

Exit Interview with Chris Mathews, Presidential Reorganization Project, Richard Pettigrew's Office

Interviewer: David Alsobrook of the Presidential Papers Staff

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David Alsobrook: I thought, first of all, Chris, I would ask you a little bit about your recollections of the background for the Presidential Reorganization Project, what you recall about it, how did it come about, and who had input.

Chris Matthews: Yeah. Well, it began as a campaign commitment on the part of the President made during the '76 primaries. My own recollection of it was -- I guess it began with the series of interviews the President did for major magazines in '76 in the spring -- *Fortune*, *US News*, *The Washington Post Outlook* section, *Business Week* -- where he laid out what he saw as the main emphasis his administration would have, would take in the area of making government more effective, cutting down on bureaucracy, regulatory excesses, exercising fiscal restraint, and basically defining what you might call a pragmatic, positive approach to government which recognized the government had gone too far in a lot of areas and that traditional liberalism really didn't have an answer, that it was more important to try to clean up the act of government, make it more streamlined and effective rather than posture -- continue to posture for more government activity -- activism.

So I think that's what really distinguished Carter's candidacy from the other liberal Democrats, Jackson and Udall, and the others that didn't run in the sense that he recognized the limitations of government, but he also recognized that government had a role to play, so he wasn't a conservative in a traditional sense.

So out of the campaign committee, well, first of all, it was totally unformulated what he would do in reorganization. All he said was that he would cut down the number of government units, which was a kind of a, I think, a symbolic way of saying, "I believe in less government or less government proliferation about government agencies." But he did not have any plan to reorganize the government. When their transition began, I understand -- and this is before I came here -- Harrison Wellford was given the task of coming up with some directions for the project to take and some notions of how it would be implemented. Then Bert Lance came on and was given the nut -- OMB [Office of Management and Budget] was given the nuts-and-bolts responsibility for reorganization. Initially in the spring of '77, Dick Pettigrew was to be the chairman of a presidential commission on reorganization, which was then, sort of a blue-ribbon panel, which would screen the proposals which worked their way up from OMB. That never was created.

David Alsobrook: Okay, and you're getting ready to tell me about this blue-ribbon commission that didn't, that didn't quite develop.

Chris Matthews: Well, that was -- there was a dispute. Pettigrew wanted to -- well, he was asked to develop a plan for a blue-ribbon group and presidential commission, which would be kind of a political brokering and screening unit, which would take what OMB had developed in a nuts-and-bolts form and then decide what should go as a presidential initiative in reorganization.

Bert Lance was able to prevent that from being created. He wanted OMB to have a clear ride. Pettigrew was left as a result not as head of a commission but as sort of a political advisor, broker, and salesman for what OMB was developing. So he had a role in an input level in terms of making recommendations and possibly forming some of the OMB proposals, but in fact, there was not going to be any brokering going on. OMB would make the recommendations. So that was the influence of Bert Lance, and that was sort of an early decision, though whatever reorganization became, it was a product of that decision or didn't become. And subsequent to that, there's always been a difficulty in identifying what Pettigrew's role was vis-à-vis OMB, and it's been a difficult relationship a good part of the way, I think. Other people would probably give you a different account.

When we got here, there was a decision made that reorganization would be bottom-up, as they say, which means the term implying that it would look for problems and solve them rather than have a master scheme. It would also not be top-down in the sense it would not be aiming at increasing the presence/control of the government but increasing the ability of government to serve the people, deliver services.

However, saying that, nevertheless, the fact is that the reorganization's team, where they hired some operatives from the beginning, believed that the President expected reorganization to be structural, major changes in boxes, different things.

So on the one hand, we were giving lip service to the idea that it was to improve government services, tangible the way the government affects people, but in fact, what we were doing or what had been doing is attempting to do something dramatic that would look -- fulfill what the President perceived as his campaign commitment, which is to do something bold and dramatic, meaning move something around, you know, eliminate something, consolidate something, break up something.

So there's been that all along. We have to do something dramatic. We have to create a department. We have to get rid of a department. We have to do something like -- and all along that has been sort of the guiding principle because people on the staff level, like Harrison, basically non-politicians, felt they were taking the President's thing almost like scripture. What he promised literally in the campaign is what he was meant to deliver in office, which maybe a more shrewd politician would say, "Well, let's go with the essence of what we tried to get across in the campaign but deliver on the spirit of it. Let's find the

