliar city. None of us knew very much about the town at first and, in fact, it was a matter of some months before a lot of us even learned where Pennsylvania Street is. Then we went into some sort of routine about how helpful Tip had been, helping out congressional relations. Just the other day he came in and said, Mr. President, you have to be more responsive to phone calls. With members of congress you've got to be more open and receptive to these things. I know it is bothersome and there are a lot of them there, but I think it will really pay dividends with the legislative program, and the next call I got was from up in Philadelphia. I can't remember all those things. The one about Pennsylvania Street I stole from Mark Russell. I called him up later and said Mark I stole this joke from you, and he said, "Hell, that's all right. I stole it from Hamilton myself."

**Allen:** [laughs] Well, thank you for that. Were there other types of things that you worked on in addition to speeches and some jokes? Were there other writings?

**Doolittle:** Oh yeh, I was the author of the 1977 White Cane Safety Day proclamation.

**Allen:** [laughs] What is that?

**Doolittle:** Well, that's the day in which we all pause to do honor to the white cane with which the blind pass their way through life and there are a lot of these congressionally mandated days. There is something called National Architectural Barriers Week, I think, and White Cane Safety Day.

**Allen:** We erected a couple of chairs on top of each other in our office to commemorate that day.  
[laughs]

**Doolittle:** We had a handicapped person try to get into...I don't know.....there is a common stream to them, most of which are luckily drafted initially by OMB, I believe, and then we get them down and slice them up and put them together again. Although there is one event every year, I can't remember what it is, but it falls on the birthday of Rick Hertzberg's sister, and so whatever that proclamation is, he has done it for both years. He tries to work in, he tries to write it so that the first letters of each word or each sentence, whatever, spells out his sister's name.  
[Allen laughs] But normally everybody tries to run away from those assignments, but he likes to do that particular one. [Allen laughs] And we do what we like to call "*crocker*", whenever Elvis Presley dies or congressman so in so dies...a statement of accomplishments, condolences, regrets, and whatnot. I did the one on Elvis Presley. Initially I thought it was a poor idea to do because you never know who else might be more worthwhile and die the next day, and where do you draw the line on it? As a matter of fact, Groucho Marx, who was infinitely more deserving, did die a few days later and we didn't do a *crocker* on him. But Rex Granum said they were getting a lot of calls in the press office, and they wanted one, so I did one with the idea in mind that it would be the sort of *crocker* that would kill the idea of doing a *crocker* for Elvis Presley--- I leaned heavily on his military services as a truck driver in the motor pool in Germany and things like that---a humble young man from obscure beginnings who nevertheless went off to serve his country without complaint at the very height of his fame and fortune as a truck driver in the German motor pool. Anyway, that didn't work as I had planned. Rex still insisted on doing a *crocker* so Rick Hertzburg finally did one.

**Allen:** [laughs] Did you find that among the President's notes was who's the king and why?

**Doolittle:** I don't think it got that far. It just got to Rex. The proclamations or the obituary notices sort of. We edit letters to heads of state. We edit all kinds of stuff that goes up to the hill....notifications of transmittal letters, protocol, the Treaty of *Prolotellotel* or something. We try to impose a measure of linguistic order on these things.

**Allen:** What are the skills that you use? Do you use primarily your grammar skills? Are you primarily interested in expressing ideas clearly? What are the skills you use in your writing?

**Doolittle:** Editing simplification. It's not grammar. Grammar is a given. It is not a given in what we receive, but it should be a given in what we produce. Grammar is just the usual rails on which words travel....hoping the brain receives the same signal in a predictable way and words follow each other in a pattern that doesn't shock you too much.

**Allen:** Nicely said.

**Doolittle:** But, what we would do is uh....what, the skills.....I don't know, just uh....? The principle skill ought to be.... that of writing simple, clear English under pressure and in a great hurry...which is much rarer than it ought to be as a skill. A lot of the day to day stuff, the proclamations and the this and that, are I guess matters of editing.

**Allen:** for grammar or?

**Doolittle:**....of taking something and shaking it until all the chaff escapes and what you have left with is what little kernel might be there...the points too important to be left out. The less people are able to write, the longer they write. It's harder....it's a truism, but a true truism that it is harder to write short than to write long. We try to compress.

**Allen:** Did you have special instructions to use simple language?

**Doolittle:** Well, Jim would occasionally pass on that kind of thing. There was sort of an understanding from the President at the beginning and the President sometimes does cut out words for people to understand, but not with any great consistency. Often he'll write in "minimize or lessen". He will add Latinate words rather than remove them. He has a great tendency to use two verbs or two nouns where one would suffice. When you want we must oppose our enemies, he has a tendency to say "We must oppose and resist our enemies and adversaries." So he on the one hand wants simple writing, but on the other hand sometimes contributes to greater complexity in writing.

**Allen:** You've been here since the beginning of the administration, so you've had really two full years of experience in the Carter administration. Are there other things you would like to say about your experiences here at particular times, like Camp David...particular high times here that you remember?

**Doolittle:** The only speech writer that ever set foot in Camp David in this administration was Jim. I think he was up there briefly during the preparation of the inflation speech or something. No, it was at the end of Camp David....the Middle East meeting. But we uh...the speech writers have played a much smaller role in this White House than we usually have. It's usually small, but it's been smaller this time, but we very seldom meet with the President. It has been a major problem all along, finding out what he wants to say when he gives a speech. We very, very seldom ever get any substantial guidance from him. There has never been anything like what was apparently routine in the Roosevelt days or routine in the Nixon days when it was apparently routine when they would sit around the table with the president for two or three hours and they would thrash out the prose and they would argue things back and forth. He may involve himself in that sort of process, but if he does, it is just with himself or with somebody other than us. He just takes what we assign and goes and does what he wants without further consultation with us. Roosevelt used to do it very differently, according to the people who wrote for him.

Eisenhower, I don't know much about how he did, but I think probably he was fairly closely involved in the process of speechwriting. Johnson, again, I don't know. I have no feeling for how that worked. Ford met frequently apparently with his speech writers although his guidance on substance was apparently not too helpful, but he uh.....that was partly because he gave so damn many speeches. He gave vastly more than Carter.

**Allen:** Hmmmm.

**Doolittle:** I don't know how it would work if you looked at their schedules, but Ford's chief speech writer...I had lunch with him a while ago..... said he did something like 2000 speeches in two years, or some incredible figure like that...far more than we did, in large measure because a lot of the things that most presidents would require a prepared text for, President Carter could toss off the top of his head.

**Allen:** Are there other observations which you would like to make?

**Doolittle:** Oh, I can't think of any. I have wished all along that there could have been more attention paid to the uses of the spoken word. I thought there was a tendency to relive the primary days when he was getting the nomination very successfully by going out and talking--- and talking extemporaneously in most cases. If you won a prize as substantial, considerable, illusive and as difficult in attainment as the presidency is by use of your tongue, you have a tendency to continue talking and dealing with speeches in about the same way that you did at that time in your career and I think the purpose and function of the speech, once you become president, is very different from that of a man trying to be president. It's OK on the campaign trail where you are meeting strangers every day that you want to win over to give them the same speech, for example.....the stump speech with variations to it because you are trying to present yourself and introduce yourself to people who have never seen you before and may well never see you again. You're on sort of an extended selling tour with a new audience every time. The only permanent audience you have is the press corps and your own staff and they grant you their highest praise and become numb all over after having heard the stump speech for the 200<sup>th</sup> time, but to most of the folks listening to it, it is new and therefore effective. But when you become president, in effect, the whole world becomes like the press corps and like your own staff and you talk to such a vastly greater number of people when you get on TV in prime time, you are reaching sixty million people or whatever the audiences figures are, and they've all heard you say this and that about a question. Well, that bows that particular approach to a question and the next time you've got to find another, if you want them to sit up and pay attention. Repetition of the sort that was effective in the campaign is no longer effective when you have a nationwide audience for everything you say and open your mouth. I thought there was never a careful thinking through of the sort of ratification process that public opinion is subject to in the United States. It's like the uh....well, to give a somewhat different example, and then we'll move on to the other one....uh, uh, say... let's see, how did it go? [pause] I was thinking of that alleged episode with Hamilton and the wife of the Egyptian ambassador.

**Allen:** The pyramids?

**Doolittle:** Yeh, the pyramids thing. That began in *The Ear* column, it seems to me. The remark, if a remark there was, I don't know, was at a dinner where a lot of newspaper people and TV people were present. Barbara Walters, I think, was giving the party. This little item of blind gossip came out in *The Ear*, it seems to me it was *The Ear* first, about which top presidential aide...a Nile ambassador and something, I don't know, I can't remember. So that was it, just a little item which would have gone away, but then the little item was picked up on by Sally Quinn several days later in the conclusion at the very end of a long, long article on Hamilton and the Carter people in general and how they were not fitting in with the social scene in Washington, and some such nonsense, and how they failed to realize that most of Washington's business was done at cocktail parties and receptions. Of course, most of this stuff is total hogwash, but presumably Sally Quinn believes it, so that means the *Washington Post* does. In any event, the story came to an end and it threw in in an anecdotal way this business with Hamilton and it named him and it named the ambassador's wife. Well, still nobody paid very much attention to it because it had not yet become totally legitimized and in the *New York Times*. Now, it has jumped from *The Ear* to Sally Quinn, who is a sort of high level gossip writer, a little higher than *The Ear*, perhaps, because she has longer space...more inches at her disposal there. Well, now it has become semi-legitimized, but not completely and somebody at the *Times*, which was, of course, sitting around dying to print the God damn thing but they felt it was beneath their dignity, but now it's been surfaced by the *Washington Post* and somebody there said "Hey, ya think we oughta do something about this Hamilton Jordan and the Egyptian ambassador's wife?" and Abe Rosenthal thought "No, that's not the type of thing the *Times* prints" and whoever it is, somebody else said "But Abe, wait a minute, you are absolutely right there but I think we are dealing with something more than chit chat there. What we're dealing with is, after all, what you would consider and I certainly would, is a terrible breach of diplomatic protocol, and an affront and something that might very easily have harmful effects on this country's negotiations for Middle East peace, don't you think, Abe?" and then finally they talked themselves into writing this piece of gossip and then they call up the Egyptian ambassador and say "Are you offended, sir, at this apparent breach of diplomatic protocol?" And he said "No, no, in my country there is a saying that he who repeats bad stories is the one who you should hit in the mouth." He did say something like that to Sally Quinn, I think.

**Allen:** [laughs]

**Doolittle:** But anyway, by that time is now on page 83 or something of the *Times*. The *Times* still does not have the guts to put it on page one because it has kind of a gossipy ring to it, but it has made the *Times* and at that time it becomes OK for the bubble heads on television to talk about it because it has appeared in the *Times* and has now become news somehow....and now it becomes a national treasure. But something of this process occurs in a presidential speech. You're not speaking to the people who are there. The two thousand people there mean nothing if you are the president of the United States. You can't waste your time talking to 2000 people---

you've got 220,000,000 of them out there. So, when you talk to the 2000 people, that particular act is unimportant. A little bit of what you say, maybe 20 seconds, is going to get on the 7:00 or 11:00 news, so it should be crafted so that there will be one or two things there that the TV people will find interesting enough to put on the news, so instead of the 2000 people, you are now talking to the audience for the news that night. In order to get this to happen, you have to have, as we so often have not had, advanced text of the thing so these guys know when to turn their cameras on instead of filming the whole damn thing so they can notify their desk back in New York that he has interesting stuff to say about airline safety or something.

So, you play it first for the little snippet that appears in the news, but what you are really searching for in the long run, is not the oral presentation of the speech at all, but its written form, the transcript of the speech the *New York Times* runs, the transcript that you pass out to reporters because they will look at this thing and ponder over it and come up with whatever their best collective judgment is about whether what the President is saying anything important or not, or new or not, or good or not, or whatnot. At any event, they will pass their collegial decision on what has happened here and in a day or two editorials will appear that says that the President's new airline safety program shows his far sighted qualities and what a great leader he is or it's a another piece of crap from the yoyo in Georgia and it is what we have come to expect. They pass whatever judgment they have to pass and at that point, whatever it is, has become legitimized to the TV guys who are the big speaker. They are the bull horn that disseminates it to the country but they accept their judgment in most cases from the columnists, the editorialists of the printed page and those are, or ought to be, the audience in a speech instead of trying to get people up on their feet and cheering, stomping and everything. They're not trying to create an emotional effect unless it is a political rally or something. You should be trying to build an argument that will persuade the written press to create a climate of opinion which will influence the television guys. They will start attaching words like far-sighted to your air force safety program instead of unimaginative. I never thought that that process of slow ratification, of legitimization, by the written press was fully understood. I think no one has thought through what you hope to accomplish in various types of speeches given by the president and how you can best get there. I mean that's my feeling on the largest single structural shortcoming in the speech writing operation.

**Allen:** Huh! Thank you. That gives a nice perspective and some helpful understanding, perhaps. Can I ask you for a permanent address where we can find you six or seven years from now?

**Doolittle:** You can find me at Route 7, West Cornwell, Conn., 06796, which is my address now, was my address. And will continue to be my address.

**Allen:** Thank you so much for taking the time to come down. I appreciate it.