

Exit Interview with Dennis Fitzgibbons, Intern, Jerry Rafshoon's Office of Communications

Interviewer: Lee Johnson, Presidential Papers Staff

January 31, 1979, Room 492, Old Executive Office Building

Transcriber: Lyn B. Kirkland

Johnson: It is January 31st, 1979, we're in room 492 of the Old Executive Office Building. Today I'm interviewing Dennis Fitzgibbons, who was an intern with Jerry Rafshoon's office, the Office for Communications. My name is Lee Johnson.

Alrighty. Let me just check to see... why don't you say something into the microphone?

Fitzgibbons: Well, ok.

Johnson: Ok, try it again, talk a little bit louder.

Fitzgibbons: Alright. Well, in 1976, there were a lot of elections.

Johnson: There certainly were.

Fitzgibbons: How's it coming along?

Johnson: I think, I think it's ok. I think it's alright. Let's, let's just start out with some questions about your background.

Fitzgibbons: Ok

Johnson: Were you involved in the area of communications before you came to the White House?

Fitzgibbons: Newspaper work, yeah. In what capacity I guess would be the next question.

Johnson: Yeah, sure.

Fitzgibbons: And, see, well I'm a recent, I just graduated from college last June. During my senior year and for a few months following graduation I worked on and finished up a book, it's a restaurant guide to Boston for one of the newspapers there.

Johnson: Uh huh.

Fitzgibbons: And, again, I did a lot of things. I did some freelance newspaper stuff throughout college, just travel articles. Worked on a travel guide series with the student newspaper. Things like that.

Johnson: What college was this?

Fitzgibbons: It was Harvard.

Johnson: At Harvard. Did you, were you ever involved in speech writing?

Fitzgibbons: No.

Johnson: Specifically?

Fitzgibbons: No, never. I had written one address, well, not address, it, well, it was a paper that I delivered at a convention, a popular culture association convention, but that was a few years ago. That's the only, that's the closest thing I have ever done to a speech. It really wasn't as much a speech as a sort of a lecture.

Johnson: How did you happen to come here?

Fitzgibbons: Blind luck. Lot of just chance really. What happened was I finished up the restaurant guide the first week of August and then I spent the next month pointing yo-yo up and down the east coast and I happened to have a series of rides that ended in Washington and I had no immediate plans. I had no job so I figured while I down here I might as well just look for work, so I just called up everyone I knew to find out what was up and got this opening in the speech writers office.

Johnson: Was there a particular person in the office who hired you?

Fitzgibbons: Yes, it would be Jim Fallows.

Johnson: Ok, and you took, and you had known him before?

Fitzgibbons: No, I'd never met him.

Johnson: How did you happen to get his name? Was just, was it a blind call or ...?

Fitzgibbons: Through friends. There was an intern working in his office that I knew and he said, you know, there's going to be an opening here, why don't you come on in, so I did.

Johnson: Was he familiar with anything you had done, was he..?

Fitzgibbons: No, not until he had met me.

Johnson: Was...Did you turn over some, a piece of work or something for him?

Fitzgibbons: Yeah. What happened, we just met briefly, talked about 15 minutes, maybe a half hour and I was totally unprepared for the job search when I got here since I was basically just a bum at the time, or just trekking it, [Johnson laughs] traveling around and he said, well you

know, sounds great. All we need to see is a writing sample. So I went back to Boston where all my stuff was stored and dug up some writing samples, sent them down and then just called back about two weeks later and he said “Yeah, come on down.” So I ended up here.

Johnson: So that was that. And was the date of, what was the exact day you came on?

Fitzgibbons: I believe it was September 20th. It was like a day or two after Camp David. I know that, I think it was the 20th.

Johnson: Uh huh, uh huh. You, I take it from the answers you’ve given me, well, let me ask them. Did you work on the campaign at all?

Fitzgibbons: No.

Johnson: You were not involved in the transition either?

Fitzgibbons: No, not at all. I was non-political at the time. Only because I had a, I was in the middle of a year off from school and I was not working anywhere where I was plugged into the local politics or anything. I did have a number of friends on the campaign. No one significant, but... Mostly, you know, local organizers. People in Ohio, from Cleveland. Lot of people from Cleveland.

Johnson: You’re from Ohio?

Fitzgibbons: Yeah.

Johnson: I see, you just went to school in Boston.

Fitzgibbons: Right.

Johnson: But you were originally from Cleveland?

Fitzgibbons: Uh huh.

Johnson: We won’t make any comments on Cleveland right now. Save those for off the record.

Fitzgibbon: I’ll defend Cleveland but not, not its mayor.

Johnson: [Laughs] OK. Let’s get into things that you’re doing or did do on a daily basis, what were your primary responsibilities?

Fitzgibbons: That’s a very good question. It was never really clear. It was just sort of a question of being, of things being passed along to me. I did, I did a lot of writing but it incred- was mostly stuff that Jim would just pass along. You know, I was fortunate to get here at a time when he, when he knew he was leaving, cause I got quite a bit to do that he was willing, you

know, I guess he trusted my abilities and he was willing to pass on quite a bit to me. I did a number of things, you know, everything from receptions to religious leaders to, you know, some signing statements, veto messages, edit- a lot of editing, fair amount of writing, a number of cam- a number of the stump speech, well, the stump appearances, since there was really just one stump speech they used over and over again.

Johnson: Right.

Fitzgibbons: There was like a, all we had to write would be a third of it, local color, local jokes, local candidates.

Johnson: This got me a bit ahead of some of the questions I was going to ask, but since you talked about writing, are there, were there particular things that you wrote that you saw incorporated in a final presidential statement?

Fitzgibbons: Uh, well, yeah, there...I'm trying to think of things, there was, well, a lot of the things I, I wrote were delivered. There was Leontyne Price... her appearance. Quite a bit of, of the stump speeches, the stump stuff was, was used with Carter, you know, a sentence here, a sentence there. Couple of jokes here and there. A joke or two that he missed, that he blew.

Johnson: That you had done yourself?

Fitzgibbons: Yeah. [Laughs] Other stuff. There were, I re-wrote and edited quite a bit of the veto message. The public works veto message and I get, from what I heard that went through with one minor change after all the reworking I'd done. Thanksgiving Day proclamation. One or two other proclamations which don't seem to me to have been very momentous, because I can't remember them. You know, a couple of "croakers," the obituary statements, things like that. Wasn't, there was really nothing all that significant. I mean to say, nothing from the inflation speech, the State of the Union that I had written that actually made it into the final draft.

Johnson: Did you, did you say that a good deal of this was only after Jim said he was leaving or did you have these kinds of responsibilities before?

Fitzgibbons: Well, I came on at a time when Jim had already announced that he was leaving.

Johnson: Announced, yeah, yeah.

Fitzgibbons: So that was, that was just given and so I was fortunate, for one thing, to come on at a time, in the fall, there was quite a bit going on. There was Camp, you know, Camp David and every, and public appearances afterwards and then the inflation speech and appearances following. The elections, and the calls of congress. Those 190 pieces of legislation that they sent over here and a statement had to be drafted on each and every one.

Johnson: Right.

Fitzgibbons: So that was quite a bit of work for me to do and also, and so I was fortunate to be here at that particular time and also Jim was kind of fed up. Just sort of tired of the routine. It was fresh to me so he was perfectly happy to pass along stuff to me, to do. I was at the right place at the right time in more, in many ways.

Johnson: Yeah. I take from the responses you have given me that you worked pretty closely with Jim. Now, were you assigned to him specifically or did you also work with the other speech writers?

Fitzgibbons: It was, yeah, it was with all the speech writers. I worked with everyone, but you know, Jim was the titular head and also the, I guess the administrator for the office. He would give out the assignments, so inevitably I was working with him. But those, it was not, and I'm sure you have heard this from other people, we've talked enough, he was very informal. There was definite, you know, team spirit. It was a great place to work when he was around.

Johnson: Did you, did you have particular subject areas that, things that were channeled to you where they said, Dennis is, Dennis knows more about this, we'll put him on this one?

Fitzgibbons: Not really. About the only thing that I was assigned because I might have been better informed than anyone else was the, were the appearances in Massachusetts because I had been there for six years.

Johnson: Geographical.

Fitzgibbons: Yeah.

Johnson: Were there, how many other people were in, well, of course, you were an intern?

Fitzgibbons: Right.

Johnson: How many other people were doing similar work to you in the office?

Fitzgibbons: You know I did probably, my duties actually were those of a full-fledged speech writer. I had as much to do as anyone else.

Johnson: Hmm.

Fitzgibbons: And things were, the things I did were as important as those that other people were doing with the exception of obviously the inflation speech, you know, the big televised things. That, you know, of the big events that have occurred since I have been here, what? Inflation, State of the Union, the Memphis address, you know, and China. Those are the things, you, four, huge things that no one else, I mean that obviously it is not really only one person that is going to

do those, the big things I mean. They were written, of course, by committee, but there was one person overseeing the whole thing.

Johnson: On a, let's say a mid-level speech, if we put it that way, was it usually one person pretty much did it from beginning to end?

Fitzgibbons: Yes.

Johnson: Or did it, was there is a lot of input back and forth?

Fitzgibbons: Not all that much input. It just went, mostly went, writer to Jim. At least in my case, Jim I think looked over just about everything.

Johnson: OK. He form, he did basically review everybody's work.

Fitzgibbons: Yeah, I think so...

Johnson: Before it went out.

Fitzgibbons: With comments, et cetera. Other people would look at it but it was a question, mostly a question of soliciting comments. I mean, though if somebody, you know, I, well, I would look over other things and if I found, if you know, say, a factual error or something I would mention it, put it on. There really wasn't much in the way of a constant give and take about the copy. Since it was all pretty much company line, there weren't many things, you know, with the exception of those, of the major speeches where they, you know, where a new policy had to be hammered out. I would know what to write just from what had accumulated on the subject in the past. I mean, you know.

Johnson: Sure.

Fitzgibbon: The standard line on Camp David, these two great leaders, you know, and on the inflation speech, the five points and...

Johnson: Ok, you said that you kind of knew what to write. Let's say you are getting into an area that's reasona-, relatively fresh, what, what are your sources of information? Where did you go to find out what you wanted to?

Fitzgibbons: First place would be a relevant, I guess, they'd be the liaison people within the White House, meaning the people deal with a certain agency. Someone on the Domestic Policy Council, the National Security Council, Congressional Liaison. If it's, if it was someone, if it was a reception where it would be significant to members of Congress. Most of the stuff were done in house over the phone. The basic policy. Beyond that, you know, details and color and things to "Georgia-fy" the speech. [Johnson laughs.] And let's say, if, what other pres-, if it was a head of state, you know, what other presidents had said. You know, the reference center would check

biographical sources for little stories, anecdotes. Occasionally, you know, someone at the NSC would know, would know a lot about the individual, just call them up. In terms of solid information, it really wasn't... Well the policy, let's put it that way, the policy for just about everything I saw except for the new, for the formulation of very new and you know, substantially, substantial programs, inflation obviously, just came from in house and could be summarized in two or three lines. The sub-cabinet officials briefing which I did, was a little bit different. Because Carter never, he, Carter convened like 1500-2000 of the top agency personnel throughout the government and, but I was just basically working with Jack Watson's staff and just deciding what kind of image we wanted Carter to project.

Johnson: Now, you, do you, you prepared what, briefing papers of some sort? Is that it?

Fitzgibbons: Well, mostly talking points.

Johnson: And then you would deliver them to someone. You delivered them to someone to present before these meetings. Is that it or...?

Fitzgibbons: I'm not sure what you mean.

Johnson: You said you had these sub-cabinet briefings.

Fitzgibbons: Right.

Johnson: You worked on them, now -

Fitzgibbons: Right.

Johnson: You worked up talking points and then they were just sent over to people with Jack Watson's people -

Fitzgibbons: Yeah.

Johnson: - and when they met, so after that you, once you'd put those talking points together you were kind of out of it. You just sent them over to Watson.

Fitzgibbons: Yeah. Well, what it was, we just, I worked with, well, Gene Eisenberg and Gene and I just met for about an hour to discuss what we thought should go in, compared notes, compared drafts. He just gave me the stuff and said, you know, "I have no pride in authorship. Go ahead and write what you want." So I wrote it up. You know, we'd settled, we'd agreed on what should go in it and all I did was, you know, show it to other people in, like Jim and Rick Hertzberg and they said it looks fine, looks good, whatever. And then from us, it would go directly, it went, we took it over to Rick Hutchinson and then directly to the President and I would just send copies for information to Watson's people. And that was true of a, of a number of other things. You know, for the stump speeches it would go to Congressional Liaison people

and, in Minnesota, you know, when we did Minnesota, I was very lucky. I got real, two real plum states where there were important races, Minnesota and Massachusetts. There we see, you know, well, in Massachusetts we won four and didn't lose one and in Minnesota we didn't win one and lost them all.

Johnson: Bombed out.

Fitzgibbons: But, yeah, for Minnesota we sent Mondale's people. They were supposedly familiar with it. And of course they didn't- Mondale's people. It's funny. Achsah Ne- Actually there were two Minnesota appearances. Achsah Nesmith worked on one and I worked on the other. They tore Achsah's stuff apart, made her put in all sorts of stuff and made her take it out. After double checking it they realized it was all wrong. And the guy who is in charge of handling all this and is now in charge of our office, that's Bernie Erinson.

Johnson: Right.

Fitzgibbons: [Laughs] And they didn't mess one bit, not, he didn't even touch my copy. You know, he said, this is fine. And I really wasn't quite sure what to make of that. [Johnson laughs.] But, yeah, we would just send it, mostly for information, to the relevant people since these were not incredibly important appearances and there wasn't all that much in them that could be controversial. Through, the induction of Ed King could have been controversial, but that was the sort of thing that really had to be left up to Carter himself to decide what he was going to say in the last minute, getting a better feel from the people closer to the scene. I mean I would, you know, I would talk to, I mean, in preparing the stump speeches I would talk for an hour at a time with people in Massachusetts, you know, just getting the basic background, but we were preparing, you know, a week in advance and the deadline on the stump speech stuff was usually like five days before it actually went, so, you know, so many things could happen in between. With Ed King was making dumb statements, about, you know, such and such, and Bob Schroyden in Minnesota, was just screaming it out of the mouth, it was.

Johnson: Yeah, yeah.

Fitzgibbon: So that, much of that stuff had to wait until the last minute and the advance people, of course, sent in their own briefing, briefing papers.

Johnson: Right. Did you, did you accompany the President on any of these...?

Fitzgibbons: No.

Johnson: Trips?

Fitzgibbons: No.

Johnson: Did you, did you ever on any of these advance kind of things? You were pretty much based here then?

Fitzgibbons: Yeah, yeah. And I didn't, that was fine with me. I really didn't have any delusions of grandeur when I came in. [Johnson laughs.] I was, you know, just sort of shocked to find myself here.

Johnson: Yeah, yeah.

Fitzgibbons: Surprised and fun.

Johnson: Let me follow up on that a little bit. You said you worked pretty much directly for and with Jim Fallows but you also worked with the other people in the office. What, what kind of contact did you have, let's say, with either Greg Schneiders or Jerry Rafshoon? Did you deal with them at all?

Fitzgibbons: Not at all until Jim left. Well, hardly at all.

Johnson: Uh huh.

Fitzgibbons: You know, copies of the stuff would go to them but that would be about it. And Rafshoon would give the company line, the new company line, the three- I'm sure you've heard about the three "E's" and the catch phrases that came up during the fall. That would come to us from Jerry through Jim.

Johnson: Did you ever, you didn't meet directly with either of them?

Fitzgibbons: Oh, yeah.

Johnson: You did?

Fitzgibbons: Yeah. On a couple of occasions.

Johnson: Now, what-

Fitzgibbons: But mostly in the whole group, whole speech writing group.

Johnson: OK, so you would be summoned as a, in a body to discuss directions and policy and kinds of things, kinds of points that you were focusing on?

Fitzgibbons: Yeah. That would be it.

Johnson: But you didn't have too much direct contact individually with either one?

Fitzgibbons: No. Some, I have more with Gregg now, that is mostly again in the context of meetings both before and after, just chasing down, running down facts and checking things, but I haven't really worked with him at all.

Johnson: Going, following that up, did you see any particular changes in your duties after Rafshoon took over, after the communications office was set up?

Fitzgibbons: I would say changes were more, occurred when Jim left. I came on after the communications office had been set up.

Johnson: I see, that's, ok.

Fitzgibbons: And when Jim left, of course, there was no more chief speech writer. There was now an executive speech writer and a deputy to Rafshoon who took over Jim, many of Jim's assignment and administrative duties.

Johnson: Maybe it would be a more informative kind of answer if I, if I put the question this way. What do you see the differences in duties and responsibilities of people in the office under Erinson, as opposed to the way it was under Fallows?

Fitzgibbons: Erinson is tougher to work with.

Johnson: OK.

Fitzgibbons: He is pickier, he's prissier. I think when came he on, of course, and I think part of that is being new to the job and enthusiastic and excited. You know, he was getting his fingers into everything and I imagine, not having been around when Jim first came on it may have been that he was like that too, but just decided that it just wasn't worth it after a while because the changes were ultimately marginal. And since Carter still does so much of his speaking off the top of his head it's really not that important to get the precise language. It's been, Bernie's in sort of, I think, has been in sort of a tough position. I am not sure what he expected. I think that he kind of expected that he would have more responsibility, more authority than he has. It's tough for him because he has the title as the head of the office, but it was really st-, it's really Schneiders and Rafshoon who are running things.

Johnson: Uh huh, uh huh.

Fitzgibbons: There have been some problems with egos conflicting. Bernie, I guess, has probably felt he should have been consulted on some things when he wasn't. I mean they ask people to look over drafts, so it's, which appeared to Bernie as if they were circumventing him, but I've tried to stay clear of that dispute, of any disputes, because I am only going to be here a short time. And, yeah.

Johnson: So, let me ask you this. I think this ties in with, with what you have just been saying. What is, what is your view of the speech writing function in this administration from the time you've been here? How, how important does it appear to you in terms of the overall...?

Fitzgibbons: I don't think very important at all. In terms of policy it's totally extraneous, but I'm, well I should say, the office of the speech writers going no farther than our corner of the EOB which does not include Rafshoon and Schneiders. It's, it's really totally extraneous, since the company line is decided by Rafshoon, you know, the phrases, what we use. It is important though, extremely important, to Rafshoon's job. And it's been an excellent, well, personal benefits, it's been an excellent vantage point since we are in charge of disseminating the company line. We post it on just about every, on the end result of things that happen, of policy discussions even though being posted could mean just that, you know, Rafshoon comes down with the word this is how we are going to deal with this issue, as what we say about it. And since the speech writers' office doesn't, we handle more than just speeches, just about every public pronouncement that the President makes goes through the office, you know, letters to heads of state come through for editing, the proclamations, the signing statements, veto messages, obituaries, you know. Since all that goes through the office to be put into English since much of it is written by lawyers and is not in English, almost by definition. Well, I, for those reasons, it's been a great vantage point, learning, well seeing from a position somewhat on the inside of what goes on. But not, Carter's not all that good a speaker and from what I have heard from people that have been with him a long time, he refuses to change his speaking style. Maybe the speech writers, if they were given the opportunity to work on something in that direction, could be of value. But I really don't think it takes anyone especially gifted or someone with special talents in writing speeches to work in the office. It's very easy to get, it was very easy to pick up the basics by the Carter's speech. Now it's much tougher to continually turn out that stuff because of the parameters, the, you know, borders, on what we can write were so narrow, not just for policy reasons but because of his speech patterns and the types of stories and things he would say. Short declarative sentences.

Johnson: Yeah.

Fitzgibbons: Things like that.

Johnson: Did you, you mentioned the different things that you did other than speech writing or speech writing related kinds of things, what other responsibilities were you involved in, either you personally or the office?

Fitzgibbons: Letters to heads of state would come down from the National Security Council. As I said, the statements on legislation, and that means both before the proposed legislation goes up to the Hill and when it comes back. Proclamations. Thanksgiving Day, as Jim said on the Tom Snyder show, General Pulaski Day, National Joggers Week, 10-4 Day. [Johnson laughs.] Kind of

insignificant stuff but it was occasionally fun to do. The Tribally Controlled Community Colleges Assistance Act of 1978, that was one of the things I did. [Johnson laughs.] National Aquaculture Week. You know it was, there was legislation on aquaculture. I remember one day, we got a proclamation that had to be, it was an immediate turnaround, had to, you know. So I got it and I looked at it and it was a proclamation for something about this, some energy, World Energy Expo 1982. This, it was for 1982 and we had to have it out by the next day in 1978. I didn't quite understand that. [Johnson laughs.] Yeah I did get to work on a public works message. Yeah I did that. In fact, I handled that entirely by myself. Re-wrote some of it. I was happy with that. Just changing what the domestic policy council had written. Taking out the, all the "suches" and "therefores" that the lawyers put in. I'm trying to think of specific things that we did. Just about everything would at least pass through the office for comments, and editing, and revision and then it would go back to whoever had written it and if there was, if they didn't like something that had been changed, we'd hash out our differences, but that rarely occurred since it, since it was just a question of putting things into English and the Carter line on all that was, you know, if I can't read, if I can't understand it then I don't want it to go out under my name. He's not a lawyer. I'm getting down on lawyers here.

Johnson: There must have been some opportunities for humor. Just the way you're talking about it. You said you contributed jokes from time to time. Where did you come up with these jokes?

Fitzgibbons: Well, mostly based on local color, things like that. I'm trying to think of specific jokes that were used. He was addressing 250 religious leaders. That was the first thing that I'd written and he used like the first four sentences, one of which included a joke about keeping his sermon brief, and Carter, he said "in return I'll ask you to do the same on Sunday." And someone screamed out from, these were 250 religious leaders from all over the country, and somebody yelled out, "Saturday too." This is, in the middle of this they're all chanting, "Pass Humphrey Hawkins." And, I went back, it's funny, I went back to, I was walking back from the reception which was in the, it was in the White House, I forget what room, and I passed Jim who was coming over to a meeting and he asked me how goes, how it went, whether or not any of my stuff was used and I said he used about 3 or 4 sentences, this was out of about two pages single spaced that I had written and he said, "Well you know, that's pretty good," so I got, I kind of got the idea of how things worked at that point. [Johnson laughs.] There was another thing, a Red Sox joke I had written for Massachusetts because Tip O'Neal was a fanatic, was a Red Sox fanatic, and Carter placed the Red Sox in the National League when he delivered it, something about... [Johnson laughs.] There were a lot of jokes that came up around that.

There was another, there was another thing, this was tough. Carter was greeting the Friendship Force which is apparently, which is a group that he's been involved with, it's just an exchange group. Americans go live with families in Europe in some town, and people from the town come

and live in their town in the United States. And, this was tough to write jokes because Max Schmeling was on the flight, he was one of the directors of the flight, and there's an anecdote in "Why Not the Best?" about Carter when he's twelve listening to the second Lewis/Schmeling fight, and they'd put the radio like in a window, or out in the backyard to listen to the fight and all the black kids from the neighborhood came around and listened to it intently and of course they were rooting for Schmeling, and, you know, they couldn't go in the house, and Carter in the, in the book, you know, he said his father was almost crushed when Schmeling was almost, you know, when Lewis almost killed Schmeling like in the first round and, so, you know, the fight was over very quickly and they went back to the little black, the black kids, and I guess probably parents with them, walked down a road going back to their house and got about a hundred yards away, and then just bedlam, they started cheering and they were shouting and, so I had to work on, you know, it was tough to work on German jokes without coming, things coming up, especially Schmeling jokes, since, you know, and overtones of Nazism, especially with the Lewis/Schmeling fight, a lot of people, the associations that people would make might be improper. You know it was tough, it's tough to make jokes about Germans and Nazis, I mean, without coming out like Hogan's Heroes. [Johnson laughs.]. I don't, I didn't happen think there was anything funny about a POW camp in Germany in World War II. I-

Johnson: Yeah.

Fitzgibbons: Yeah, so, I think it was something that, that, as it turned out there were two flights, two plane loads coming in. Judy Carter was on that, no wait, anyway, the one that didn't separate. I forget which one it is. I never get the family straight. They were in Berlin; this was a group of West Berliners. They were in Berlin at the time, as it turned out Carter greeted, met them at Dulles, met the first plane at Dulles. Schmeling was not on the first plane, so, you know, it was averted. He used some of the stuff I had written for that. It's not one of the more inspiring things I've done. [Johnson laughs.]

Johnson: I would think, yeah I would think that would be difficult. The newspaper always depicted Jerry Doolittle as the "the" joke writer, but he left.

Fitzgibbons: Well he was.

Johnson: Is that an accurate ...?

Fitzgibbons: Yeah. Jerry could just rattle off five or ten jokes every minute that were, you know, outstanding. And he had a basic standard repertoire. But he was an incredibly funny man. He was also a great man I think in the grand scheme of things. Not only because he had a sense of humor and, and refused to be beaten by anything in his own quiet way. I don't know, I can't remember any Jerry, any jokes Jerry wrote for what I, for things that I had written. Those, the stuff that I do would just be one of two jokes incorporated into the, into the beginning of the text, depending on the occasion.

Johnson: Has the joke mantle been passed on to anyone in particular?

Fitzgibbons: Not really. There's no one in-house that's doing jokes. We go, we have gone outside, at least Bernie has. He's got some guy in a PR firm that writes jokes and other people have friends that write, you know, that are joke people, so. But there is no one in-house.

Johnson: OK. A couple of "big thing" questions.

Fitzgibbons: OK.

Johnson: Not really, just, just standard, no really just standard kind of things. You look back on the time you have been here. Anything in particular give you an immense amount of satisfaction, any particular kind of work or just an overall kind of impression?

Fitzgibbons: Uh, satisfy, personal satisfaction?

Johnson: Well, either, or whatever.

Fitzgibbons: I guess, well, personal satisfaction, I guess, you know, was the first time, you know, I saw, I saw Carter speak and he'd used stuff that I had written. That quickly wore off. The second time I saw him use my stuff I really wasn't too thrilled. Or at least I wasn't as thrilled. The stuff I did for Leontyne Price. That was neat. I mean, that was on PBS nationwide and he stuck pretty close to the text. That I enjoyed. In fact, you know, all the major media, well there was, there was something I had written about Leontyne Price arriving at the White House eleven years before Carter. And there was a joke there about she started practicing when she was at the age of three on a toy piano before her White House performance, you know. I had no way of doing that, something like that. And you know, all the papers used that eleven years thing as the lead on ABC and CBS used it, so, you know, I was writing the evening news leads for everyone. But um.

I was really proud of a thing, the sub-cabinet officials' briefing that I had written. I thought it was really substantive and its tone was something that was really, it was really stern. Sort of a stern lecture. But it's, see, it's very tough to write for Carter because there's sort of this, this is something Jim told me, and so I will use his words, there's sort of this humble, both humble and high at the same time. You know, leader and servant, it's got religious overtones and I thought in the tone of the subcabinet thing that I had done that I had captured that pretty well. The day after the speech Jim came back and said Carter came off very ineffectually and it wasn't good. It seemed like the type of thing that could have been, really could have been Carter gave a stern lecture to bureaucrats. Carter started off by, you know, by giving a joke. It was a pretty good joke, which was more or less, I don't know who wrote it. Doolittle may have written it. Something about all those who want to help me fight inflation raise your hands. [Johnson laughs.] He said the rest of you may leave. But apparently it just didn't come off all that well.

But from what I under- from what Rick Hertzberg told me I'd captured the tone, an aspect of a particular tone, in which Carter speaks very well, comes across rather sort of grim and determined. Much of the off the cuff stuff he did during the campaign was in the same tone. He didn't go for applause lines. But, you know, he's... it's easier... it was easier for him to use that tone when he was running, rather than now. Other satisfaction. I really didn't feel I was that significant, you know, in the grand, in the overall White House scheme of things but that didn't bother me, when I looked at this as an educational experience from the start. And you know, I didn't want to be on the, I didn't want to meet with Hamilton Jordan, or Jody Powell, or Jerry Rafshoon all the time. I still have a basic mistrust of the institution. And I think it's healthy, unlike other people who say "restore faith". Well, that's just basic mistrust large organizations that I've acquired in my various experiences. On the whole, I'd say it was fine.

Johnson: Did you ever meet with the President?

Fitzgibbons: No.

Johnson: Did you ever collectively work with the other speech writers?

Fitzgibbons: No. In fact only, only once since the beginning of the administration has Carter met collectively with his speech writers. I don't think Jerry Doolittle met with him very much. I don't know. Achsah Nesmith occasionally has lunch with him, I know. Fellow George and Jim and Rick and Bernie and you know, others. Well, when you make the trip, I guess you have to meet with him if you're on the road with him, but ah.

Johnson: So, flip the coin over for a second. Anything that you found peculiarly disappointing about your experience while you were here?

Fitzgibbons: Yeah, but nothing in particular. Nothing that I would say is peculiar to this White House; just how huge the job is and how nothing can ever be accomplished. Just because you can't move an inch either way without stepping on five million toes and having five million people screaming, you know, "What are you doing?" I mean, I probably don't have any original, I know I don't have any original insight to this kind of thing, but -

Johnson: Go ahead anyway.

Fitzgibbons: I would say from everything that I have heard about Carter and from what I have read about him he is a decent man. He's, you know, extremely intelligent, obviously very sharp. I mean, I've seen him...the stuff that he delivered that I have written, I know he couldn't have seen it for more than five minutes before he went on and yet he delivered it almost verbatim in some cases. The better, the stuff he liked.

But you know I would, but it is sort of, you know, sort of like I would trust Jimmy Carter with my life, but I wouldn't trust the President with a nickel, because I don't think he as president,

you know, he just doesn't have an opportunity to do everything, I'm sure, that he'd want to. I'm amazed at how tough the job is, you know, and I don't mean tough in the sense of physically demanding. You know, I am sure it is, but that's not what I mean. I mean that there is just so much to do, and to worry about. What else have I found disappointing? I've seen transformations of people who had, I, well, for lack of a better phrase, good liberal credentials into the President's flack, the President's flacks. I don't like to see that. I mean, I can, I understand that there are people that definitely agree with everything that Carter is doing but there are people I know, a number of them, Bernie Erinson for one, who have a background and from people who have known him in previous incarnations, his views are in many ways inimical to the administration. Yet he's been gung ho in the company line

Johnson: He was with Allen Myers at one time, wasn't he?

Fitzgibbons: Yeah, Myers for Democracy. That movement. I guess it's understandable I'm kind of disappointed in that. There seems to be ... a lot of people aren't challenging things. Which, the thing is, the White House, it's funny, of all the experiences I've had in the past, job experiences, work place experiences, this is closest to a bank. [Johnson laughs.] I worked in a bank for about six or eight months and it's closest, of all my impressions of possible, of various jobs, it's closest to, well, it seems to me there's definitely a product and that product is Carter and the Carter line and that product is not formulated just by the President but, you know, there are five hundred people who exist only to serve him.

Johnson: Yeah.

Fitzgibbons: And the goal, the ultimate goal, obviously, is to present him in the best light and get things done for him. And you know, I worked, I happened to work for the president of the bank and you know, I hope, I pray, well, I know, and I would hope and pray that Carter was nothing like this other president that I worked for, and I know he is not. But there are more similarities than differences in the two jobs. Cause there is a hierarchy. There has to be. It's in the nature of the White House, for one thing. There is a pyramid. Definitely there is one man at the top.

Johnson: Yeah.

Fitzgibbons: I would say that's really not so much a disappointment, but it could be if I knew more about the inner workings of what people, what every journalist calls, you know, the inner circle of Georgians. I don't know all that much about them. My only contact is with one. That is with Rafshoon and that's not extensive contact at all. It's very much a business relationship with, say, the people higher up. So one of the reasons I like Fallows so much is that he knew it was a company line job and he would make no bones about it and make the best of it. You know, he has a pers- most, I don't think enough people have a real perspective on it, but it, then again, Fallows says, he sees a lot of people are complacent in holding office as opposed to using their

office to do things and I think that's probably a valid criticism. I haven't seen enough of the top level, the policy making level, to really, you know, to say for myself.

Johnson: Right.

Fitzgibbons: So I can only repeat his observations.

Johnson: Right.

Fitzgibbons: Which are, which are borne out by most of the press accounts, assuming they are accurate.

Johnson: Would you want to be in a position where you were writing speeches again?

Fitzgibbons: Well, it's lucrative. There aren't that many good speech writers around and the pay is real good, but I would rather write for myself. At this point it is the type of thing where it might enable me, speech writing might enable me to find my own voice. Seeing things on the inside is basically is, was the reason I took the job.

Johnson: Yeah. When you say writing, I assume you are speaking of journalistic writing.

Fitzgibbons: Yeah. Right.

Johnson: What are your, do you have any specific plans?

Fitzgibbons: Well, I have a couple of free-lance magazine pieces lined up. I'll do those. I'd like to get newspaper work. I don't know if I can, since that's impossible. I've had nibbles from corporations to write speeches for the chairmen of the board. I don't know if I'm go-, if I would take that except they pay very, very well. And it is the kind of thing I might do for a year and pocket, you know, and take the money and run, you know, that kind of thing. At this point I am really wary of crossing over. There's a line, I think, that if I crossed now, meaning over to sort of this corporate speech writing, corporate world, corporate PR, I'd never be able to cross it again, back from it. It's different from going into government, you know. Since you can always use the government as real life experience. I could look at corporations. Speech writing is real life experience. But journalists aren't too receptive to people who want to go back and I can understand why there is a skepticism because this is a, you do become a flack after a while. But I have no solid plans beyond these two pieces I am going to write in the next month, I hope.

Johnson: I am going to just ask you two more quick mundane things before we finish up. Did you in your office, did you create any files of your own, down there?

Fitzgibbons: Yeah.

Johnson: You do have some files. Ok, we're interested in that, and have you talked with Secretary Annette about where and how they're fitting into the office files and so on?

Fitzgibbons: Yeah, they keep great files and they have all the drafts.

Johnson: Fine.

Fitzgibbons: They have copies and things.

Johnson: Fine.

Fitzgibbons: Well, I think they have all the originals and I have only copies of the-

Johnson: You have a reading file that you'll be taking but nothing else? That's good.

Fitzgibbons: Right.

Johnson: So I don't have to check on that. Secondly, we would like to get an address and a phone number where we can reach you for the record.

Fitzgibbons: Sure.

Johnson: Why don't you just tell me?

Fitzgibbons: I guess the best thing to do is to get my parents because I don't know where I am going to be after a month.

Johnson: OK.

Fitzgibbons: Which would be 1261 Ramona R A M O N A Ave., Lakewood, Ohio, 44107

Johnson: 44107. How did you spell Ramona again?

Fitzgibbons: R A M O N A

Johnson: Just like the woman's name.

Fitzgibbons: Right. For some reason some people spell it R O.

Johnson: Yeah.

Fitzgibbons: And the number there would be 216-226-2841. And, I don't know, I might as well give you my address for at least the next month in Washington, in case something else comes up. And they would at least have a forwarding address if I'm somewhere else. That would be 2142 Newport Place NW, and it's in the District and it is 20037 and it's 296-4706.

Johnson: OK. I'm going to cut this off. [The tape recorder.]