

Exit Interview with David Rubenstein, Deputy Director Domestic Policy Staff

Interviewer: Emily Soapes of the Presidential Papers Staff

December 3, 1980, in his office in the White House

Transcriber: Winner Hoover and Lyn Kirkland

[Audio is poor quality; transcript is best product.]

Emily Soapes: I wondered, first of all, was the '76 campaign the first time that you had worked with Stu Eizenstat or had you been with him in Georgia?

David Rubenstein: No, no, no. I worked in Georgia in the '76 campaign for him, starting with the general election campaign.

Emily Soapes: And what was it that attracted you to Jimmy Carter the candidate?

David Rubenstein: Well, at the time that I went to work for him, he was the Democratic nominee.

Emily Soapes: Yeah.

David Rubenstein: That was a big attraction. But I thought that he had a good chance of winning the election and that he represented what I thought the Democratic Party should represent at that time, which was a more moderate image and they had been presenting for some time. And that was one of the most significant factors.

Emily Soapes: Had you been active in Democratic Party politics?

David Rubenstein: Yes. I had previously worked on the Hill for Senator [Birch] Bayh, who also had worked--run for President. I was his Chief Counsel for about a year. And after he had withdrawn from the Presidential race, I was offered a job in the general election by Stu to work on his staff in Atlanta, which I took.

Emily Soapes: On the issues staff?

David Rubenstein: Yes.

Emily Soapes: Oh, okay. And did you have a specific area--.

David Rubenstein: --Yeah--.

Emily Soapes: --Of expertise?

David Rubenstein: My area that I was assigned--I can't say I was an expert in it at the

time--but was to be in charge of figuring out what Ford's record was and to make sure that every speech that Carter gave there was some criticism of Ford, and to make sure the facts were right, and make sure everybody knew what Ford's record had been. That was the job that I did.

Emily Soapes: Did you think back in this campaign about where you had been four years ago and that there was probably someone sitting in the Reagan headquarters doing the same thing that you had done?

David Rubenstein: Oh, sure. It happens in every campaign. In fact, this time we had somebody who was an expert in Reagan's record - Barney Frank - worked in the campaign and he sort of did the same job I did. And in fact, Stuart had done the same job in 1968 for Hubert Humphrey in his campaign.

Emily Soapes: Then after the election, were you in one of the clusters that worked on the transitioning in Atlanta or here?

David Rubenstein: No. I was Stuart's deputy during the transition, so I didn't sort of get in any one cluster. I sort of helped him do whatever he was doing, which was trying to oversee the liaison with the cabinets, departments, and agencies, and also helped to develop the policy and legislative program for the then incoming President. So that's largely what I did, and also a lot of the hiring that had to be done for our staff for other people.

Emily Soapes: Right, right. And how did you go about the cabinet liaison? Could you go into detail a bit about that?

David Rubenstein: We had cluster people assigned to become experts in each of the departments and agencies. And they would meet with the--then the people occupying those jobs and develop materials for the incoming cabinet secretary and agency heads. And as they would proceed with that process, we would review those materials and try to make sure they were focused on what we thought would be useful to the incoming people.

And as we prepared materials for the President, we prepared letters for the program - administrative decisions he would have to be making - we would ask each of the cluster people to provide us with information that was relevant in their areas about what we needed to know, like what would be the bill that the President would have to comment on very quickly, what would be the executive action he would be expected to take or would be required to take early on, and so on.

But, I prepared, based on a lot of that information, a kind of calendar that was handed out by the President when he first met with his cabinet. I think it was St. Simons Island in Georgia. And it showed all the executive decisions that had to be made by the cabinet or department or the President over the first six months. And that was a lot of the type of thing that we did during the transition.

Emily Soapes: So then, you were overseeing a number of very important areas that the President had to act on?

David Rubenstein: I wouldn't say I was overseeing a lot of it. Stuart was in charge. I was helping as his deputy doing it. And that was principally what I was doing during the transition.

Emily Soapes: And I guess it was assumed all along you were going to become his deputy here at the White House.

David Rubenstein: It was assumed by me. I'm not sure it was assumed by him. But we had a situation that was somewhat similar to that of many people during the transition that we didn't know, despite what people thought, what we were going to be doing in the Administration.

The President did not designate Stuart or any of the senior White House staff people, with the exception of Jody and a few--one or two others perhaps, until 10 days before he took office. Therefore, we did not really know and could not hire people for particular jobs. We didn't know that Stuart was going to be Domestic Advisor, so we couldn't hire a staff until just about a week before. So, it was very hectic throughout the transition process.

The most frustrating thing for everybody was knowing, or not knowing, whether or not they would have a job and what their job would be. So, I'm sure the Reagan people are going through the same thing.

Emily Soapes: Transition by nature is a good bit of chaos.

David Rubenstein: Inherently. It's a difficult time for a lot of people.

Emily Soapes: Would you be able to say how well documented it is in the records from what you saw? I've seen some of the records that are in courtesy storage, and I wonder if--.

David Rubenstein: --I just don't know. The real story of that transition could not be captured in documents.

Emily Soapes: That's what I thought.

David Rubenstein: And is probably best captured in some of the newspaper accounts or things like that at the time--what went on in that transition, the problems it had, the things that it did right. I'm not sure the documents would show that.

Emily Soapes: So then, when you did find out you were coming to the White House, okay, could you describe what you had to do--your job description, I guess we would say? Describe what it is that your work consisted of--a great deal of issue-oriented work

now for four years.

David Rubenstein: My job for the last four years has consisted of generally serving as Stu's deputy and helping to oversee the formulation of domestic policy; and to help with the running of our staff, specifically responsibilities that included, obviously, substituting for Stuart with the President and others whenever he was not available; helping to provide domestic policy advice to the President and to the Vice President, and others. One of my jobs that I took on was to advise— keeping Mrs. Carter fully informed of what was going in domestic and other affairs, so that she would be briefed when she went out and spoke.

Also, I was in charge of preparing the President for his press conferences and in charge of preparing materials for his debate. I was generally in charge of preparing the State of the Union messages. I also reviewed and edited all of the President's speeches and statements, and I would say also helped keep the White House senior staff informed about what was going on in the domestic policy area.

Emily Soapes: Is that through the daily meetings?

David Rubenstein: Through the daily meetings. Generally, if people wanted to know what was going on in the domestic policy area and if they couldn't get a hold of Stuart they would speak to me, or I would spend a lot of time briefing various people about what they could say and what our positions were.

Emily Soapes: And you say you helped work on the State of the Union addresses and the President's speeches and statements. Is that after the speechwriters had finished or during the time the speechwriters were working?

David Rubenstein: Well, sometimes ahead of time.

Emily Soapes: We've interviewed several of them and so I know that that's--.

David Rubenstein: --Well, sometimes ahead of time we would prepare a draft. We'd always review every draft that they produced before it goes and give our final comments to the President. And one of the other things that I did was to travel with the President on all of his trips to make sure that he had somebody with him on the plane who knew laws sufficiently and all of the facts and figures and knew what he could say and couldn't say, and also to help him answer questions and things like that that might come up on the road about local issues.

We always made certain that he was briefed on every local issue that we could possibly come up with. And we would try to supplement anything that he might ask about while he was traveling.

Emily Soapes: Is he a pretty willing advisee? We read that he absorbs great masses of detail.

David Rubenstein: He is a very quick reader, and I would say has very good recall for what he has read. And typically, for trips or for meetings, we would give him a great deal of paper and he would almost always know it as well as the people who wrote it. He had a very good ability to remember what he had read.

Emily Soapes: Now, paper on domestic issues from the agencies and the cabinet. Does it proceed Bert Carp, David Rubenstein, and Stu Eizenstat? Is that--?

David Rubenstein: --Well, in the domestic policy area, what will probably happen is staff experts that we have will be working up drafts of a decision memo for the President in coordination with the cabinet people or cabinet staff people and other people in the White House who are interested. As those drafts are going forward, Bert, I, and/or Stuart may be involved in various stages of looking at it.

But when the staff person has what he or she thinks is the final draft ready to go to the President, it will probably go through--it will go through Bert and he will edit it to meet his... and forward to Stuart. Before Stuart reads it, I'll look at it and either send it back or send it to Stuart or make some comments to Stuart about what I think should be in the document. Stuart will probably make some editing changes himself, and then we'll put it into the President. That was typically how our staff worked.

Emily Soapes: Now, this procedure of sending all the domestic work did not come to DPS without some resistance from the other agencies and departments. Is that correct?

David Rubenstein: I'm not aware of that.

Emily Soapes: And--.

David Rubenstein: How else was it going to get in to the President?

Emily Soapes: Yes. Well, I gathered that some cabinet members thought that they should be able to send it straight to the President.

David Rubenstein: Well, every cabinet member always has the right to send every paper to the President--or any paper they want to the President, and they did. What may have frustrated some of them was that they found out if they sent it on one day it didn't get to the President the next day. What would happen is it could get held up at the White House staff while it awaited the comments of Stu or--if it was Big--if it was a foreign policy matter, or other White House staff people.

But the cabinet secretary's memo to the President went in. It just may have gotten held up until staff comments could be incorporated. I think there may have been a feeling on some cabinet secretary's part that perhaps sending a memo to the President wasn't the best way to communicate with him because it would get bogged down in the White House staff system. And that they--maybe the best thing was to talk to the President. But I'm

not sure that's true. I just don't know.

Emily Soapes: Did you see a growing realization of the importance of working with your boss, Stu Eizenstat? The interviews and the articles that have been in the paper through the Administration spoke of that he did--he gained stature, he gained influence. Did you see that or is that something that's just been touted in the press?

David Rubenstein: Well, no, it clearly happened. When he came into the Administration, he was a young lawyer from Atlanta that no one had heard of.

Emily Soapes: Right.

David Rubenstein: And he became the person who was the most substantive person in the domestic area around the White House and the person who it became clear the President was relying on for domestic policy [inaudible]light. As a result, Stuart gained some stature because of that. As well, he had to do a great deal of work on Capitol Hill in terms of trying to push our programs through. And he maintained a policy of being willing to meet with virtually anybody. And so, so many major corporate leaders or labor leaders or others who wanted to have an influence on policy knew they could always meet with him. And as result, he also became well known and well liked because he was so accessible and ready to meet with people.

And what he told me not long ago was he was struck by the contrast between the '76 convention in New York and the '80 convention. In the '76 convention, no one had ever heard of him and he just sort of wandered around, couldn't get into various events. No one bothered to stop him while he was walking. In the '80 convention, he couldn't walk anywhere without people coming up and bugging him, asking for something, telling him how great he was, asking for autographs, and so forth. It was a big contrast.

Emily Soapes: And he's gained a good reputation as a coordinator.

David Rubenstein: That's right.

Emily Soapes: --A synthesizer-- somebody called him. Is it important do you think--he is a well known and, as you say, accessible spokesman. Is it important for the rest of the staff to remain in the background and let him be their mouthpiece?

David Rubenstein: We try to follow a policy of not having too many people speak for the President on domestic policy or foreign policy. It's the same problem that the Reagan people seem to be having now with foreign policy.

Emily Soapes: Yeah.

David Rubenstein: So what we did is just not encourage people to be talking to the press on the record about what the President's policies were. You can't talk--you don't talk to the press, and they did very often---- off the record or for background purposes. But the

person you want up front giving the briefing and making the major interviews is the President's domestic advisor because of the fact he's the one with the responsibility. Because of the fact, he's the one with a personal relationship with the President, and it's his job to do that.

So we--myself and Bert Carp-- typically would try to keep our names out of the paper. So, there's probably--there are very few people in the country who ever heard of me.

Emily Soapes: Yes. You are very hard to find anything specifically in an index about, so you've succeeded. In the next few years, before we get back to you, can you list some of the issues that would be most important to explore that you have worked on?

David Rubenstein: In the next few years?

Emily Soapes: Yeah. If we can get back to you in the next few years, what should we come talk about? What do you consider at this point to be the most important things that you worked on and that you should explore in depth in talking about your work?

David Rubenstein: Well, I think the--a couple of things that would be most important. One would be the role that we played and that the President played in the whole changing of the relationship between government and business I refer to it as deregulation of so many industries and our whole effort in regulatory reform. The whole regulatory area is one that will be the President's--one of the President's great domestic legacies.

The second major one would be energy because we accomplished so much there. A third one would be the economy because that is where I think we've failed to accomplish what we wanted to accomplish - and may have been a major reason why we were defeated - and what went wrong and what went right, and how we were not able to persuade enough people that we deserved another chance to--more time to fix the problem is a thing that I think is worth exploring.

David Rubenstein: --

Emily Soapes: If there had been a second term, what issues do you think would have been at the forefront of your work? Well, obviously, the economy.

David Rubenstein: Well, we would have moved quickly to get the economic revitalization program enacted. We would have pursued very vigorously national health insurance and welfare reform, and our youth employment bill, had that not been defeated, or not passed, in this lame duck session. We would have also tried to consolidate our energy successes by getting a few remaining energy bills off of the Hill and into law, and also making sure that the energy bills which we had enacted in the first term were implemented the way we wanted, so we could begin to really have our energy policy work.

We would have also moved fairly aggressively to further implement and expand our urban policies, which the President thought was very important.

Emily Soapes: Yeah. I guess you had a lot of trouble [inaudible]. Okay. I know that this is very routine for you, but I want to thank you because I think it's going to be a help in--.

David Rubenstein: How many people are you talking to?

Emily Soapes: Let's see. I think about 30 or 40.

David Rubenstein: And I think President Johnson, as I remember, has lots of oral tapes. Are you interviewing everyone on the White House staff? Have you been interviewing cabinet officers and other--?

Emily Soapes: --Right now, we are only allowed to talk to White House staff. Because while they're on the payroll, the tapes are the President's property and there's no legal problem there. So, that's where it is right now. However, after the Administration, heavens yes, we really do want to go into the cabinet secretaries, the under secretaries--.

David Rubenstein: Track them down.

Emily Soapes: Yeah, all of those. Yes. Tracking down is--has not been as hard for--at least the other libraries— hasn't been as hard as they thought it might be. And Truman has an ongoing program. Eisenhower is getting ready to close up theirs. Johnson, as you know, has a massive program. And Kennedy, last I heard, had something like 1,200 interviews that he had done.

David Rubenstein: Really?

Emily Soapes: So it's--right now, we're just concentrating on the staff because we can do that without there being a deeded gift or any kind of legality problem. But, yeah--very definitely.

David Rubenstein: Good.

Emily Soapes: Thanks for taking some of your time from your work. I really do appreciate it.