

**Exit Interview with Ray Jenkins, Deputy Director, Press Office**

**Interviewer: David Alsobrook, Presidential Papers Staff**

**November 21, 1980, West Wing of the White House, Press Office**

**Transcriber: Lyn B. Kirkland**

**Alsobrook:** The first question I would like to deal with is, could you tell me a little bit about the sequence of events that led you to work in the White House?

**Jenkins:** Yeah. I had worked in daily newspapers in the South, principally for two newspapers, the *Columbus Ledger* and *Montgomery Advertiser and Journal* for close to thirty years. Yeah, I had worked for twenty-eight years in newspapers in the South and at the time, in 1979, I was editor of the *Montgomery Advertiser*. And we had a change of publishers, which left me somewhat at cross purposes with the new management there, and I was beginning to get a little weary of that job, anyway. And so I was leaving Montgomery, had already, in fact, virtually accepted a position as visiting professor of journalism at the University of Florida. And then I got a call from a newspaper man in Washington whom I had known for many years, and who was real close to the President as well, asking me if I'd be interested in joining the Press Office at the White House. Well, I had always been politically very close to the President. My newspaper had supported him as strongly, I suppose, as any newspaper in the country in 1976, and I said, "If he needs someone, certainly I will do whatever I can." And shortly after that I got a phone call from Jody Powell, and I came up to Washington to discuss it with him. I met with the President, they outlined the type of work that they needed, the type of person they needed, and I said I'd be glad to do it. So I came up here and joined the staff in September of 1979.

**Alsobrook:** Do you recall that first meeting with the President?

**Jenkins:** Yeah. Actually I had met him several times before, almost always as a newsman covering a political figure, really going back to the Sixties. That's when he first came to my attention. But, yes, I do recall the first meeting. That is, the meeting when I came here to talk about joining the staff. I talked to Jody for maybe a half an hour or an hour, and then we went into the Oval Office. It was one afternoon in August, as I recall, and just to chat with the President and get acquainted, get to know one another and, again, he sort of explained what he had in mind. And I remember so well, that as we were leaving, had a very pleasant conversation, talked a little bit about growing up in the South and so on. And, as we were leaving, he said, "Just remember, the only purpose we have around here is to tell the truth." And I said, "Well certainly that's the terms on which I would accept it." So, I was here a short time later.

**Alsobrook:** Do you remember how Jody described the job to you that first time?

**Jenkins:** Yeah, he made it clear that with the coming of the campaign, that he was going to be traveling a good deal, and that he needed, in effect, a No. 2 person in the press office who would be able to stay here and handle things while he was traveling. He needed someone to handle administrative work. In addition to that, the press staff, which presently consists of 42 persons, and that includes the photographers, the press advance people, and all of typists and secretaries and everyone else, did not have extensive journalism experience. Probably my 28 years in journalism was more than the entire White House staff combined and so, to that extent, I became not merely a deputy to Jody but also something of a liaison with the nation's editors. I'd been active in editors' organizations like the American Society of Newspaper Editors and similar organizations, Sigma Delta Chi, and similar organizations. It was understood that I would be in fairly close contact with the editors.

**Alsobrook:** Is that how the job evolved? Did you find you were doing a lot of that?

**Jenkins:** Yeah. As a matter of fact, I did less of that than I anticipated, because the demands of the job are such that you just don't have time to do that much. Mostly we spend our time on the phone reacting to the questions, queries from the press, and I found that I had less contact with the editors out there than I would like to have, but nonetheless I did have a fair amount. I like to describe this operation to someone as being the reverse of being an airline pilot. Around here we have hours of panic and moments of boredom. [Alsobrook laughs.] You just don't have the time to do all of the things that you want to do.

**Alsobrook:** How about daily contact with the President? Does that occur on a regular basis?

**Jenkins:** Yeah. From the outset I began to attend this regular 10:00 morning meeting with the President, which is almost always held if he's in town. It's a half an hour meeting. No great decisions are made there, but we kind of review where we at that moment on legislation, on domestic policy, to sort of plan the President's schedule for the next 24 hours or so. It's very useful. It's indispensable for somebody from the Press Office to be there.

**Alsobrook:** When you communicate with the President, is it mainly through memo or is it face to face?

**Jenkins:** Mainly it's face to face. Oh well, I'd say about half and half. My communication with him in memos, or for that matter, in face to face, are largely logistical type things. I just finished writing him a memo a moment ago about a taped Christmas message that he's going to give next week that the Press Office has some involvement in.

**Alsobrook:** In terms of your daily activities, too, do you find you work closely with Jody Powell or do you have to react to the press when he is gone? How does that work, exactly?

**Jenkins:** Well, given our communications system, we are never apart. All we do is pick up that signal line, the Army signal line, and wherever Jody is they'll reach him. I frequently talk to Jody Powell not even knowing where he is. He may be in the air somewhere. So we're never very far apart, and we do have pretty close communication. Our routine of handling things, if there is any routine to the Press Office, at least when everyone is in town and we are planning our daily briefing, is for the top people in the Press Office—myself, and Jody and Rex Granum, and Alfred Friendly, who is the press secretary for the National Security Council, in effect—we'll all gather in Jody's office and discuss the topics of the day that will be of most interest to the press and try to frame our answers, so that we'll have Jody prepared whenever he goes down to brief.

**Alsobrook:** When you try to respond to the press, do you try to get input from every possible part of the White House, like when you are trying to deal with Iran, do you have to get input from the NSC? How does that work, exactly?

**Jenkins:** It's much like being a newspaper reporter, really. You identify the people who are experts in a given area, and the first thing you learn is, don't make any assumptions. You know, check everything out. You can't possibly know everything that the press is going to inquire about here. You couldn't function at all if you didn't have at your disposal the enormous informational resources of the whole federal machinery. That includes not merely the White House staff, but the Cabinet and agencies as well. And if I get an inquiry about, let's say, agriculture policy, I know the person on the White House staff to call and get a clear answer on it. Rarely ever do we give—a reporter calls with a specific query; rarely do we give it then. We usually have to check it out and then get back to them.

**Alsobrook:** OK, as you think back about this past year or so in the White House, are there certain moments that really stand out in your mind as being particularly interesting or maybe exciting? I guess I am talking about the real high points of your experience here.

**Jenkins:** Well, it would be hard to pick out any particular one. There were so many, because the Press Office is in the forefront of all of it, you know, like the Iranian hostage situation, the rescue failure, mission failure. I know we were here for something like 36 hours whenever that took place. "Exciting" is not quite the right word—I guess, "stressed." Stressful moments that I can remember—certainly the Billy Carter affair. I handled that pretty much by myself for the first week that it went on, but mainly because Jody was on vacation. I was again in constant contact with him on the telephone. That's one of the more memorable experiences, but no, I can't think of ...

**Alsobrook:** OK, like with Billy Carter, did you have to work closely with Al Moses and people in the Counsel's office? Was this almost an hour-to-hour thing, day in and day out?

**Jenkins:** Absolutely.

**Alsobrook:** On into the night, then, something you worked on all day long, then?

**Jenkins:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Alsobrook:** And how about the Iranian mission? What are your recollections of what the mood was like here in the West Wing the day after the raid had been aborted?

**Jenkins:** I don't think I've ever seen a mood of greater sadness. I mean, after all, you did have eight people who were killed, you know. For two or three days at least, I don't think I've ever seen quite so much despondency and despair around the White House as I did here in that particular period—including the loss of the election, for that matter. I might say that that lasted longer. After the Iranian rescue mission failed, we did get pretty much on track within a couple of days, but it was the low point as far as morale or spirits were concerned around the White House. It was just that we felt that we were laboring under a curse, that nothing would go right. That here you had what was given to us as a foolproof, fail safe, almost fail safe operation, and too many things went wrong. You know, any one of a half a dozen things might not have happened, the sandstorm in the desert or what have you, and it might well have been successful. And, of course, if it had been successful, of course, we don't really know what would've occurred, but possibly the hostages would have been returned home and, of course, if they had, I think probably the outcome of the election would have been different.

**Alsobrook:** Were you aware that the raid was coming off?

**Jenkins:** I was not. I knew that something was happening, but I don't suspect that there were more than four or five people in the entire White House who knew it. Now, Jody Powell knew it.

**Alsobrook:** Oh, yes.

**Jenkins:** He was with the President for most of that time, but I did not know about it until I actually, I got a telephone call from a newsman asking about the raid, it was like the middle of the night.

**Alsobrook:** Oh, yes. Since you've had an opportunity to view the press from a different vantage point, it is an interesting opportunity for a person with a journalistic background like yourself. This is a very subjective question. How would you assess the role of the press in the recent election? It's a [unintelligible] question.

**Jenkins:** Yeah, it is. Actually, I wouldn't say that my perceptions of the press have greatly changed since I've been here, but having said that, I came here aware of some of the deficiencies and the flaws in the press and so on, and I think these were sort of reinforced. One thing that I learned right away is, that it's a whole lot easier to write an editorial than it is to make a policy decision. When you're an editorial writer, you don't have access to all the information. As a rule, perhaps the most that you have is just a wire service report. And it's awfully easy to say, "Well,

by God, if I'd been up there, I would have done this, this, and this." And what you didn't realize was the complexity of the decision process. Anytime a decision reaches the President's desk, and even at lower levels in the White House, but anytime it reaches the President's desk, it is not an easy decision, because if it were, it would have been made somewhere else. There's always the so-called downside to it, politically as well as substantively. It's a constant balancing process, a balancing of competing imperatives. The best example, I suppose, is the imperatives of a clean and safe environment as opposed to energy self-sufficiency. There are constant tradeoffs that must go into these, and the decision process, -making process, is infinitely more difficult than I thought that it was. The time for making your decisions is very short. That's one thing.

Another thing is that, of course, I came at a time when we were in the so-called post-Watergate period. It should be called both the post-Vietnam and the post-Watergate period, because during those years the credibility of the White House, the confidence of the press, had sunk to an absolute zero level. And if Jody Powell has done nothing else, and I think that he is uniformly regarded as one of the best, if not the best, press secretary who ever held the office since we started having press secretaries, is that he has restored that minimum degree of confidence in the senior officials of government which is absolutely essential if government is to function. But at the same time, we still live in this post-Watergate climate, and I did find myself, before I came here, troubled about this. And more so after I got here, the tendency of the press to see the government—you know, they talk about this adversary relationship. I don't like to use that because it is only one step from declaring an adversarial relationship to an enemy relationship, but it is there. And in the briefings I have been troubled by the fact that so often it seemed to me that the purpose was not so much to elicit information as to entrap, to try to force Jody Powell to give an indiscreet answer which might take the nation closer to war, or this sort of thing. Related to this is—and I am really echoing what Senator William Fulbright said in an article in the *Columbia Journalism Review* about five years ago when he was a popular figure in the press—but he was lamenting this tendency in the press to, as he put it, scandal had become—either personal or political scandal—had become the *sine que non* of news. If scandal is present, there was news, no matter how trivial the underlying substance. If scandal was absent, there was no news, regardless of how good the underlying substance.

There's also a tendency in the press, and again, this is going back to the Watergate syndrome, a tendency among the reporters to focus on every wart and every crack in the individual as opposed to the total performance. And the cumulative effect of this type of journalistic coverage is devastating, particularly whenever a President has to endure it for a full year, as Jimmy Carter did. He's the only president who had to run a campaign for a solid year before his re-election. And again, also, the fact that the President must stand for re-election means, at the very outset, that every judgment, every decision, every public policy is examined as if it may be politically self-serving, as opposed to serving the interest of the country. And the one thing that I've come away with, is a very strong feeling that we do need to convert to a system of a one-term

presidency, probably, well, a six-year presidency, a one-term, six-year presidency, and that way the President could get on with the business of running the country and would not have all of his policy decisions questioned and suspect.

**Alsobrook:** Mmm-hmm. Have you got any thoughts about what future historians will have to say about this president?

**Jenkins:** Oh, I am absolutely confident that history will look very warmly on Jimmy Carter. He undertook a number of major initiatives which had been on the presidential agenda for many years: the Panama Canal treaties, the Camp David peace process, an energy policy. We didn't have an energy policy when he came to office. Deregulation; he made massive strides in deregulation of industry, and in all of these cases, it meant burning a substantial amount of political capital to achieve what you were doing. If you look back, you'll find that there's a striking parallel there in Georgia. He took on the hard job. He was willing to take on the toughest issues and see 'em through, fight 'em through, and when you do that you just make an awful lot of enemies, and so he had expended an enormous amount of political capital.

He probably could have overcome that, because he had a residual great measure of confidence, I think, in the American people, had it not been for three events in particular that were totally beyond his control. One was the seizure of the hostages. The other was the doubling of OPEC oil prices, and the third one was the Cuban-Haitian refugee situation, which had enormous political cost to it, not merely in the states that were affected, like Florida, and Arkansas, and Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, and Illinois, I believe it was, but throughout the whole country, because it made the government look impotent. In retrospect I see no way that we could handle that situation any differently, but the political costs were very great. The accumulation of all of these things, plus the very courageous decisions that he had made and fights that he had undertaken—successfully, in many cases, were just more—he had taken on more water than any politician could carry.

**Alsobrook:** Is there a side of Jimmy Carter that the American people don't see?

**Jenkins:** Yeah. I suppose there always are. He's a very warm person. His loyalties run very deep. He—uh, uh, hmm, it's difficult to describe him personally. As I say he's very warm, he's very businesslike. He doesn't like to waste time or anything like that, and he's got a sense of humor; it's a somewhat self-deprecating sense of humor. One thing about him is, that he has a rather remarkable capacity for stepping outside the presidency and viewing it much as an individual might be able to, and this manifests itself in small ways. But he's, you know, a very devoted family man. I remember this one little anecdote that might be worth passing on about him. This was one of our 10:00 meetings. He rarely ever complained, and I don't think I've seen him lose his temper. I've never seen him in a table pounding mood, not like the way we used to hear stories about Lyndon Johnson walking up and down the hall roaring like a bull and what

have you. He never loses his temper, but there are times when he gets terribly frustrated, terribly impatient, particularly whenever people are not performing as well as he thinks that they should be.

But on this particular day, I don't remember even when the time was, perhaps earlier this year, maybe in the spring of this year, he was complaining that the White House staff tended to load him down. That's another aspect of it, that he just doesn't know when to quit so far as work is concerned. He tends to take on more than any person can humanly carry. And the White House, I must say, tends to abuse it. I hear so many times people coming in and saying this won't take but five minutes of the President's time. Well, if I added up all the five minutes of the President's time from every one of those requests that I've had, we'd be to the year 2040 or something in five-minute segments.

But he was complaining on this particular day, and it was on a Friday, and he said there was a tendency of the White House staff to load him down with things on Friday before he got out to Camp David. And he said he'd appreciate it if we'd be a little more respectful of his schedule and his demands for *some* relaxation. He started going down his presidential calendar and he says, "Here I had a meeting at 7:00 this morning with Brzezinski, and at 8:00 I had a foreign policy breakfast, and at 9:00 such and such, and at 11:00 Billy Brandt drops in unexpectedly, and I had to see him,"—former chancellor of Germany. And he was going on down the schedule and he said, "Rosalynn's out of town, and I've got to go over and take care of Amy this afternoon," and he didn't bat an eye, you know. I don't think anyone saw that there was something rather touching about that remark. Here's the busiest man in the world, the most important man in the world, but he felt it absolutely necessary for him to take a half an hour out of his day to go over and spend some time helping a twelve-year-old girl with her homework, or violin lessons, or what have you. That's a side of him that people, I don't think, fully appreciate. He is a very devoted family man.

**Alsobrook:** Do you think maybe the American people are rather hard on their presidents, I don't know if it's post-Watergate, or what, but they seem to chew 'em up?

**Jenkins:** Oh, there's no question about that. I remember about ten years ago I was on a panel with George Reedy, who was press secretary to Lyndon Johnson, and he predicted that we were entering a period of one-term presidencies. Actually, we were already into the period. Lyndon Johnson had just left and, of course, different circumstances brought the others down after that, but he was absolutely right that we were in this period of one-term presidencies. And again, this gets back to the press. This tremendous preoccupation with presidential politics which gets more intense and longer, the period of examination gets longer. There is indeed a tendency for the public, through the press, to devour our presidents and then bring on a new one for the next feast. It is something that is very troubling, there's no doubt about it.

**Alsobrook:** You describe in some detail about your role here, is there anything about this job that has given you a great sense of personal satisfaction—professional, or just as a human being?

**Jenkins:** Well, actually, obviously just being in the press office we are not much in the policy-making business. We don't consider ourselves policy makers but it's broader, as conduits of presidential policy, which is a tremendously important thing. When I've performed effectively, I've had moments when I was very proud of it, I've had moments when I just felt like I was a total failure, and it's just part of the job, I suppose. But certainly, just being a part of this administration, and one that I am confident will go down in history as a great administration, as someone who took on some tough problems at a time when it would have been a lot easier to run away from 'em, it's been a real privilege, that I'll always cherish to be able to be a part of it.

[End of tape 1]

[Tape 2]

**Alsobrook:** I would appreciate your thoughts about your own background as a Southerner, and what you've brought to this job perhaps, in comparison with the President's own background, too, because you suggested to me earlier that there were some similarities there.

**Jenkins:** We have strikingly similar backgrounds, probably more than any other person, just by accident of time and geography. I suppose that my background is probably more similar to the President's than anyone else in the White House. I grew up in the same part of Georgia, on a farm, a peanut farm.

**Alsobrook:** You're talking about your own background?

**Jenkins:** Yeah, well, just for the record I might mention that article that we had referred to earlier. I did a piece on the op-ed page of *The New York Times* on July 5, 1976, which deals with it pretty extensively. But I grew up in the same part of Georgia, nine miles from the nearest paved road, on a peanut farm, a farm which had been in the family for generations, I suppose. And like the President, I was the first member of my family to graduate from college. Like the President, I saw no great future in agriculture in the South, and so I opted to go into another profession. Subsequently he returned; I never did. But this sense, it gave me a sense of personal identity with him. He first came to my attention when he was in the Georgia State Senate back in the early Sixties, and I was a strong supporter of his when he first ran for governor in 1966, again in 1970, when he ran for president in 1976, and so on. So it's not only a sense of political identification there, but a sense of personal identification as well that I cherish. Although I have never known the President all that well, I must say that our relationship has always been, until I joined the staff, was as a newsman covering a political figure and subsequently as a staff member.



**Alsobrook:** This was with the *Columbus Inquirer*?

**Jenkins:** Yeah, the *Columbus Ledger*. I was on the afternoon paper there. But it was in the President's circulation area, and when I was on the state staff, I used to cover his county. It was in my coverage area. In fact, one of the stories that I covered fairly extensively was the famous Koinonia Farm, which is not far from Plains, and I don't recall meeting him during that period. I don't suppose there would've been any reason for him to remember that; he was not involved in any way. So, there's been, as I say, largely an accident of geography. I feel a sense of closeness there that probably others on the White House staff don't.

**Alsobrook:** Did you come in contact with Hamilton Jordan or others during this period when you were ...?

**Jenkins:** No, Hamilton is somewhat younger than I am, and so I never knew him until I came on the White House staff, Hamilton or Jody. Actually Hamilton, Jody, the President, myself, Charles Kirbo, we all grew up within a radius of about 50 miles from one another in southwest Georgia.

**Alsobrook:** Could you tell me anything about your future plans?

**Jenkins:** Well, at the moment we've got to decide whether we are going to stay in Washington. I say "we" because, you know, families tend to get terribly neglected whenever you're on a White House staff. I think anybody who works on the White House staff ought to be an orphan and a bachelor. [Alsobrook laughs.] After having neglected them for the past 15 months or so, I really do want to do what they want to do. That's my wife and daughter. I have two other sons. One is in college, and one's already out of college. Their preference would be to stay in Washington. That is not my preference, although I don't feel that strongly about it, and certainly if the right kind of opportunity came up, I would stay here for their benefit, as well as mine.

But the other day, after the election, the President had a meeting of senior staff, and each of us as we were going out--it lasted for about an hour, a very warm meeting—I'm terribly sorry that we didn't record that meeting, but we didn't. And as we were going out, each of us had a minute or so just to say a word or so to him, and he had told us that he was going back to Plains to live, which came as no surprise to me. I kept telling people that whenever Jimmy Carter left office, he was going back to Georgia, probably to Plains, and people would look at me in disbelief, but he told us that he planned to go back to Plains to live, and it came as no surprise to me. And I told him, "I almost envy you." I told him that I really envied him going back to Plains, and if anybody asked why he did it, just use that great line out of Uncle Remus where Br'er Rabbit says, "The briars they may scratch sometime, but it's my briar patch." And I genuinely do envy him going back there. I almost wish that I could go back there and just pick up where I left off thirty years ago.

**Alsobrook:** Finally, Mr. Jenkins, could you give me the most permanent address and telephone number, so several years from now somebody from the Carter Library could contact you?

**Jenkins:** It's unlikely that I'll be at this place five years from now, but I can give you my address here. It's 5902 Kirkside Drive, Chevy Chase, Maryland, and my Montgomery address is 2026 Commodore Street, Montgomery, Alabama. But I don't think I'll be going to either of those places. Very likely what I'll do, given the fact that there are not many positions in Washington that I could readily go into now, chances are very good that I will go back into daily newspapers in the South somewhere. Probably in a smaller town. I prefer living in a medium-sized to small-sized city. Or perhaps will go into journalism education—if not immediately, at some time in the future, I suspect I'll go into that.

**Alsobrook:** Well, thank you. We'll be talking to you again.

**Jenkins:** OK. Enjoyed it.

[4:34]