

Exit Interview with Mari Forbes, Special Assistant to Les Francis, Deputy Assistant, Congressional Liaison, Coordination

Interviewer: David Alsobrook, Presidential Papers Staff

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Alsobrook: Interview with Mari Forbes, special assistant to Les Francis, Deputy Assistant Congressional Liaison, Coordination, May 2nd, 1979, 3:00 pm, room 490, Old Executive Office Building, interviewer is David Alsobrook, Presidential Papers Staff.

Alright if you just say “testing testing” so I can see-

Forbes: Testing Testing

Alsobrook: Yeah ok that’s great. First of all, Mari, you’ve worked as a special assistant to Les Francis, right?

Forbes: That’s right.

Alsobrook: How long have you been here?

Forbes: Approximately two and a half years, since the beginning.

Alsobrook: Did you come in with the administration?

Forbes: Yes.

Alsobrook: Do you know your first day at work?

Forbes: Roughly.

Alsobrook: Do you remember the date?

Forbes: I think it was May 1. I had been with Stu Eizenstat for, temporarily for a couple of months before I took on the position with Les Francis.

Alsobrook: What kind of a day was it, that first day on the job?

Forbes: In terms of the, just the general make-up? And how was it?

Alsobrook: Yeah. Just tell me what you remember about it.

Forbes: Not really very much. I was on the campaign so I knew everybody involved in the White House and so I felt very comfortable with it. It was just generally finding where my position within congressional liaison was supposed to fit and, and working with Les and so forth who had been on the campaign but not in Atlanta and I was in Atlanta.

Alsobrook: You had some central...

Forbes: Yeah, I worked on the issues staff with Stu Eizenstat.

Alsobrook: And then from there did you work in transition too?

Forbes: Yes I did.

Alsobrook: What was your role during the transition?

Forbes: During transition I was working with Jack Watson and Barbara Bunn, but officially I was Barbara Bunn's executive assistant, but I was one of the first people on the transition, helping to set it up, literally getting the people on board and so forth and, and who would be on the staff, the transition.

Alsobrook: And so Stu really brought you in to that?

Forbes: Stu really brought me in to that. Yeah, he suggested and recommended me to Jack and soon, I think a day after I got back from Atlanta, I received a phone call from Jack's office asking me to, if I would join the transition that following week, which I did.

Alsobrook: What was that transition experience like?

Forbes: I...That's a difficult question to answer because I felt that although our goals were, were good ones, it was not practical the way that it was set up and it was really an impossible task. We wanted to help too many people and we had too short of a time in which to, to do that in a, in an equitable fashion. We had the Town Inventory Program which everybody is, is, who had anything to do with the new administration coming in was familiar with. We had so many applications that it was very difficult to set it up properly and, and be as responsive as we had originally had in mind. It, compared to the rest of my personal professional career, everything was, was probably one of the more difficult jobs I had in terms of just daily running it and being responsive. I think most people in the transition agree that were another transition to develop for another administration or even this one again if Jimmy Carter were to win again that we would have to take a totally new look at how to go about setting up a transition committee.

Alsobrook: Did you use a computer for that TIP program?

Forbes: They were, yeah, they were used for TIP. I wasn't directly involved with TIP. That was a whole separate entity within the, the transition structure but daily, of course, we were receiving hundreds of resumes and so forth and trying to feed them in. And I think one of the

basic problems, my own personal view, did have to deal with the fact that you had people who had not traditionally worked in Washington coming into Washington, trying to set up this transition and, and be responsive and just did not realize how things work in this town. And jobs in this town overall are word of mouth and who knows whom and, and that may seem unfair to some people, but if you are a Washington person and you know it, you, most people need to have that kind of background in order to, to retain jobs in Washington, let alone just get, get the initial job. And that became clear, I think, to people who had been outside of the city as we, as we went along, but it posed a great many problems.

Alsobrook: So from the transition working with Stu, you began to work for Stu in the White House Domestic Policy staff?

Forbes: Yeah, originally, I, I had not really been desirous of going into the White House. I had formerly been in the Foreign Service and worked for State Department and initially that's where my aim was, to go back to State Department. And so initially I was to do that however the job with, with Les Francis cropped up in the meantime and my security clearance and so forth and I decided to go with that instead.

Alsobrook: So you were just temporarily with Stu Eizenstat?

Forbes: I was temporarily, temporarily with Stu until a decision was made whether I would go with State or if I was going to somewhere else and then that's when this job came up and I decided to go ahead and take that than go with State.

Alsobrook: What were you doing issues in Stu's office before you...?

Forbes: No, I was not. I was... It was just simply a temporary job they put me on until I, I could iron things out so I was generally doing administrative work for him helping Jo Ann Hurley, his special assistant, and doing that, that sort of work in terms of administering staff.

Alsobrook: Now, you've mentioned your Foreign Service career before you came with Les Francis office. Do you feel like that is the one that helped you prepare you for the job that you have with him? Is there any way that you can prepare for a White House job?

Forbes: I think the only way you can prepare for a job in the White House in general is to have a general background of understanding Washington and the way that politics works. I had been in the Foreign Service but I had also worked on the Hill and the combination of those jobs and I think maturity and so forth and my age, helped a great deal. Depends on where one's goals is obviously but I think more than, than any other factor, I would have to, to single out the fact that I had, had not just worked in one field but had been in another one as well and understood the way Washington worked, the way the politics works, and the way the Congress functions, you know, vis a vis all the agencies and, and so forth, and the contributing factors and differing, you know, opinions on what the agencies needs are versus the Hill.

Alsobrook: Well, that's interesting, because... Could you perhaps tell me a little bit, what's the difference between working on the Hill and working down here, as far as what you've found?

Forbes: Well, with this administration I think it's a matter of the power of politics, the power of Congress as a whole, as a unit and where the power of the President lies versus the power of Congress and this has all changed dramatically over the last, you know, 10 years, especially with the last freshman and sophomore classes of Congress. It's a much more individualized system now up on the Hill than it used to be and there is a lot to learn, in that sense, not only by the administration coming in but by the Hill itself, by a lot of congressmen, by senior congressmen and senators, who have been there, seeing their freshmen and sophomore classes taking much more hold of what is going on on a daily basis and demanding more and demanding to vote independently, disputedly, or, you know, et cetera. It's a, it's a classic example today. It has been, been noted many times in, in magazine articles.

Alsobrook: It sounds like a maturing process the way you're describing it. Is that, it that the way you-

Forbes: Myself or-

Alsobrook: No, I mean for the people on the Hill, for example.

Forbes: No, it really was a change in the process, actually, not so much a maturing process. There is a clear change in the perceptiveness on the Hill on the issues now. We are not in the day and age anymore where a speaker can say I want you all to vote as a block on this particular given issue because they won't do it anymore. The power is not there and as such the administration or the presidency, however you want to phrase it, has to look to individual members for votes now rather than to look at a given state to use as a block, or a given, you know, committee. You can't, you can't depend on all the Democrats in many cases or know the Republicans are on our side. It's a totally different make up than it used to be and I'm not sure that it will ever change back. It will be more complicated from here on.

Alsobrook: Now, when you worked on the Hill did you work for a committee or did you work for individual-

Forbes: I worked on the Senate budget committee.

Alsobrook: Did anything, did any of your experience there help you for your job here?

Forbes: Oh, sure, sure, because that was my only job. That was the only job I've had on the Hill and although I had preconceived perceptions of how Congress worked, one doesn't really grasp that until one's working there and there, there is so much to learn. And it, there are people who have worked on the Hill for years and years and years and still have a great deal to learn, so that gave me an insight into understanding how compromises are made and how, and also, in that particular instance, because I was working on the budget committee, how, how far reaching the

budget committees could be and, and how important that is because the budget process was a fairly new one.

Alsobrook: So you were up, up there when you went into the campaign?

Forbes: I went, I was on the basic committee staff until either the day of or, let's see, the day before? Day of, that Mondale was nominated and I think it was like the day after Mondale was nominated, his legislative counsel, Burt Carp, who is now one of Stu's deputies on the Domestic Policy Staff called me and asked me if I would help him out and go to work for him as legislative assistant for Mondale to which I agreed and I did and I was in that function and in that capacity for about a month. Burt went on down to the campaign and then called me and asked, and told me that the Carter people needed help and would I consider going down to Atlanta and after one week I was down in Atlanta.

Alsobrook: So you was down, down at Colony Square? Was that that where it was?

Forbes: Yeah. Uh huh.

Alsobrook: Could you tell me a little bit about how your office was organized, say within Congressional Liaison. You were in Les Francis's office.

Forbes: I was in Les Francis's office.

Alsobrook: Now what was his title and how was his office set up?

Forbes: Well, initially Les, Les's title was Legislative Projects Coordinator and it was just Les and myself in that, in that office. And later it was restructured and we added staff and his title was changed to Deputy, of which there are now three. At that time there were just two. The senate and the house liaison people. The heads of those particular entities within Congressional Liaison so this was added -

Alsobrook: That, that, was that Bob Bethel and Thompson? That's something else?

Forbes: No, that's Stan Pate and then Bill Cable.

Alsobrook: OK.

Forbes: And Les and I functioned basically as sort of a management tool of Congressional Liaison, trying to pull the staff together so that we could function as one unit rather than people going off in different directions. Frank's time was taken up a great deal with literally lobbying on the Hill and being with the senators and congressmen who needed to talk to him and spending time with the President and there had to be some coordinating function within the unit but also without. Our job was principally was to lay down strategy for the President's programs. Les's job was and my job was to assist him with that task. Coordinating with all the agencies, the "L" people, in terms of lobbying for the President's priority programs. So a lot of my job had to do

with dealing with the agency, Congressional Liaison officers, and setting up task forces and so forth and overseeing those on any given thing. Only last year civil service was a primary example of how that functioned. It existed and was, was put in use which was very successful and then on the basis of the success of that particular task force it was decided this year we would use the task force concept for other issues this year.

Alsobrook: Can you list some of those other task forces?

Forbes: Sure. This year, well, we have the regulatory reform task force which I am now in and hospital cost containment, Department of Education, the HEY reform comparability, SALT. These are all, most of these are chaired by other people but they report to, to Les, you know, at the end of every week on their successes or lack thereof, you know, whatever, and an overview is kept there which is necessary so that our lobbyist know where we are coming from and that we speak with one, one voice and we don't have different agencies calling up.

Alsobrook: But you're involved in regulatory reform now?

Forbes: Right now. That's what I am switching to now.

Alsobrook: Up until now could you, could you possibly tell me which, which of these have occupied more of your time than any others?

Forbes: Well, last year, certainly, up until this time, civil service reform did. Without question. I mean, that was a major reorganization effort. And, that was, we had meetings every evening at 6:00 on the- I mean, that was a major, major effort on behalf of the President and it was a landmark in terms of nothing had ever been done on, on civil service and trying to reorganize it and make it more effective.

Alsobrook: You had many long days then?

Forbes: Oh, yeah, yeah. No, it was two and a half years of very long hours. No question about it.

Alsobrook: How about the Panama Canal? Did you have a similar...?

Forbes: No. That is a, that is a, that is a... certainly our lobbyist were involved, and particularly Bob Beckel, but that is more of a NSC priority item than congressional liaison in general because it is not a domestic item. And we work, we work primarily with domestic issues.

Alsobrook: A lot of projects?

Forbes: You know, the energy task force and so forth. The Panama Canal was basically handled by the State Department and with the help of Bob Beckel and Madeline Albright from, from, you know, Brzezinski's staff, but I personally didn't have that much to do with that particular issue.

Alsobrook: So, but civil service reform you did.

Forbes: Civil service, energy, yeah.

Alsobrook: Could you list some other domestic issues that the office was actively working on? Like last year, you know, you mentioned energy. You mentioned civil service reform.

Forbes: Well, there is a lot that goes on daily that can't be grouped in, in certain categories. You know, there are lots, there are just numerous calls on a lot of different issues that don't fall into any category. There, there- Les's previous contacts with California were important. I developed a lot of contacts with Californian concerns, and water concerns and energy concerns out in California and developed a lot of contacts out there because of that. There are a lot of, it's a very, I have thought about this often. It's very difficult to describe what an average day is because it's, a day is basically consisting of, you know, twenty different problems that have to be solved that minute. [Alsobrook laughs] You know, every day.

Alsobrook: A lot of crises.

Forbes: That's right. Or directing people to the proper person or just basic, basic political judgment in a lot of cases which I, I would not want to go into right now.

Alsobrook: Right.

Forbes: It's so ad hoc, you know, individual.

Alsobrook: Do you find in carrying out your daily activities that in addition to relying on people on the Hill and your own staff, are there other White House units that you have to work very closely with for coordination?

Forbes: Oh sure.

Alsobrook: Could you list some of them?

Forbes: Scheduling. Scheduling is a major one. Scheduling of the President's time. That's, that was always an issue every day because with all of the issues that we have to face daily, that the President has to face we have energies within who were always requesting the President's time to meet with certain groups and so your arguments have to be fairly strong on why the President should meet with someone. So you spent a lot of time on asking the President to meet with a particular senator or congressman or hold a cert- hold a meeting with a group on a given issue like civil service or an aspect of civil service or energy or, you know, the Panama Canal or any of those things. So a lot of time was spent with scheduling. I'm trying to think of others. Hamilton's shop, obviously, just because of basic political coordination on these issues. OMB on a lot of budget in terms of legislative veto problems. A lot of time with Herbert Harris's office on the legislative veto question. Just general budget problems affecting all of these pieces of legislation. Agencies calling up and saying we have this isolated case here which is not a

presidential issue, but which, because of the way we've set up cabinet government is not a presidential issue, however, may need our help in, in trying to force the vote in the right direction on the floor somewhere. And any...

Alsobrook: This is like a domestic issue you're talking about?

Forbes: Domestic issues primarily, and on to regulation. Or any given...a subject or an issue which is, is almost primarily, let's say a Department of Transportation problem which is very important in the long run to pass. And if they, if a department felt that they needed a White House lobbying effort they would call and let us know. And it was our job to then get in touch with our lobbyist and say, you know, "So and so has this problem. Can we help them out?" That is what we are here for and that is the way we function. One of the other, one of the other functions which I performed was, of course, as is well known. You have all these memos going to the President, most of which ask for Congressional Liaison comment and before we really, before Les began, before I began we had no system within Congressional Liaison of making sure that our comments got in to the President so I developed a system by which I would make sure that our people who were in touch with the Hill on a day to day basis were aware of what memos or what questions were being asked of the President, what decisions he was being asked to make, and what the Hill sentiment would be on those given questions or issues and I just stayed on top of them until they got back to me to submit up to Rick Hutchinson so that the President would see what the feeling on the Hill would be on an issue, which was very important, you know.

Alsobrook: So you monitored these memos every step of the way?

Forbes: Uh huh. Uh huh.

Alsobrook: All the way through the staff secretary's office into the President and back?

Forbes: Uh huh, uh huh.

Alsobrook: And then, after the comment, say the President had comments, would it come back through your office?

Forbes: Then I had to inform- Yeah. Then I would inform our senate and house liaison staffs so that they could in turn inform the Hill, whoever they had to talk to. Also, I'm in, into that category fell all the bills that got signed and so forth and the requests for ceremonies for the President to be involved in and so forth, and that process went through me as well.

Alsobrook: Mari, after the memos had reached everybody, where do they finally end up? Do they end up in central files or do they end up in Frank Moore's office or Les Francis?

Forbes: No, they end up- that goes into Presidential Papers, through Rick Hutchinson's office.

Alsobrook: I see.

Forbes: The original goes back to them.

Alsobrook: OK. Did you spend most of your time in the building or did you get to do any traveling or advance work?

Forbes: No, most of my time was in the building All of my time was in the building.

Alsobrook: You didn't get to make any trips then?

Forbes: I didn't want to.

Alsobrook: Ok, ok. You already answered several of my questions in one swoop. You mentioned the fact that you worked on the, on the civil service reform; as you think back about your work here, are there significant jobs like that one, you know, that you would like to remember? Are there, I guess what I am asking you is, are there, were there other significant projects like that one that stand out in your mind, you know, as being valuable?

Forbes: Well, I think the reason civil service stands out in my mind is because of the make-up of people involved in that task force. They were, it was a very, very well knit group and much of the reason, I think, behind that is because Scotty Campbell who is an absolutely superhuman being and well respected and certainly one of the best managers that this government in this country has ever seen was involved in that and the contacts made out of that group were, were far reaching and, I, I think everyone involved in civil service just became a very close knit group. Plus it was an issue which lasted longer as a working group than any other issue, I think. And as I said, I mean we worked, we had, we had evening meetings every day of the week for months. The President's involvement in civil service was, was better focused there than probably a lot of other issues and he had at the town meeting on it in Virginia and it was without question a cornerstone of basic reorganization of the federal government and, and because of that importance I will always remember it. It was, it was very key to changing our system and improving the management quality of people and, we will probably be successful---a great deal because of Scotty Campbell and also the President's personal attention to it, and will have much, a far reaching effect more than any other issue on people in general in this country, because we have so many federal employees. There are very few people when you contrast it to other jobs and so forth that it doesn't effect.

Alsobrook: Have you received a lot of favorable mail on the Civil Service Reform Act, both from civil servants and ordinary citizens?

Forbes: People were....they were very frightened of it at the beginning because of obviously the individuals who have for years and years just been in their jobs and gotten along and almost done what they had to do and nothing more, you know. Because they were safe, they were secure in their job, and nobody could fire them, nobody can get rid of them. There were individuals, without question, that were very afraid of it because what we were basically doing, I shouldn't

say we, but what the, the legislation basically would do is say, "OK, you are going to have to perform now," and we are going to grade according to that, promote, we are going promote according to that and there are levels to which we want our civil servants to reach and that was frightening to a lot of people and people didn't understand it completely and thought that would take their security away. There was a lot to combat because of that, particularly in this area with constituency around Washington obviously because the majority of the federal government is around here. But I think what we did in the end was right. I think the only thing that we didn't, the only aspect of the civil service reform legislation which we did not win which I personally felt very important was the veteran's preference portion of it and that may come back again someday, I hope.

Alsobrook: Maybe in a different form?

Forbes: Maybe, yeah.

Alsobrook: Can you tell me anything about your future plans?

Forbes: Well, right now I'm working on regulatory reform which I will do for at least a year and I am also applying to a mid-career program at the Kennedy School of Harvard and, if accepted, will go up in the fall of '80 to that. And I don't know after that. I don't know whether I would come back to Washington and work in the federal government again or whether I would go into state and local government. Just depends. But that's what my, my career goals are at this point. But it all depends on where I get accepted.

Alsobrook: Could you give me a permanent legal address and telephone number for the use of the future library?

Forbes: The only one that I can give you is my, my residence now. My parents are not living so I don't have a permanent address.

Alsobrook: Just give me the most permanent address you have.

Forbes: I have its 3138 Quesada St., in Washington.

Alsobrook: OK, and the telephone number?

Forbes: 966-2189

Alsobrook: OK. Is there an alumni association or any other group that we could always contact to locate you, say ten or twenty years from now?

Forbes: Hmmmm. Not really. I suppose the only way, the only sure way of ever contacting me is through my ex-husband, who is always going to be in the Foreign Service. I mean that is the only way.

Alsobrook: Well, I'll leave that up to you. I don't want to...

Forbes: I don't really have any other... I have an uncle who would always know where I am but other than that, I don't.

Alsobrook: We could probably get you through the White House, say through the Personnel Office. I think they maintain a permanent files on most people so they would probably have it. Well, you answered all the questions I had for you.

Forbes: OK.

Alsobrook: You know, if you have any, if you feel like we skipped over anything, is there anything else you want to add?

Forbes: No, no.

Alsobrook: I want you to have the option to add it. Well, thank you very much and good luck.

Forbes: Thank you.