

JODY POWELL EXIT INTERVIEW

[This is an] interview with Jody Powell, Press Secretary, December 2, 1980, approximately 3:40 p.m., in his office in the West Wing of the White House. The interviewer is David Alsobrook of the Presidential Papers Staff.

ALSOBROOK: Mr. Powell, before your arrival in Washington, after the 1976 election, did you have any preconceived ideas about the role of the Press Secretary to the President?

POWELL: I probably had some, but I certainly had very little in the way of an appreciation for understanding what the job actually entailed, or what it was like. I had, during the transition period, made it a point to talk at length with most of the other people who had held this office before, both Democrats and Republicans. So, I had a lot of advice and comments, thoughts from them--they were all, it seems I felt at the time, very cooperative and forthcoming, and I think, genuinely anxious to be helpful. I can understand why now. And they were helpful. But, as I think they would be the first to admit, there's really no way for somebody to tell you exactly what you're going to be dealing with. It's something, no matter what else you've done before, I suspect you have to see it and get into it before you begin to understand it.

ALSOBROOK: And now that you're here, been here four years, what are your ideas about the role of the Press Secretary? What does the Press Secretary do and how does this compare with your earlier feelings?

POWELL: Well, I think a Press Secretary, unfortunately, may have more potential for ill than for good, in the sense that there is very little that you can do--perhaps a better way to put it would be that your ability to affect things in a positive way, particularly in the short term tends to be pretty marginal. I think that your capacity to affect things negatively when you make mistakes is a good deal greater.

I think every President has used the Press Office and the Press Secretary in a different fashion related to the identity and the characteristics of the President and of the Press Secretary. And many Presidents have had more than one person in this job over the course of time, and that relationship and the role have changed as different people have come in and out. And it also, I think, changes in an evolutionary way, over a four-year period, even when it's the same people, the same President, and the same Press Secretary. Basically, it sort of boils down to presenting and explaining administration policy and actions and so far as the President's decisions and actions are concerned.

But, in fact, it goes a good bit beyond that because there's no way to do that adequately without dealing with the spokesmen for the various departments which include the major and the more active departments--certainly Defense, for example, Defense and State and the national security area. And you also, actually, have to be concerned not only about what comes out of the press office in this or that particular department, but quite

often you have to deal with what may be coming out of the third or fourth level down and the policy makers in those agencies because the Presidency is one institution in our government that is personified and is one person. All of that tends to come home to roost at the White House and on the President's back, for good or for ill, usually for ill. And you face the same problems that other people in the White House do, in that there is no way to control or to manage--there's really no way to even know about or to be aware of, a lot of what goes on, until it's too late to do anything about it. And, perhaps, particularly in important matters that stretch out over an extended period of time; yet, it is extremely difficult to ensure that the administration is speaking in a way that's both accurate and understandable and reasonably consistent because you will always have divergent views being held by people on any important or complex matter. And the nature of the system is now that quite often--and I'd tend to say more often than not--those views will end up at some point or another being part of the public record.

ALSOBROOK: You know, as you think back about the four years here, are there certain things that stand out in your mind as the high points? You know, the things that gave you a great deal of personal satisfaction?

POWELL: Well, they would be, I suspect, the same sorts of things that others in the White House would take satisfaction from. This job is not the sort of job in which there's very much that you can consider to be an accomplishment that is peculiarly or particularly or primarily related to just to this office; it tends to be what you do well or not so well is almost always just always a part of and in support of a much larger effort. So, the things that are the high points are the same sort of successes that other people would point to--the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, the energy program that involved taxes, the reform in the regulatory system, the Panama Canal treaty. Those were the successes.

ALSOBROOK: Are there certain of these areas that you feel like you played more of a policy role in than in others?

POWELL: Well, I think, actually my role in policy has generally tended to be exaggerated a bit in the popular media. There's a difference between being involved in, being there, taking part in policy discussions and playing a major, direct role in the formation of policy, in the sense of being a high-level advisor to the President on particular aspects of policy. If I contributed anything to the actual making of policy, I suspect it had more to do with sort of asking questions and just participating in discussions in a hopefully reasonably intelligent fashion and sort of being part of a process or a group of people that were digging around for--trying to get a grip on this or that particular difficult issue or concept, or so forth.

ALSOBROOK: I want to focus a little bit on recent history. You know, obviously since last November the Iranian crisis has occupied much of your time; what kind of unique problems has this crisis presented for you in dealing with the press?

POWELL: Well, those which would normally be associated with a story that, first of all,

is of such long duration--in which there has been such an intense interest on the part of the public and on the part of the press. The fact that it is a story which comes out of Teheran; it comes out of Washington; it comes out of various places around the world; so it's one which you have even less control over than is normally the case. You seldom have much control over much of anything, at least, not for any extended period of time. You also had human lives at stake, and there you were dealing with a situation [in] which your public statements could have an effect for good or for ill and again the potential for ill was probably always greater on the lives and safety of those people. And that certainly is an extra dimension that is not usually the case with the stories that you deal with.

And also, there's also been almost continuously throughout the things that were going on, that were happening, that were being done which needed, frankly, to be kept secret. And, generally speaking, they are the sort of things that you can keep quiet just so long and then as bits and pieces of information begin to dribble out, you have to make judgements as you go along about, at any particular point, whether you're better served to correct a false bit of information or just to ignore it, or whether you're better off to tell a little more to help them get the story straight if they're going to deal with it. And, of course, it is the only time in the past four years where I have faced that situation, which I suppose any Press Secretary could face on any day, in which there was a direct--at least in my view--a direct conflict between my obligation to be truthful on the one hand and my obligation--which I frankly consider to be a higher one--to the national interest and in this case, this particular case, to the lives of American citizens and so forth. And, I obviously, from what I've already said, I considered it my responsibility to protect, in this particular case, the rescue mission, and so forth; to be a higher responsibility. It's that situation, as I've said, it's the only time that I've felt that I had a direct conflict. And it is not the sort of situation, frankly, that is likely to occur, probably as often as the average person thinks that it would. Generally, there are a lot of times when you'd be better off if all things were equal, if this story or that story were not written, or if it were written a different way. But, there have certainly been cases [in] which the publication of a particular story clearly was contrary to the national interest. But, generally speaking, you can deal with those without saying anything that's not true, and if you can't, then, in most cases, I think, not only do you have to deal with the obligation to be truthful, but also to be, I think, to be effective in the job, then you have to have a certain amount of credibility. And it's not something that should be quite without regard to moral considerations. It's not something that you ought to toss away or expend carelessly.

ALSOBROOK: You know, in addition to having to deal with the press during this period, was there also a problem in trying to deal with the White House Staff? Because I recall a story in the [Washington] 4mStar, I think, that came out, you know before the raid, talking about some descension within the staff, about whether or not military action might be used. Was that also a problem too, in the staff wanting more information, and you're just not in a position where you can give it to them?

POWELL: Well, there's some of that. That's not peculiar to the Press Office, and

perhaps, not even less peculiar to the Press Office than it is to other staff positions in the White House. But, that is a continuing problem where the more people that know about something that ought to be held in confidence, the greater the chance that it won't be, and so it's just something you just have to deal with with some tact and understanding. And, generally speaking, the better the people are you're dealing with or the better they understand that need and, frankly, more responsible they are and the more responsible their position is, the more they are likely to understand and not be personally offended, if you just say, you know, "I just don't think I can discuss that with you or anybody else at this point," or, you know, "Let's don't get into that right now."

ALSOBROOK: I want to ask you a different type of question about the Iranian thing. Was there a feeling that the Iranian crisis also obscured some of the other domestic and foreign issues that you were trying very hard to take care of during this whole period?

POWELL: Oh, there's no doubt about that. I suspect, in retrospect, the Iranian crisis will be seen to have dominated this year and to have dominated an American election in a way that [there's] probably not really quite a parallel to it, certainly not in recent history. Obviously, elections in the past have been dominated or heavily influenced by wars or by economic crises and so forth. But for one to be so dominated by a particular crisis involving, at face, fifty-two people is quite unusual, I think. And certainly for the first three or four months, really even longer than that, I suppose--it was very hard to get either the press or the public to focus their attention on much else. Although during that period of time in the final portions, the energy legislation was passed, and the windfall profits tax was passed, and so forth. So, it wasn't a case that it so much, I think, paralyzed the government or even the White House or interfered with the ability to carry on business, but it did interfere, and it did make it very difficult to communicate with the public about what was going on.

ALSOBROOK: I want to ask you a very subjective question. What's your personal assessment of the press coverage of this past campaign?

POWELL: Well, I think that more than in most campaigns--and I'm not sure exactly why--that the press did not adequately discharge its responsibility to inform the American people about a candidate who, in this case, is now the President-elect. That's always a very difficult thing to do, and it's a very sloppy and sometimes unfair process. But, I think, Governor Reagan was coming into office and in many ways less well-known in any real sense about what he's likely to do and so forth than even Jimmy Carter did in 1976.

ALSOBROOK: I want to ask you an even bigger question than that. How do you feel television has changed press coverage of the Presidency, and the White House, say, over the last twenty-five years?

POWELL: Well, of course, I wasn't around before television, so it's very difficult for me to contrast it to a situation that I never saw or experienced directly. But, there is no doubt that it's had an immense impact, not just on the President but on American

politics and so forth. And, I think, on the down side it has contributed a great deal to both the oversimplification of matters and issues and questions, and so forth. And I think it tends to promote the extremes to an extent that the print coverage does not--with a very limited amount of time--which I think every television correspondent would admit readily. It's always woefully inadequate to deal with a given story. The sharpest, rather, the most extreme point of view, the most extreme position is most likely to be that which gets the attention. It is such a powerful medium that I suspect television has changed the way government functions, the way politics function, probably more than any other single thing. Because we're always accused of catering to television--that is a legitimate charge--but the fact is that you really have no choice because that is where most of the people get their news and their impressions and so forth. And what they get from television, I think, quite often is more impression than anything else. And how our system deals with that is a very serious question. I am quite ready to admit that I don't know what the answer to it is.

ALSOBROOK: How about your thoughts on how future generations of Americans as well as scholars will evaluate the Carter Administration?

POWELL: Well, I think quite naturally, I suppose, that history is probably going to be very kind to this President, to this administration. I think even in the relatively short-term and even in the next few years, there will be a much finer appreciation for just the specific accomplishments, the things that he did that were important changes for the better. And I think, to some extent, even with respect of a few years, the value of those things will become more apparent. I also think that with some perspective that much of what now passes for criticism for this particular President will tend to fade in significance--they tend to be the sort of criticisms that are more stylistic and don't go so much to the heart of what being a President is all about, in the sense that they don't go to character or judgement or those sort of basic accomplishments; those sort of basic qualities. I also think that the next administration--and I also wish them well--as they struggle to deal with the same problems that this President faced that there will be, perhaps, a greater appreciation for just how thorny and difficult and politically unrewarded those matters can be.

ALSOBROOK: I want to go back and touch on a couple of things; this will be a little bit of backtracking; now, I think, two years ago Professor C. Vann Woodward came to the White House and it seems like I recall your meeting with him on that occasion?

POWELL: I met him but not to talk to him.

ALSOBROOK: But it seems like there was a comment, something about you had made concerning his book, Tom Watson, or something like that. Do you recall?

POWELL: Well, Tom Watson, I can't remember, frankly, what I said except that Tom Watson has always been an incredibly fascinating person to me, and I have read his book and had always wanted to meet the author. To me, one of the real personal pleasures and privileges of working in the White House is obviously the opportunity to

meet so many people that you had always wanted to meet, even if it was no more than just to say that you got to meet them, shook hands and tell them what you thought of this or that or the other thing. There's probably no place else in the world where you have many opportunities to do that with so many people from the arts, literature, sports, music; you name it.

ALSOBROOK: Are there other personalities that stand out in your mind that you really enjoyed meeting [during] the time that you've been here?

POWELL: Oh, God, yes. It's sort of hard to know where to start. One person that I did get a chance not just to meet but to talk to at some length is Shelby Foote, who wrote the three-volume history of the Civil War, which is probably the best Civil War history that I have ever read.

ALSOBROOK: Were you on that tour out to Gettysburg with the President with Shelby Foote?

POWELL: Yes. In fact, I was the one that suggested the President get Foote. We were just talking about it and, so, it was a little selfish on my part; I wanted to meet him. I figured he would come if the President invited him, and then, you know, if you're interested in the Civil War, [to] have--somebody like that to be your tour guide is about as good of a deal as you can get.

ALSOBROOK: Did he tailor that tour of Gettysburg to suit the President's interests? I recall [that] he told him something about [Robert] Toombs's Georgia sharpshooters or something at one point or--maybe that was at Antietam--

POWELL: I really don't know. I'm sure he did recognize the President's interest in, you know, Georgia, in his native state, and so forth. He and, frankly, the guides there--the Parks Service people, in fact, one of the things I've been meaning to check, the President told them was to put a marker up where the Georgians had broken the Union line on the second day. And we went back up there sometime later and they hadn't done it yet and he asked me about it as something worth following up on to make sure it gets done before the 20th [of January 1981] that it would be something worth following up on--make sure it gets done.

ALSOBROOK: Any sports figures that you're met that--?

POWELL: Oh, yes. I, sort of, just about everybody. None of them sticks out in my mind so much as [Mohammed] Ali; certainly, he's probably maybe the best fighter; certainly the best one that I can remember. I was always a great [Rocky] Marciano fan. I would hate to say that he was a better fighter than Marciano, but I suspect Ali is.

ALSOBROOK: What do you recall about the day the young Olympic hockey team came to meet the President?

POWELL: Not a whole lot except that one of the things that always strikes you is how impressed people are--and you tend to forget--just to have an opportunity to meet the President and to be in the White House, and sometimes they're really taken aback by it all and they're sort of bashful and inarticulate and so forth. And almost afraid to speak or move for fear they might do something wrong. So, I suppose one thing [was] how young they were. Here these kids were, at least, for those brief few days, probably as idolized as any group of young people, young or old, in the country. Then everybody's so young, kids, you know, college kids that are twenty years old.

ALSOBROOK: I've heard several people say, and, I think, the case of the Olympic team kind of illustrates this; that in recent history anyway, recent Presidents, never before have we had so many ordinary people, you know, come to a White House.

POWELL: I really think that's very true and also such a rich variety of people, both ordinary and noteworthy. I think this President, both in the East Wing and the West Wing and the Mansion, probably the people that have been to this White House have reflected American culture in all of its aspects better than any on the more classical side; certainly, no President in four years and no First Lady has had a greater quantity or quality of musicians and artists of every kind. In addition, this President has had to a degree that, I think, no one else has, representatives of, certainly, equally important other aspects of American culture from--and the quality of those people from jazz to country to blue-grass to gospel; frankly, aspects of culture that are in many ways are more distinctly American than in the more classical times types, really have gone into making American culture what it is today.

ALSOBROOK: Just a couple of more questions. I dug up an old quote from an interview that you did last year. You're quoted as saying, and you can correct me if this is not exactly right, "I don't have this idea that Jimmy Carter is the only President that we've ever had or ever will have who is good enough for me to want to work for, but it's very unlikely I could serve someone else as effectively." Do you feel like this is still a pretty accurate representation of how you feel about that?

POWELL: Oh, certainly in so far as this particular job is, or a White House Staff job sort of thing, and I don't have any idea that I would ever be in a position to serve any other President again except in the most indirect way. But, I think a President's White House staff, in their relationships, tend to be personal as well as professional, and that degree of personal understanding and so forth is an important part of it and just the fact that I've worked for this particular President now for ten years was an advantage, I think, and a helpful aspect of the relationship that obviously I would not have, well, you know [in another job].

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

POWELL: Not really, because I really haven't made up my mind.

ALSOBROOK: Have you ever thought about what you'd like to be doing in ten years or

five years?

POWELL: Well, I think that's one of the things I'm beginning to think about now because the end of this administration will be a major sort of watershed in my life, and I will be doing something very different from what I have done at this point, and clearly whatever I do decide to do next year will have a real impact on what I do five to ten years from now, so I'd like to make that decision about what I do immediately with some appreciation for the fact that it will lead or will not lead to the--

ALSOBROOK: Well, you know, if you had all of this to do all over again would you go down this same road that you've been since 1968, '69?

POWELL: Well, I certainly wouldn't, in specific matters, I certainly might do this or that or the other differently; but on the long haul, overall, I certainly have no regrets about where I am right now. I would prefer to have won the election, but, you know, I consider having had the opportunity to work in the White House and particularly with this and under this President to be an absolutely valuable thing and the rarest sort of privilege. It's not the sort of thing, I suppose, you could ever really plan on or figure out ahead of time how you were going to get to do it and so forth, so it's more something that happens to you than you can make happen. And I've got no regrets about that at all.