

Exit Interview with Rex Granum, Deputy Press Secretary

Interviewer: Dr. Thomas Soapes of the Presidential Papers Staff

December 10, 1980, in Rex Granum's office in the White House

Transcriber: Lyn Kirkland and Winnie Hoover

Soapes: Let's start with a little bit of your background. Could you give me where you were born and your formal education?

Granum: Born in Dayton, Ohio. My father was in Civil Service, so we did live in a number of Southern towns - Mobile, Alabama and Memphis, Tennessee. Grew up in Warner Robins, Georgia, from the third grade on went to public schools there. The University of Georgia --- journalism degree.

I went--when I graduated from the University of Georgia, I went to the *Atlanta Constitution*, the morning paper in Atlanta, and eventually began to be a political writer there and came over and covered state government, covering Governor Jimmy Carter, his Press Secretary, Jody Powell, and his Executive Secretary, Hamilton Jordan, and then Frank Moore succeeded Hamilton when Hamilton went to--came to Washington during that change. So, that was the main point at which I became acquainted with the political beat.

Soapes: How long were you on the political beat?

Granum: Uh, I guess two years--two and a half years, something like that.

Soapes: So the last--you say the last couple of years were--.

Granum: --Yes. I covered the last six months of his time in the Governor's Office. And from March of '74--so it was longer than six months --I went over to the State Capitol in March of '74 and stayed there until early January of '76 and, of course, the President--or the Governor's term--Governor at that time, his term ended in January of '75. But during that time I covered sort of a little bit of the first campaign prior to his announcement, and then, of course, his announcement.

Soapes: Did you get involved in his campaign?

Granum: I got involved down--when he left office there wasn't much coverage after that by the *Constitution*. I stayed and covered the succeeding Governor, George Busbee, with regard to the General Assembly, I guess, in the winter of '75. This was a time, of course, that the President and Jody Powell were out in Iowa and all sorts of good places doing some very lonely campaigning and the paper did not feel that it wanted to spend the money, to my regret at the time. I imagine to their regret now. They did not want to

spend the money to cover, even sporadically, that sort of forum and so, I was at the State Capitol. Was approached in late December or early January by a good friend of Jody's about whether I wanted to come to work in the campaign. Talked with Jody in early January and quit the paper around January 4th and went to work in the campaign.

Soapes: This was January '76?

Granum: I'm sorry. It was January of '76--and went to work there I think about the 15th or 16th of January of '76. It was a week or so before the Iowa Caucuses. And at that time, Jody, of course, had been on the road with the "to be" President virtually all of the time. And Betty Rainwater, who had worked with Jody in the Governor's Office as his assistant, was running the national press office. They needed more people on the road and the decision was made that Betty would start to go on the road with Jody.

So he hired me and a woman, Kate Clooney, who had been working as a volunteer for six or seven months prior to that. She was working with me at the time. She quit her job. She and I quit at the same--went to work in the campaign in the same week. So we went to the national press office in Atlanta. It was in some vacant offices of the law building of Bob Lipschutz and his firm at 1776 Peachtree.

Soapes: Interesting address..

Granum: Yes. No, I'm sorry it was not 1776 it was 1976. 1976. That was the perfect--.

Soapes: Perfect symbol.

Granum: And so, there were the two of us there and there were Betty and Jody on the road. And that was really, of course, the time when the campaign was just barely started to move and it moved quite cyclically.

Soapes: So what is your--was the scope of your activity there in that office in Atlanta?

Granum: Well, we were the—I think I had the title of Press Director, which explains nothing. Any newspaper, TV, any media inquiries there, trying to help schedule interviews because, of course, Jody and Betty were on the road. And when you are, you are moving around and are much more difficult to reach. But Kate was doing a lot of the scheduling of press in terms of travel because at that time we were still doing commercial flights, occasionally charters, but mostly still commercial flights.

So we'd have to book the four reporters on the trip and, of course, it got larger and larger and eventually we got to start chartering a plane. So that Kate was working primarily on that. I was spokesman for the campaign and we had various inquiries, talking quite a bit with Jody on the road, still very much in charge of it, and tried to coordinate it with him on the fly, which is always difficult. But just anything in the press area that came up. And, of course, we were doing a number of events there in Atlanta in terms of helping raise money and had coverage to coordinate on the primary. Each time there was a primary there would be an Atlanta celebration. There'd be some national coverage, but

primarily local. Other campaign staff, in most cases, celebrated yet another victory--sometimes not, but everything that we do now here, but, of course, on a much smaller scale.

Soapes: What was the motivation for you to move away from a reporter's job with a major newspaper and a fairly good beat into a very speculative situation?

Granum: Well, the very strong attitude at the time at the paper. I mean, I was not a Carter advocate. I was an admirer of Jimmy Carter and his people in the sense that what they were setting out to do was not nearly as outlandish as they were generally treated. There was--by the time I left--I believe he was gone--I'm not certain on that point--Reg Murphy (editor of *the Atlanta/Journal Constitution*), with whom Jimmy Carter had a very acrimonious relationship, to say the least, and to a degree, because he edited the paper, he set the tone at the paper.

I tried intensively to warn either--of course, my preference was that I do the covering---but that we were just making a real mistake not covering it sporadically. I'm not trying to suggest we go out and cover it for 30 weeks in a row, with that sort of expensive, but that sporadically we go out and watch Jimmy Carter and Jody Powell and watch them in California, and because it was not a foolhardy event. There was no conviction that, yes, they're going to win, on my part at that point at least, but that it was not--given the context of everybody thinking it was a ridiculous exercise; no, it was not.

There were very smart people around him. He's very intelligent, very intent, hardworking, going to give it everything he's got and he's got a lot, and we ought to be covering him. I was frustrated by that attitude. It's not a matter of, from a journalist's perspective, of so much cheering Jimmy Carter on, but accessing him and saying "it is plausible; it is possible; you shouldn't laugh at it." And basically, the *Atlanta Constitution* did, which was very frustrating to me.

I was tired--now, by the time I joined, that major battle had been fought---tired of working there. It was time to move on. And I had been looking for other newspaper jobs and I'd been promised the next job in two different cities. And then, this overture came -- "would you be interested?" And "yeah, I'd be interested." And I had no thought at that time--naïve as it may sound now, I had no real thought about coming to Washington. Yes, that's obviously the culmination, but we didn't know whether he'd win or not.

I felt very positive about him, Jimmy Carter's style, attitudes and his talents and abilities, and that he had a right; a Southerner should, whether he ends up winning and is successful or not, should have a legitimate chance of running for President and I could help. And who knows? So, I gave my three days' notice, which was just as well for the paper. Once somebody says they are going to go to work for a politician, they're out--you can't use them on very many assignments. And then, I went to Washington.

Soapes: After the nomination and you were in a much bigger operation, did your role change any?

Granum: Well, we really only touched on the start of this. Now this--in January, it is Kate Clooney and myself, Betty and Jody on the road. Our office grew from that point. I think by May I think there were eight or nine people working for me in the press office itself in Atlanta. At that point, Jody and Betty decided it would be just as well if Betty stopped traveling. Betty came back. I went on the road, and then stayed on the road for the rest of the time.

So my role switched dramatically in that sense because I went from primarily an office telephone sort of responsibility to equal if not more responsibility on the road. Because by this time--I mean, I can remember vividly at one time--I digress a moment, but Greg Schneiders --- who traveled with the President during that time --- I can remember vividly that the entire staff and press corps in Oklahoma City in February of '76 decided that they really didn't want to go to some event that Jimmy Carter was going to. And they went out to the airport and met him there. He had some kind of meeting. And so, the whole staff and press corps got in a cab and went out there... It was me and Greg Schneiders and Jim Wooten, a reporter with the *New York Times*. That had changed dramatically. There was a chartered plane by the time in May that I went on the road. We chartered a plane. There were 30, 40, 50, 60 members of the press there and it grew all the time. We were going to three, four and five cities a day. We'd go out for five and six days at a time, sometimes more a very relentless sort of process in which there's a lot more scheduling--- the press advance work to get.--For one thing, just a simple matter of telling the press a day or two ahead of time where we were going to be, particularly for the networks' benefit, so that they can figure out how to get their edit packages there and feed from a particular station. And it was a very hectic and continually growing sort of process. It was difficult to stay up with, and we brought more and more staff on the road.

So, yes, my responsibility had changed, but I felt like it had--I mean, for everyone, no matter what position we were in, it was always growing because the thing was--the campaign was taking off. And then, Powell--I was not married at the time---Powell, who was, traditionally would come back either through Atlanta or end up in South Georgia--- and there would be a way that Powell could get up to Atlanta and he'd go to see his family. I was not married and there seemed to be a plot to make sure that I never did get married, because I would end up spending the time in Plains.

I had a permanent room---room 201 at the Best Western Motel in Americus. And we spent, you know, ---every time Jimmy Carter would come back to Plains, the press corps, of course, had to stay, and therefore the press staff had to stay. And we always stayed in those rooms whenever we were there and I spent the whole summer there with the great, the now famous softball games and that sort of business. There was some traveling. And of course, that summer he gained the nomination too. It was more of a down time and a planning time for the future, but still fairly busy.

Soapes: And then, this role of yours continued through the general election?

Granum: It did continue through the general election campaign and the transition period,

which, of course, went down in Georgia itself. I missed this whole--which, I'm rather pleased as it turned out I did--the whole business of the Washington transition here because we were down in the Federal Office Building in Americus that President Ford and his Administration made arrangements once the President became the President-elect. We worked out of there and that role continued through that time and on into today.

Soapes: And then, how did your appointment to this position come about?

Granum: Jody asked me if I'd come on and be his deputy or be a deputy here. He set up the office and hoped that somebody he'd interviewed at the exit--Walt Wurfel, who was a Deputy Press Secretary here, had worked in a number of positions in the press and TV before, and I think at that time was Senator Dick Stone's. I think he was his AA [administrative assistant], and took a leave of absence to come work in our campaign down there. He set up the office. He was living, of course, in Washington at the time. And so, he helped set up the office and showed what the responsibilities were if you're Deputy Press Secretary. Powell asked me for one and he asked Wurfel to fill the other. And I just came up. And so, you didn't get very much swept upon the whole process. It wasn't any sort of tremendously deliberative decision. I'd been filling that role and there was never any particular slack time. We just kind of went on with what we were doing..

Soapes: So January 20th of 1977, you just continued doing pretty much what you had been doing; only it was from the White House.

Granum: Yes. Yes. I guess one minor distinction that no one really cares about. I mean, I was doing more press advance work. I mean more direct working with the crews and so forth in the campaign itself. So although we hired people there, I still had more direct line responsibility for it. I had less and less once we got here because we had a separate press advance office, which worked for me, but was--well, I wasn't so much having to walk the pool here, there, and yon.

Soapes: Could you describe for me something about the routine of your work here? What's a day like when you start and--?

Granum: We start at 8, 8:30, read the papers, drink several cups of coffee. By 9 or 9:30--we sort of established a little bit of a tradition in the sense that we always had a pot of coffee here. Reporters would come by that I'd become sort of friendly with, some that I'm not so terribly friendly with, but we get along. And it's just sort of a bull sort of session. But from it you get a much better feeling of what they're really interested in that day, what the questions are going to be during that day.

Claudia Townsend, who's the Associate Press Secretary, runs the lower press office here, is doing much the same thing except for talking with the reporters. She is reading the papers, seeing what seem to be the most likely questions. I'll add or not add any questions that I might have for Powell. This is anticipating what he'll be asked at the briefing, getting them to him. Usually, Powell's meeting is at 10. Then, it's dependent

upon the briefing times. But sometimes at 11:30, more often 2:00, 2:30, a brief lunch usually at the desk because there are always--it's just sort of a moving process. It's news (inaudible)

Have whatever briefing, calls, -- a good volume of calls---I think sort of an average day, 50 calls, 60 calls, somewhere in that area, and a lot of walk-in business because reporters, unlike all previous times; in any case, they can walk right up here and come talk to us, which is fine. So we do a lot of walk-in business as well. But they're usually the same questions. It's not as if you have to prepare for the 50 or 60 calls---come up with a different statement or find out a different fact for each one. And they had usually one or two or three questions that are central that day, considered the news that day.

Watch the evening news that evening and go home. Sometimes it's a later process than that. Sometimes you're up here 9, 9:30, 10. You don't really know why, but there's been that much going on and there's so much planning that needs to be done for the following day. Jody is perpetually tied up because so many people sort of--what does Powell think about that, or I've just got to see and get Jody's reaction. And so, there's just that--that's the process and demands on his time. So, sometimes you'd end up spending your time waiting to see Jody to do exactly the same thing that these other people are doing, and that is to get his reaction and so forth

Soapes: When you came here--of course, you'd been a reporter, you knew--you'd been around. But the Washington press corps is supposed to have an aura of its own. What was your reaction to the Washington press corps once you had begun to work with them?

Granum: Well, it was a very gradual thing because, of course, the Washington press corps, or what's considered the Washington press corps, I mean, people had come out and covered the campaign. And so, for a while, yes, it was Jim Wooten and then Ed Rabel with CBS was one of the early ones. Donaldson with ABC was one of the early ones. It was a gradual sort of process. It's not a matter of having gone along and not dealt with any Washington reporters one day and the next having to deal with 40. It was a gradual sort of process and you ease yourself into it.

For the most part, very intelligent. They had gotten out of Atlanta, they'd gotten out of wherever, they'd moved up. In the print press you may be dealing with political reporters in the political campaign. Not all of them transferred over here to cover the White House with Jody Powell. I didn't really have a general reaction. They're so individualized given the reporter. Some were very good people, both personally and professionally; some very bad, and different mixtures in between, personally and professionally. Some people you didn't really like those people and didn't care much for their work and vice versa. So it's a very individualized sort of thing. It's not an easy sort of thing. Somebody got the story and it's set in a particular way, be it positive or negative. There's a great tendency to copy that, the whole business of journalism on which I have no profound thoughts--, but it is there, and you have to try and deal with it.

Soapes: What was your feeling about the way they reacted to Jimmy Carter, the outsider?

Granum: Well, it was basically in '75 and especially in '76, Jimmy Carter had a very--on balance, a very positive press. He was new. He was fresh. You know, virtually none of them had ever heard of him until that year, if at all, and in a very peripheral manner. He was new. He was exciting. If anything, you saw his name, were it not for the press, which is the whole process, you know, his name never would have gotten known. He started with small victories and he grew larger.

Because in the campaign the candidate was in the front part of the plane and the bulk of the press corps was in the rest of it--I'd say we took up to a fifth third or so, maybe a fourth of the space-- and the press took the other part, there was an access. I mean, he'd walk back and talk to them, shake their hands, knew their names, much more access to him, and a sense on their part that they knew him, far more than there was when he came in office.

But it's a fairly natural process of lack of access. Air Force One---as opposed to having 50 or 60 members of the press on your plane maybe during the campaign, Air Force One is a maximum of 10 and they're way in the back and they hardly ever see the President. He maybe came back three times--I don't know, there's a record somewhere---during the whole four years. So it was just a different sort of process. And I think some people--I mean, clearly, he had a better relationship with the press corps in the campaign than he did when he was in office. I think that's part of it.

Soapes: Talk a little bit about the way things operate here in the White House. Your job is to work with the press and help them get the news, get the message out that you want out. Jerry Rafshoon was brought in, in a slightly different context, with somewhat the same job. How did this office work with Rafshoon?

Granum: Surprisingly well, given the fact that you had two very distinct individuals as heads of those offices --- Powell and Rafshoon---and the coordination that there was primarily between those two. Powell and Rafshoon did a good job--- a pretty good job--- of keeping each other informed of what they were doing. Like any other organization, it was not always filled--it's supposed to go down, but it didn't always. So there was some overlap. But I think it worked. I think it worked fairly well. And we all knew in large part that it was a fairly temporary position.

Soapes: What was it that he did that you didn't do?

Granum: One thing I can think of offhand was his pushing for acceptance on the part of the President for a series of private dinners with prominent journalists, which was primarily from management people in the White House, something that I'm sorry we didn't do more of earlier and did not continue to do because it gave, in groups of 10 and 12, the feeling of intimacy, a sort of almost one-on-one with the President in a social setting that I think it was very helpful to us.

Jerry coordinated--in his office--coordinated appearances on Sunday talk shows. He attempted to set themes for weeks and months at a time, in speeches and so forth - with

mixed results - that the President would give. A down side, which I'm confident he shared as well, was, of course, the high visibility role that he did not seek but came, because they all knew Rafshoon, they knew Rafshoon Advertising, the coining of "to be Rafshooned or Rafshoonied" --and a slight tendency on the part of the press, therefore, or because of them--the public to see the President as being a bit more manipulative or I suppose more frankly manipulated, than in fact he was. (A gap of silence) I think that was a problem, not a major problem, but a downside to it.

Soapes: The lines of communication within the White House--when you had to get information to supply the press, what were your lines of communication?

Granum: Well, the single and best source of information, of course, is Jody, who has such an affinity and understanding and an ability to anticipate what the President thinks or is going to think. And of course, Jody was in the most contact with Hamilton Jordan, with Frank Moore, with his peers. Secondly, one person in the White House who seemed virtually always to know what was going on, whether it was his particular field of expertise or not, is a man named David Rubenstein, who was Stu Eizenstat's deputy, one of his people, one that works here in the West Wing itself. You know a confirmed workaholic who was here quite literally 16 and 18 hours each day and kept up with the flow of information and so forth in all of the offices. He was the single best source, and certainly on domestic matters, which of course, I dealt with more so than I did foreign policy. Rubenstein was--but it just depended on the area. I mean, if it was a question that involved a particular House member, we'd call Bill Cable, who was the deputy as far as the House. If it was the Senate -- Dan Tate or Frank Moore--in certain instances. I mean, I called virtually everybody---Jack Watson at that time on governmental -- governors and mayors and so forth... or the Cabinet. So, it just--it really depended on the story and in some respects you were sort of a house reporter since you're trying to get the information. And then, helping determine with that person the best way to present it and what you put out and what you don't.

Soapes: What about coordination with the Cabinet offices? Taking part in the HEW (Department of Health, Education, and Welfare).

Granum: It roughly broke down to... Ward Pullman who stayed here two years and left and was succeeded by Pat Barrio. But whoever was filling that work on the Barrio slot was the general coordinator with those Cabinet public information offices -- you know, this month's theme or who in the White House to send that report to in terms of the press area.

When it came down to day-by-day news or some announcement that we wanted them to make, or they wanted us to make, or what's really true about Secretary Miller's relationship with some--I mean, just that kind of matter, more of the daily news and to make news sort of thing, then it was myself. But it's a relaxed-- -it is not a military operation. It would be a mistake to ever make it one. But there is always going to be some overlapping. But that is generally how it came down.

Now, if Claudia Townsend was going to call, fine. And too, you sort of pick up clients. You sort of get people who are used to coming to you for so and so, and maybe are used to coming to Claudia for something else or whatever. And it works itself out.

Soapes: On the tone that you're raising, would you say this was a relaxed office that felt at ease with its job?

Granum: I wouldn't go that far. I mean, by its very nature it was a tense office because there was a great deal of consistency. Not always, but pretty consistently we were under a lot of pressure. A lot of good things happened during these four years, but they were certainly compensated by a number of bad things that have been perceived as happening. And we would go through periods of weeks in which we were under very intense pressure to be here early, stay late, day after day, week after week. So, no, I mean, it was not a relaxed office in that sense. Very tense. Most people in this office smoked, and smoked too much.

Whenever the President traveled, we'd travel, and virtually all of us did because of so many press. We'd go on a foreign trip, we'd have 180, 190 press signed up. Sometimes go in two planes, sometimes in a super jumbo, and be gone, you know, 10 days, different time schedules, trying to deal substantively with different matters. So it wasn't relaxed in that sense. But as far as getting along, this office got along. Had it not, it never would have worked at all. There are very close friendships now within the press office. We knew them very, very well, extraordinarily well, and had to because you had the camaraderie of having gone through a lot of that.

It was relaxed in the sense that we felt we could handle the job by and large. That wasn't always accurate. But that's about as much *mood* as I can think of. One thing I forgot to mention, too, is the National Security Advisor, Dr. Vincent Tad, worked down here and had two press secretaries within our house.. They were two associate press secretaries for the National Security Council... Jerry Schechter, for probably almost three years, and then Alfred Frim for this last year or so. When I said earlier the domestic--whoever was in that position was the primary conduit for foreign policy press information who talked to Dave before talking with Powell with the defense and state press offices there about what they were planning to put out in the briefing or what guidance they had on this question or that.

Soapes: What were the two or three toughest episodes here?

Granum: Bert Lance, certainly. Second to that I would put the accusations of the use of cocaine at Studio 54 against Hamilton Jordan. Of course, at first they had their story about both Jody and Hamilton, and it was proved that that couldn't have happened, so they changed their story. Bert Lance first, Hamilton Jordan, second, and then the amaretto and the Pyramids. For one reason or another, I found myself working very closely with--well, Powell certainly, but with Hamilton on those, on which he just got a terrible rap. [Jordan was accused of spitting crème amaretto on a young woman in a public bar. He was also accused of gazing down the cleavage of an Egyptian dignitary's

wife and comparing it to the pyramids.]

I mean, it was just so frustrating. You're trying to prove a negative - no, I didn't do so and so. And once the accusation is made and once that mindset is achieved and once that question is raised, then there always is some residue from that, in some cases more than others. And it was just a very frustrating sort of time. And you sit there and watch this guy just struggle. Those are the two that stand out right now as something I could really look back on more and haven't.

Soapes: Hmmm.

Granum: Because there was always one process or another, one variety or another. And after a time, they all sort of blended together.

Soapes: Let's take the other side of the coin - the two or three best stories you think came out of this administration?

Granum: Middle East Peace Treaty. To leave Israel with the reports already on the air back in the United States and, for that matter, even in the Middle East. The President took a real chance of going there and trying to negotiate. Leaving Israel and down smooth--I'd been tipped off that, in fact, things were moving, but of course I couldn't say anything about it. Just get on the plane and I just listened to them all. Feeling sorry for Carter, but also somewhat gleeful. And just all the usual sort of razzing, and there was a lot of razzing. Not all of it means a whole lot--on both sides.

And flying to Egypt---a very short flight---going to Sadat just hoping--in cases where everything worked and I was sure, and then coming out, all of that happened. We changed our plans. Sadat and Carter made statements there and we changed our plans. We called ahead and told the press center. We'd first gone to Egypt and then to Israel. And we called back from Israel and said don't break down the press center; just keep it real low key and keep the phones there in case this works.

And then, changing our plans, taking the bus in. It was very ramshackle thing--the buses--through the center of Cairo, to go and file and have briefings there. And just a tremendous feeling of achievement and gratitude for Sadat and Begin, and pleasure that Jimmy Carter had pulled that off.

It's something that doesn't crystallize at the moment, but the whole restoration of honesty. And you know what is so quickly forgotten is the part of the mixture which helped Jimmy Carter win office. But the whole Nixon/Watergate period and the pardon by Ford. Gerald Ford was going to be President, of course, and had he not, I believe, had he not pardoned Nixon. Jimmy Carter was so infused in the age in which he was. He was very convincingly proven to be wrong. He always refused to be dishonest at all on a number of other things. He was an honest man, an honorable man. And like I say, that doesn't crystallize in a moment. That's a steady sort of a constant. But I was very proud of that.

The instance that I didn't mention earlier in terms of intense times - when the [Iran

hostage] rescue mission failed it was just a horribly sick feeling. And we stayed out there all night, and stayed through the night and through the next day. And you're trying to deal with it, and you're fearful, too, of what the repercussions might be there to the hostages, and concerned and sorry about the eight killed, as we learned.

I'm confident there are other positive things. (Both laugh)
[End of audio]