

JAMES FREE

EXIT INTERVIEW

This interview is being conducted with Mr. James Free in his office in Executive Office Building on December 16, 1980. The interviewer is Dr. Thomas Soapes. Present for the interview with Mr. Free is Dr. Soapes.

THOMAS SOAPES: For background, could you tell me where and when you were born, and your formal education?

JAMES FREE: I was born in Columbia, Tennessee, on January 17, 1947. I went to public schools in Columbia, graduating from high school there in 1965. From there I went to Middle Tennessee State University, a regional university in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, where I got a Bachelor of Science degree in political science. I went on from there and got a masters degree in public administration from Middle Tennessee State in a cooperative program with the University of Tennessee.

SOAPES: And after you finished your masters degree?

FREE: I went from there to the University of Tennessee, where I began a law degree. [I] worked on a law degree and worked as the administrative assistant to the vice-president of the University

of Tennessee. He was in charge of alumni affairs, development, and governmental relations. I had done an internship earlier at the state legislature, when I was working on the masters degree, and got to know the University of Tennessee people through that program. So my duties there were mainly working with alumni groups and with the state legislature.

After six months of that, a friend of mine, Ned McWherter, was elected Speaker of the House, and I left law school and went back to Nashville and became his administrative assistant. A few months into that job [I] was elected the Chief Clerk of the Legislature, whereupon I stayed in that job from 1972 to 1977. As Chief Clerk, I was the chief administrative officer for the House of Representatives, plus with singular duties to the Speaker himself. I wrote speeches, kept his schedule, and was his political advisor.

SOAPES: How did you come to be involved with the Carter administration? Did you work in the campaign?

FREE: I did. Back in 1973, then-Governor Carter came to Memphis, Tennessee, and gave a speech to the Shelby County Democrats. The Speaker, Speaker McWherter and myself both attended that meeting, and I was very impressed, as was Speaker McWherter, with Governor Carter. We got to know him at that meeting, you might say. We were in Atlanta not many months after that and called the Governor. He sent a car for us and we

visited with him in the Governor's office for a long time. That's when I met Frank Moore. The meeting in Memphis is when I met Jody Powell, and through those associations became involved with the beginnings of the Carter campaign for the presidency. And then in 1975, word was out that Carter was thinking about running for the presidency. They contacted Speaker McWherter to see who should run the campaign in Tennessee, and by about December of '75 I had begun working in the campaign. By February of '76, I was the campaign coordinator in Tennessee.

SOAPES: What were your duties?

FREE: Well, I was a campaign manager. I oversaw what little budget there was. Political strategy was part of it; fund-raising was some of it. I went on from that to be the Carter caucus chairman in the convention in New York that summer. I thought that was the end of my duties then, and I would go back and be the future President's friend in Tennessee.

But then they asked me to run the campaign in Tennessee, Alabama, and Mississippi. So in the general election of 1976, I was the regional coordinator. Pretty much being a political troubleshooter for those three states. Danny Cupit and Senator [James] Eastland and those people in Mississippi pretty much ran the campaign in Mississippi, and I just went in and out of the state, kind of being physically involved from the national headquarters.

In Alabama, the same thing was true. Lew Odom and the Alabama campaign was pretty much running itself, through Senator [John] Sparkman's campaign apparatus. But I did go in and out and deal with Governor [George] Wallace and with some of the black leadership of that state. I was kind of a political troubleshooter.

Tennessee was in real good shape. Senator [James] Sasser's campaign was providing a lot of the storm troopers or legwork that we would need. Mine was just one of being visible for the campaign--overseeing, again, what small budget there was, and making sure that things were going well.

SOAPES: You mentioned contact with Governor Wallace. How positive a force was he for the Carter campaign in Alabama?

FREE: He was very reluctant in his overt actions for the campaign in 1976. I remember meeting in his office. This meeting had to be probably in October. He had several of his assistants around, and he kept going around the room asking each one of them who they were for for President. They would all come back and say, "Well, we're still for you, Governor." and he would look at me and smile and say, "Well, you know my friends just aren't excited about the Carter presidency."

The Governor, though, made two key, critical stops for us in 1976. He went to the panhandle of Florida. Florida was obviously a key state, and his following in the panhandle is

still to this very day quite well. His other stop that did so much for us was in Mississippi, which we had almost given up for lost. And it ended up being one of the closest states in the nation that year. I think we won it by less than 12,000 votes. So Governor Wallace going to Jackson, Mississippi, in the middle of October, 1976, saying, "It's all right to be a conservative Democrat and vote for Jimmy Carter," was very key. We owe him a lot. We did a lot of good radio stuff around that trip, too, that we then fed all over the South, with him saying it.

SOAPES: And then how did your job here in the administration come about?

FREE: Well, I had known Frank Moore through those campaign days, and as I said before, had gotten to know Hamilton [Jordan] pretty well during the campaign. Pretty much in the general election is when I got to know Hamilton Jordan. The week of the inaugural up here, I was here with the Tennessee delegation. At the Tennessee party for Senator Sasser the night before the inauguration, Frank Moore asked me to work for him, which I was very appreciative of.

I might say that earlier during a visit up here to the transition office, I came up one day--I shall never forget it--with a large, huge sum of money in my briefcase. I had come up to make sure that enough tickets were purchased for the inaugural. That was my reason for coming. And on that trip,

after I had taken care of the inaugural ticket business and had purchased all the tickets needed for all the people in Tennessee that were supposed to get tickets... In other words I was afraid of the mail, I was afraid that it would get lost and that they wouldn't get their tickets and I knew I'd get the blame, so I just flew off up here.

During that trip I met Hamilton--rode out to the airport with him. And Hamilton asked me what I wanted to do, and I said the two areas that I would be able to handle and also had some experience in would be intergovernmental relations, which Jack Watson became the head of, and congressional relations. Not that I knew that much about Congress, but I felt I knew that much about legislative politics. I always had a feeling, and never verified it, that Hamilton passed the word to Frank that that's what he wanted. I think Hamilton liked me a lot. So I certainly give credit for my job to Frank Moore, but I think that Hamilton probably had a lot to say in that original decision.

SOAPES: And the position that you were offered here?

FREE: I was offered the Special Assistant to the President for Congressional Liaison, and that developed into the position on the House liaison staff, which I now have, and have had for the four years. Which essentially was a lobbying position. I lobbied on the White House behalf to members of the House of Representatives.

SOAPES: Who was your immediate superior?

FREE: Well, at the beginning, the day of the inaugural, I came to work and reported to a fellow named Rick Merrill. Rick Merrill had been very active around town with some liberal causes in the legislative system. I think the most famous thing he ever did--he was a staff fellow with the Democratic Study Group, the DSG. Which was kind of a liberal think tank for liberal members of the House of Representatives. So we started out with Rick Merrill being in charge of House liaison. He was kind of in a deputy position to Frank. Frank being the boss, Rick Merrill being a lieutenant in charge of the House lobbying, and then I working in that group. Along with Valerie Pinson, at that time.

SOAPES: And how long did Merrill stay in that [position]?

FREE: Merrill stayed till, when now--let's see--it gets fuzzy about the times on all of this. I think Merrill stayed the better part of a year. Then Rick got ill, and with his illness he left--rather abruptly, very suddenly. We floundered about here for a couple or three weeks without anybody being the head of liaison, except for maybe me, which was challenging, to say the least, and uncomfoting to say the most. Because I did not

have the experience that you needed to be the number one guy, at that time, after only being here for a year.

And then after those weeks--then Bill Cable, who had been the staff director for the House Administration Committee, and he had also been on the House Education and Labor Committee. [He] had virtually grown up on Capitol Hill, on the House side, having gone up there when he was in high school as a page, and having gone to college while working as one of the parking lot attendants, or some such job. Having gotten out of college and gone to work for a congressman as an L.A. [legislative assistant], and gone to work for the committee and then moved on up to be the number one guy on the House Administration Committee. Which was probably, in house, the most powerful committee in the House. So he had great expertise and brought a lot to the shop. He taught me a lot.

SOAPES: You mentioned there were a number of people in the House liaison operation here. How was the work divided?

FREE: That's a good question. At the beginning of the process, Rick Merrill had this new idea that we would not do our work according to regional breakdown. In other words, with an accent like this, it would normally fall that I should work the southern members. Valerie Pinson, a black woman from New York state having worked with congresspersons from that area, maybe would be logical for her to maybe do the Northeast, etc., etc. Merrill

had an idea that we would break it down by issues, by policy areas, and that in turn would make us become more expert with policy, as an issue. Plus, work continuously with the same subcommittees and committees.

I started out working on energy matters, then on transportation matters, then on environmental matters, and then it just spewed out to the different agencies. Veterans affairs, I remember, was one of the things I was in charge of. It looked good on paper, but it never really worked as well as we should. Now, as it ends up over the four years, those first issue areas are the ones I pretty much worked with. I did gain somewhat of an expertise, at least with the congressional politics on it.

But I always had a feeling that it wouldn't work, because you can't take politics out of politics. When you take personal associations away from politics--that's what politics means, interaction between people. It caused the system to break down. So we did not develop close rapport with members by doing it that way. That, I think, you do when you break down to a regional thing where all the guys in these certain states know that Jim Free is their fellow. And they either give him the credit, or they give him hell if their requests aren't met or they're not treated fairly. Or whatever the purpose of the liaison situation is. That was never corrected, either.

Cable came on board, and I never understood--I think Bill's problem was he was afraid to constrict himself to any one particular group because he wanted to be in touch with it all.

So it never did get really broken down again to where it was strictly a law that you dealt with all the members from these states, and all the members from those states in turn dealt with only you, for the most part. And that way you got true liaison going, and it was accountable. That was the thing I kept talking to Frank Moore about. There was no real way to be accountable in the job. I mean, I could come to work and go out the door and wink and say, "I'm going to the Hill," and I could go home and go to bed. Because there was no way that they would know that I was not servicing, shall we say, certain congressmen, because there were really no congressmen assigned specifically to me.

I think that was a problem that we never did get over. I think it was an unfortunate problem, and one that I would have done different. I would have made--I think you've got to have in government, business, or anything else, things accountable. If something falls through the crack, you've got to be able to point your finger at somebody and scare 'em--to where it never happens again. That was never the case here. Things fell through the cracks. You could point around the room and say, "Whose fault was it?" Well, it was everybody's fault, so then it was nobody's fault. So that's basically the way the shop was broken down, the first of the four years. It pretty much stayed the same, as far as the line functions were concerned. Personalities changed. By that I mean people came and left in the job. But it stayed pretty much the same.

SOAPES: Was the physical separation--I know many of your offices started out in the East Wing, while Frank Moore was over in the West Wing. Was that a problem?

FREE: Yes, it was a bad problem, but it's probably one you can't correct, because of the way the space is laid out here. The Assistant to the President has to be in the West Wing of the White House, so the press and everybody else assumes he has the clout. It's not necessarily true. It's just a short walk from here over there. And if the Director of the Office of Management and Budget can have his office over here, he certainly loses no clout by it. He's the most powerful man in the administration. Then anybody could.

But there's a perception problem there. So when you have the leader, the number one guy in the West Wing, then wherever you put the others causes a problem. We had many frustrating moments between the West Wing and East Wing--we used to call it. Because a lot of things would happen and we wouldn't know about it. Would never know about it. We would read about it in the paper, literally. That was part of our business. But the same thing happens here. It's not quite as bad with us being in the EOB as it was in the East Wing, strangely enough. But there is a problem geographically, because you're separated from the decision-makers and the center of power in your office.

SOAPES: When you needed information out of the administration, out of the executive branch of government, who were your best sources?

FREE: Well, it depended on where you went. That was part of learning how to lobby. Sometimes it would be the Secretary himself, of a particular department. Other times it would be our counterparts, the assistant secretary in charge of congressional liaison. I'd say that person is the person we used the most.

But after you were in the job for a while you found out that another assistant secretary in charge of a certain policy area-- if you had a friendship or a relationship with him--you called him directly to get the answers to a Congressman's question or to your own questions. But for as many questions as there were, there were that many ways to find an answer.

SOAPES: Was the success or failure of such an inquiry really based on your personal relationship with these people?

FREE: A lot of times. But mostly, calling and saying that a congressman wanted an answer to his question was enough. Because the agency or department realized that the congressman had some authority over the appropriations process, if nothing else. There was really no great problem there. There were always some problems, but there always are in government when one agency

tries to find something out from another agency. It's a situation of turf.

SOAPES: What about within the White House, the executive office of the President? Were there particularly good sources that you found yourself relying on more often than others?

FREE: Well, our particular entity worked hand-in-glove with Stu Eizenstat's staff, with the domestic policy people, because we were supposed to. We were supposed to be the leg-people, as I always thought the people that went off to the Hill and had the day to day contact. And Eizenstat's people were the think tank. They were the people who we relied [on] as the resource to give us the policy and tell us what was right and wrong. In a perfect world that worked right, and in the imperfect world that we lived in, we ourselves became in large respects sometimes policy makers because we had to make a quick decision on what would sell up there. Which could get the most votes?

SOAPES: Were there particular individuals--would you usually go to Eizenstat himself, or would you go...?

FREE: I worked very closely with Stuart throughout the four years, particularly when one of the issues that I was kind of shepherding, the lead lobbyist on, would get to the floor itself and became very high profile. But I worked with Kathy Fletcher a

lot in the beginning days of this thing. One of the first issues I dealt with was probably, as we look back, the most famous or one of the most famous legislative battles that we had, and that was over water policy. Kathy Fletcher was the assistant in Stu's office in charge of water policy, and she worked under the direct supervision of Katherine Schirmer, Kitty Schirmer.

But Kathy and Kitty and I worked a lot on the water policy along with the OMB people, Don Crabill and those people. And along with Cecil Andrus's people at the Department of Interior. The water project or the water policy was probably one of the bloodiest legislative battles we had in this administration. At the same time, even though we mishandled parts of it--and by that [I mean] we were not sensitive enough to the congresspersons involved and how important these projects were to their political life, literally--but besides that problem, I think we have effectuated the process around this city of these water projects.

We brought the consciousness of the nation, if you will, up to the fact that just because a congressman has a great tenure in congress, and he wants to build an outrageously environmentally damaging water project that will benefit very, very few people at a huge cost to the taxpayers, that's not right. And the most conservative or liberal or whatever philosophy you are doesn't matter. I mean--right and wrong--you shouldn't build that project. I think Jimmy Carter brought that consciousness up in the whole country, and while we've been here the last couple of

years has actually effectuated the process. The appropriating, the designating committees on the Hill now want to know what we think about water projects. The Water Resources Council and other pieces of legislation that hopefully put some professional analysis to water projects, I think will live on after we're gone and will be a benefit to the taxpayer.

SOAPES: You mentioned the water projects as one of your toughest pieces of legislation. Could you name two or three others that stand out in your mind as your toughest?

FREE: Sure. Along with Kitty Schirmer, who again did a lot of the policy aspects of it, the President was an advocate of slowing down the nuclear proliferation that was going on around the globe--France selling nuclear reactors to places like Iraq. Well, recent history in the last few months shows us how potentially dangerous that could be if those people aren't cautious with how they use nuclear reactors.

The thing that brought it to a head in this administration [was] fighting over the appropriations and continued funding for the Clinch River breeder reactor. It was a special problem to me because I'm from Tennessee, and this project was outside of Oak Ridge, on the Clinch River. The President felt like it was an outmoded technology that they were using with Clinch River--number one. So it was a budgetary problem. If you're going to build something, one ought not build an Edsel if one talks about

having a Cadillac. And the CRBR was so outmoded and outdated that to continue the prototype was just silly. In other words, if you're going to be for breeder reactors, you ought not be for the Clinch River, either. Because you ought to be for something like the Super Phoenix or some more watt-producing breeder reactor such as the French have developed.

His other reason, and the reason that got more press than the real reason, or more press than that first reason, was his opposition to the proliferation of these things. If you become a commercial salesman for every group or country in the world of a plutonium breeding, producing reactor, you take on grave consequences there if one of these things falls into the hands of people who are not as, shall we say, conscientious about what they've got as they should be. With a breeder reactor you can get enough plutonium to build an atom bomb. All you've got to do is get a copy of the magazine The Progressive, and if you've got the plutonium, you can build you an atomic bomb. And what can you do? You can ransom the world. That gets a little science fiction-like, but it's really not.

So this President decided that he would draw his line in the dust on Clinch River. Politically it was incredibly damaging with the utilities and with the nuclear industry around the world and in this country. [It] was pretty damaging in the South, and obviously in Tennessee, in particular, and Oak Ridge, specifically. The Knoxville-Oak Ridge area.

We did what we had to do just about every time on that. By that I mean we always had enough votes to sustain a veto. Never did get enough votes to actually end the appropriation. But we dwindled and dwindled down the enthusiasm for Clinch River to such an extent that it as a project became known as a technological turkey. That was the number one problem with it.

Nuclear proliferation was a problem, but the thing you never could make people on the Hill or the secular press understand was the fact that it was a technological turkey. I've tried to convince congressmen, "Look, you're for breeder reactors. That's wonderful. You still shouldn't be for this one. You ought to be for a bigger, better one maybe. And what you're doing is disagreeing with the President on the proliferation angle, but you ought to agree with the President on Clinch River because it's just a turkey." That was a yearly occurrence, like the leaves falling every September. I mean every year in the appropriations process we went to war over Clinch River. Got me a lot of wonderful press back in Tennessee. I can barely go back for Christmas. He was right, so I was proud to be on the side with him.

Deregulation of transportation was another issue that I was kind of the lead guy on. And the one that I did the most with was the airline deregulation bill. I worked with a woman named Mary Schuman, who was on Stuart Eizenstat's staff, again as a policy person. A brilliant young woman. She and I fought like

cats and dogs over some strategy, but we always came together when it got down to getting the vote.

We won that, and we probably shouldn't have won it. The unions were against us; the management was against us; the industry was against us. And the consumers were saying they were for us but couldn't do much about it. There were a lot of instances where I would know that a business person or a Republican-type member should be for deregulation, but he wouldn't be because the industry, the airline itself, had a part of him, if you know what I mean. It was in his district; they supported him; the employees were there. The unions were against it, of course, because they saw if you deregulated it, you could get a lot of airlines jumping up that didn't have unionized workers.

So from the left and the right we had no support. We knew that if we could get it on the floor, though, that everybody would have to vote for it. By that I mean, who could vote against getting government out of somebody's business? And this actually ended up being more of a deregulation bill than we ever thought. Because the amendment that Congressman [Elliott] Levitas ended up putting on the bill sunsets the Civil Aeronautics Board in 1985, I think. Maybe earlier than that, I forget the date exactly. It became an ultimate deregulation because it sunsets or takes out of existence the regulatory body that oversees airlines. An incredibly interesting educational

experience. Probably the most educational that I had as far as working with legislative policy.

I worked on a lot of energy policy of this administration. The lobbyist that worked with Chairman [John] Dingell and the decontrol of oil. The first piece of legislation I worked with was the bill that gave the executive branch of government the power to re-route electricity. "Wheeling," it's called. And the emergency gas legislation. I guess over the four years energy and what we did with energy--if you throw in the nuclear part to boot--consumed more of my time than any other area.

I worked on the Clean Air Act. A piece of legislation that had been around a long time, but would always get terminally hung up in conference committees. We busted it out of conference committees, and the President signed a very strong Clean Air Act.

Worked on the Alaska Lands bill. The Alaska Lands bill had been around this town for ten years. It came out of legislation about a decade ago that talked about the D-2 section of the legislation that dealt with portions of Alaska that many felt should be kept for future generations. Worked very, very closely with Congressman Mo Udall and Congressman [John] Seiberling and the Alaska Lands Coalition. We passed the legislation, finally, through compromise. It was not everything we wanted, but it was certainly a lot more than would have been without the legislation.

[It] may be the hallmark of Carter's presidency as far as future generations are concerned. I think it's the type of

historical act that years from now people will look upon him the way they do Teddy Roosevelt, as far as his environmental stance. And one that he should be proud of, and one that totally infuriated, and made him the brunt of attack for a lot of the business community of this nation. Because they wanted all those lands left open for further exploration and worse.

I worked on some foreign policy issues. Never as a lead person--Bob Beckel did that for the most part. Had great fun working on those. Probably had as much fun in those types of areas as anything, maybe because it was all so new. Turkish arms sale, Panama Canal legislation in the House, which was pretty much appropriation of money to do what the treaties called for.

Learned a lot in those fights about what it means to take a walk. Which means you have a congressperson, who wants to vote with you but just can't, just not vote. Or a person who you commit to vote if you need it. And I was given somewhat credit for the Turkish arms vote because I had enough Southerners, strangely enough, who said, "We don't want to vote, but we will if our vote is essential." It got down to being an even vote in the House, and I kind of gave them the signal out in the hall, and they gritted their teeth and went in there and voted with us. We won the thing by four or five votes. John Brademas, anyway, who was on the opposite side, gave me the credit for winning that bill that day. Not one that I enjoyed receiving from him, by the way.

The Panama Canal was, of course, a very emotional, tough one in the House. One that I learned a lot from--how to lobby, I might add.

SOAPES: What was your evaluation of the quality of assistance you got from the House leadership?

FREE: Well, I think that the leadership of the House gave us all the support they could. The House, through a lot of reform measures that started back about 1974, had diffused power so greatly in the House that Speaker [Tip] O'Neill and Majority Leader [Jim] Wright and others just did not have the clout that Speaker Sam Rayburn had. It had nothing to do with them or how they did or did not do their job. It had just become part of the new system. They could not deliver like you could in the past. It was just unfortunate for them and for us. But if the Speaker no longer has real power over appointments and other things like that, then they don't owe the Speaker a lot. And that was the situation we were in. The Majority Leader was the same way. They gave us everything they could, though, they really did. They wanted to see [it] work.

They were at odds with us on things like the Alaska bill, the water projects and Clinch River and the airline bills. The ones that I did were the ones the leadership were never very excited about, I must say. But they did everything in their power to pass, and we could not have passed without their help,

the energy legislation that this President passed. And they did that for the good of the country, because the country needed it, and they knew it. They were brilliant. Jim Wright, Ari Weiss from Speaker O'Neill's staff, and others get all the credit for that legislation.

SOAPES: I know you have to get someplace, but I have two quick questions to end it up. Did you enjoy your tenure here in the job?

FREE: Totally and completely. I ended the last year here being out of the White House as much as I was in it. I was the deputy campaign manager for thirteen Southern states. The people I've met, the things I've gotten to do, the trips I've made. I went on a lot of congressional trips, one of the most beneficial things to me in the job that I ever did.

I took a lot of kidding about it, but you can really get to know a congressperson when you're sitting in the middle of Manila, taking a little drink of scotch, and you talk about each other, and you get to know each other. You come back with that relationship, and it helps you to be a better representative for the White House. Those trips also broadened my whole horizon, specific places I would have never gone before. So absolutely. I've enjoyed the friends I've made here, and it's made me grow. And that's what life's all about.

SOAPES: And last. Do we have an address where we could reach you in the future?

FREE: I'm not sure where I will end up. My parents live at 703 Royal Oaks Drive, Columbia, Tennessee, 38401, zip code. As long as they're alive, I'll always be reachable through that address.

My plans now are uncertain as to whether I'll stay in Washington or return to Nashville.