

Exit Interview with Al Stern, Deputy Director of Issues

Interviewer: Emily Soapes, Presidential Papers Staff

May 1, 1980 (no location given for interview) [Inaudible] 1st, 1980

Transcriber: Lyn Kirkland

[Archivist Note: Due to poor quality of the original audio, some audio segments were unintelligible. This prevented a full, accurate transcription. As a disclaimer, the quality of the original audio could have affected the accuracy of parts of the transcription.]

Soapes: Now I learned from David Alsobrook, who works with me, that you have worked for Hubert Humphrey for a time. Is that how you met Stu Eizenstat?

Stern: That's the person who used to be over the 1968 add campaign.

Soapes: I see, I see.

Stern: We worked in the same building then, in the same area. He did research, especially the negative research of the campaign [inaudible] on Nixon and the Republicans. They have always had some issues...

Soapes: So this is nothing new to you?

Stern: No.

Soapes: Not at all. Then you worked for him, Stu Eizenstat, in the '76 campaign.

Stern: I was his Deputy Director!

Soapes: What does the Deputy Director of Issues do in a campaign?

Stern: Well, I think that varies from campaign to campaign. In '76...

Soapes: Yeah, specifically?

Stern: What we did was establish the structure of the issues office, that is: how many, what areas would be covered during the campaign. We recruited people. I did all the administrative work... the travel and all the other...the payroll and all that stuff, and made sure that the operation ran smoothly to be more substantive than administrative and we developed a technique where we had consultative groups to avoid the issue of calling them *task forces*. Task forces had proved to be a real debacle in the '72 campaign where they kept issuing promulgations and recommendations---papers which the campaign was unhappy with.

Soapes: Uh huh!

Stern: We decided on some task forces and were or very near to accepting it, but it was very difficult, so we avoided that this time by having consultative groups which we could call on every day and whose names we could use as being involved in the campaign---without necessarily giving them a series of tasks and deadlines and dates and, I think, that was very successful. So we did that, and I kept in touch with them.... So...

Soapes: Now, how many, roughly, groups did you have? A hundred? Ten? A couple dozen?

Stern: No, No. I think by the end of the campaign we must have had some 14 or 15 separate groups of designated categories for individuals who found themselves in relationships. One or two actually met regularly. The economic one did, to allow for response.

Soapes: Oh, yeah, you want to be out front.

Stern: We wanted to be out front, yes.

Soapes: Yeah, and you apparently worked in '72.

Stern: I did some, a little bit in '72. I was not as deeply involved in the '72 campaign, not because of any lack of desire on my part but because the campaign was so disorganized they didn't know how to use people for that, but I had been involved in the campaigns for a long, long time.'68 was not my first.

Soapes: No?

Stern: No!

Soapes: Were there similar groups for the '80 campaign?

Stern: No. I don't think you can campaign today. It's very different when you run an incumbent.

Soapes: Yeah, I would think so.

Stern: Technically what you are doing is taking the next series of initiatives which the administration *might* take as what the future holds and of course in large part trying to defend and explain the record, so it's just very different than being either in opposition where you are attacking the record as opposed to ...

[The tape goes blank for about 20 seconds, and then picks up again].

Soapes: You were talking about the consulting groups.

Stern: Yeah, yeah, we had those groups.

Soapes: And that you don't use them in an incumbent situation.

Stern: And then we had the issues staff itself.

Stern: They consisted primarily of young people, many of whom had not been through national campaigns before. I think it was a very able group. Some of the youngest ones being among the most able. Remarkable. I will give you the names if you want them.

Soapes: Yeah, I wish you would.

Stern: I was enormously impressed by two of the young boys. I use the word *boy* because it is the only applicable term. Oliver Miller who subsequently went on to Yale and got a Rhodes Scholarship who handled agriculture and some other issues as well, and Bob Kegler who went up to Columbia Law School after handling a whole series of issues, including some very delicate ones like gay rights. And then, of course, we had Kitty Sherman who came with them....

Soapes: Yeah, I knew that.

Stern: And is now at OMB. We had a large number. They were very able. It was, I think, in my opinion, the most efficient operation of the campaign....the issues operation. They certainly worked very hard. Campaigns are enormously stressful—onerous. In spite of the fact they hadn't been there before, they were able to pace themselves well enough to put in those 7 day weeks and 16 hours a day with only a few of them sick....and the stress does increase, no doubt about that, but they did very well. So, that was the campaign.

Soapes: The issues groups worked out of the Atlanta headquarters, of course.

Stern: They worked out of Atlanta headquarters, right. We had a group up here as well....a smaller group. Joe Duffy was in charge. Harry Schwartz was the executive. I had three or four of them working among them as news staffers, as well. I think those were the two areas in which we had a regular on-going missions. We had of course Dave Rubenstein who was now hired.

Soapes: A good core for the DPS.

Stern: Amusingly enough, Dave, who had been there every day from morning until late night...took off one day to play tennis...the last week of the campaign. I needed him that morning and when he came back I told him that, he cursed himself out for going out to play tennis once during the five months. He was a stereotypical work-a-holic. Anyway, that was it.

Soapes: Now, were you furnishing information for speeches or position papers for the candidates?

Stern: We did. Position papers primarily but we also worked very closely with the speech writers group. Jim Fallows was actually sort of with us at the time as well but moved over at the end, and there were a couple of other speechwriters there, most of them just [inaudible]...so we worked closely with them. We, of course, did the issues work for Rosalynn as well. She had one person on her staff. I remember... (pauses)...[inaudible]...I think that was it, something like that. Whatever it was, it was not

a name which immediately produced confidence, but nevertheless a very able person. But he came to us for issues, not because obviously he couldn't help himself and as the campaign went on, Rosalynn dealt with issues of real substance. This was not the candidate's adoring wife merely talking about how she was sure her husband would do a fine job. So she dealt with all kinds of issues possibly [inaudible] and then we had a daily operation of responding to the news accounts on substantive issues and watching the Ford issues operation and dealing with them as best as we could. I think probably the most dramatic moment in terms of sheer panic, which is part of the campaign, went on when apparently the UP had documented, tape transcribed, where they had Pres. Carter saying that he would increase taxes except on lower income people. Well, Ford people lined up Simon, Moyer, Stevens all of the doyens to denounce that thing to the average person. Well, we got the tape out to listen and as it turned out the President had said, as he lowered his voice, had said lower and middle income people, so we were saved on that issue....and then I had to call UP and get them to change the story...something that news agencies don't like to do. Luckily enough I found a person who was both professional and, although obviously harassed and harassable, and ultimately sensible. They had had the tape transcribed by an outside group, and so in some sense he was off the hook. He went back and listened and found out that what I had said was true and then made sure that not only did he print a retraction and a follow up, but every time the Ford people came out with their statement, they put on the additional [inaudible], that is the original segment, on which the Ford fact as stated was erroneous. That, I thought that was very helpful to us. I called the guy at UP to thank him about a week later for doing that and he told me it was the first time anybody ever thanked him.

Soapes: Oh me.

Stern: [laughs]Which intrigues me. Think of that right there....and something where there was no way of forcing them to do the right thing. We could complain about the error at first...

Soapes: Yeah.

Stern: ...but the forthrightness in which he handled it required [inaudible] ...it was surprising that nobody had ever done that before, because I don't think their methods were so good that they had never made mistakes before. But anyway, that was one incident. The campaign has a lot of them, but I won't go into them in detail.

Soapes: That was a good example.

Stern: That's one. And then, of course, we have the debate books to prepare.

Soapes: Right, you must have been a very important part of the debates.

Sterne: Well, it really depends upon the issues staff. They were enormously lengthy and not particularly absorbable in their initial form. I felt terribly sorry for Carter who prepared out of those books. If I can be a bit vulgar for a moment, there is another amusing anecdote about preparation of the debate books [extreme traffic noise in background on tape, making it unintelligible for several seconds]

we were up very very late and started working on debate book and foreign policy...and Dick Culbert, who worked on foreign policy for the issues group kept shifting grounds from trying to do it in the briefest possible form and trying to write out all the specialized, terminological inexactitudes which are the common parlance of diplomatic dialogue...obviously almost unintelligible, unreadable, and surely unspeakable, and as time went on, people were getting more and more irritated and tired--cranky. We kept telling them to take these long essays and put them into *bullet* form.

Soapes: Right.

Stern: And they would come back with something that Bob Hunter was working on, as well as others, and it was unsatisfactory. I kept saying as I read it that it just did not strike any note of realism....the output was unfortunate. And then about...it must have been 3 or 4 in the morning...after the umpteenth re-write...by that time I was past being annoyed, I said: "That's the problem! You simply can't make bullets out of bull shit". So..., but anyway, we did debate books...and, uh, the, uh.....we did a number of them. In fact, that was it. We had large type [inaudible...compiled?] by the end of the campaign which went out to all the state offices and issues operations across the country. And then we won.

Soapes: And then you won. Then you went to the transition.

Stern: And then I went to the transition...with a two days break. I went up to Detroit, which was my home base, deposited a lot of stuff, and came down for the transition where I headed up a whole batch of what we then called *clusters*. Peculiar.

Soapes: Yeah, you headed up foreign policy, defense, and HEW. Now, foreign policy and defense I can see.

Stern: We also had agriculture.

Soapes: And agriculture too? Did you get to choose or where they assigned? How did that work?

Stern: I don't know really how it happened. [Laughs] It is hard to remember.

Soapes: By the way, in a transition things are happening so fast...there are separate...

Stern: There were really three individuals who were handling different clusters, myself and two people from Jack Watson's shop. David had then become Stu's deputy, which I had suggested to Stu, and I think he has done a fine job. He had not had a vacation.

Soapes: He had not been to play tennis then?

Stern: I don't think so and I'm not sure he deserves a vacation. He'll be needing to take a vacation after this passes [inaudible]... But at any rate, there were three of us: Bruce Kirkenbaum, who was here on Jack's staff and Kirk Pastoff (?) over in Treasury who was also there. The three of us sort of divided up the world and I think I had the lion's share of it.....at least I had well over two-thirds of the work... But that was a period of great turmoil and I must say not a very successful enterprise or transition. I

don't think we were successful for the administration. I think part of it was that the personnel operation was never really geared to produce the results. We never rewarded the people who worked with us.

Soapes: Despite all the talent inventory programing...

Stern: Despite all that stuff...it did not work well. And I think we made the mistake of allowing the cabinet members to choose all the sub-cabinet positions which meant that they went to their circles rather than going to the circles to help the campaign---and the loyalty then of the sub-cabinet positions was primarily to the cabinet officer, then to the President, rather than to the President directly. That has been corrected on occasion since but it still plagued us for some time. So that was transition.

Soapes: Inefficient?

Stern: Inefficient.

Soapes: And how come you decided to come and leave your professorial duties?

Stern: Well, I'm on leave from my university. My university is in Great Britain. They've been good to me the way that universities are, that is, they are generous but only reluctantly so. They always give you a sour feeling about the good things they do. They never do it without motive. Nevertheless, I thought I would stay down for a while. I did not plan to be here this long. And I thought it would be interesting trying to help and there was one position that I wanted and didn't quite get, it was the head of the Endowment for the Humanities. But a lot of opposition developed to that, mostly on the hill. And I think we were a little-----I don't know, whether it was a good thing or bad thing—but that didn't happen and Joe Duffy got it and he does a splendid job. No problem, he's been with us all the way through, so in that sense somebody who is on the inside and worked hard and was obviously capable of doing the task up to the standards, and so forth. And then I stayed around; the tasks were interesting anyway. I had a lot of errands to do here. In the first place I had a good relationship with Stu (Eizenstat) and I could report directly to him on issues and then I was able to operate across the board on any domestic issue and I concerned myself on and off with economic issues for this administration. I've been fine. I think my track record on predictions is good. My policy recommendations have not necessarily been followed, but that's all right. The competition can have it (laughs) and. I'm not sure that's so good. And then I had a little cluster of issues which I took care of constantly. Arts and Humanities was one of them—cultural policy, as I saw it; U.S. territories, because I thought normally they dropped below the level of visibility of somewhere in Syria...

Soapes: Now, were these the sort of things that you could just pick up the phone and say, Stu, I am going to work on U.S. territories?

Stern: No, we just talked about it and that was fine. Nobody else wanted it.

Soapes: Yeah, you didn't have to fight anybody for turf?

Stern: No turf battles.

Soapes: No turf battles for territories?

Stern: The domestic policy aspects were sound. [inaudible] The space agency and some aspects of NSA. Some of the [inaudible] I worked with the research activities and energy and I have my concerns.

Soapes: Would you also have worked with Frank Press's office?

Stern: Always. A great deal. After all, Frank, primarily, seems to me, was the one—the lead for technical advice and technical assessment.

Soapes: He is.

Stern: But there is a, but—well, I've done science too. And there is a... though he obviously is more of a political scientist and a better trained one than I am. I'm not so sure we have the same historic perspective ... I did [inaudible] as well as philosophy science, so.... But, there is a, there are a lot of policy aspects of it which are not necessarily just based on technical assessment. Things which need doing. Areas where they excessively exacerbate political possibilities and such things and I try to watch those. Later in the administration we had a large effort in trying to revitalize the economy and one part of that was industrial innovation. We had a large study and there were recommendations on that which have resulted in all kinds of legislation and some programming. Not quite enough to make a difference.

Soapes: In your work with the endowments and cultural activities, one problem that I've seen mentioned constantly is lack of funding. What can a liaison person in the White House do towards certain things...what could you do?

Stern: Well, one of the things is we talk to OMB. You indicate the policy needs funding and this is not really another request from another agency. They have to know that this has a policy function. And actually the endowments have done well during our administration.

Soapes: Uh huh, uh huh. I understand there is fear among them that they might not do as well.

Stern: I cannot say. I cannot say. It depends upon what the incoming administration's views really are. I don't think anybody knows really. There isn't an administration yet. All you have is different consulting groups of people.

Soapes: You've been through that before.

Stern: We'll see what happens. We'll see what happens.

Soapes: Yeah.

Stern: If they take the predatory stance they say they are going to take, then everybody is in difficulty—good things and bad things. The notion that one can cut merely fat requires an advanced degree in butchering, which none of these guys have. They'll no doubt cut the lean as well [inaudible] and I understand that weapons go long before golf courses do over in the military, so it wouldn't

surprise me if that should happen....if similar things should happen to other agencies. And at any rate, I've worked that budgetary thing and occasionally, if there was some kind of brouhaha, which...[inaudible] scandalous, I would make sure that politically, both [inaudible] said the right things and make it as personally solid, and get it somewhere or fund in Congress and talk about that [inaudible], but amenable to some perspectives, not necessarily agency perspectives. More importantly, I try to keep them free of political influence.

Soapes: Any agency, anything else you can talk about? Okay?

Stern: In general the attempt is always to see that they are responsive to contributors, and that's a mistake in those agencies. I don't necessarily think that peer review is the final answer to every decision problem, since a number of academics that I know claim they have no peers and a number of artists always claim that moral judgments are essentially establishment judgements. After the two hundred year history of the *Avanti garde* and total opposition to establishment judgments, many artists feel that is not the way to make awards. Quite different. And of course, we have another player here anyway—Joan Mondale.

Soapes: Right. I was going to ask how much did she get involved in what you did.

Stern: She was deeply involved in the endowment...the arts endowment.

Soapes: She was very visible

Stern: And very visible. She was *the* spokesman for the arts community....and I think a very good one.

Soapes: After all, there had not been.....well, Mrs. Kennedy, yes

Stern: Occasionally, but Joan did a much better job than that.

Soapes: She was much more consistently out there.

Stern: She was out there, she was [inaudible] and she was totally involved with it and she also has the knowledge of it, the substantive knowledge, and some training, and a great deal of experience and, by the way, very fine taste, and that helps a lot. The taste, I think, affects her steady judgment, she's good. So, that's fine. She did a good job there. So, I think that all those tasks didn't take up most of her time and she could do many of them at the same time without necessarily stumbling all over herself. I think most of the time here is spent meeting constituent groups and constituents and listening to special pleas and making sure that is not really an encumbrance on the agency, and at the same time, not clogging up the agency with any political pleas. [Inaudible.] I think those agencies have been, you know, without real failure in this administration. They've done well. All of them, with the exception of NASA, but that problem is a much larger problem. It goes back to the initial design characteristics of the space shuttle...decisions that were made long ago and which were not remediable afterwards.

Soapes: And that was something that you were involved in?

Stern: I was involved in that one

Soapes: What about Sky Lab? That's one thing

Stern: You mean when it came down?

Soapes: Yeah, yeah...was that any...?

Stern: It was just a matter of keeping informed as to where it was and what the prognostications were.

Soapes: Yeah, yeah. The only NASA thing I can really think of is Gemini.

Stern: Well, we had all those explorations, including the...

Soapes: The Saturn and all that. Yeah, that's gotten marvelous...

Stern: Unfortunately, it's gotten very little follow on because the budgetary screws we had did not permit many new starts, given the overruns in the shuttle program almost all the money went...

Soapes: Yeah.

Stern: When that's finally finished, and I hesitate to suggest a date, I think the space program is going to have a new lease on life, but until that is operational the space program will be in difficulties that includes some parts of the military program.

Soapes: Of course. Could you take an example of an issue that you dealt with and talk about how it came to your attention and what you did about it...who you consulted with or informed?

Stern: Well, let's take the NRA.

Soapes: OK

Stern: I just got the patent bill today. It was just passed in the lame duck session. But at any rate, I think the initiative for this particular one came from Jordan Burroughs over in Commerce who was Assistance Secretary of Science and Technology. For a long time there had been complaints that the rate of innovation in American society, industrial innovation, had dropped...that we were not as inventive as we were, that new products were not as common, that we were stagnant in that sense and that other countries were doing it better. Now, to begin with, innovation as a concept was, at least two years ago, a kind of a buzz word in the business community and was, quote-unquote, behind all [inaudible] indicators and the hope for every possible advance to be made. Folks exaggerated on both sides. The first decision that Stu made was to do a domestic policy study, between Stu and myself, and we allowed Jordan to design the first attempt to do that. And he came over, his assistant, Michelle, came over with a series of flow charts which were just incredibly complicated...it was the structure...tasks forces and reporting dates and all kinds of things; very well planned but much too complex.....and I sent them back to Jordan to do them directly and simply. And what we did was, we had two stages, we had an outside

group that met and a series of departmental/interagency groupings that met. Innovation was widely defined—and by the way, I must say that we had never convinced ourselves that there really was a drop in innovation. All we knew was that there are some things that could be done which might increase the rate of innovation and since, at least in this society, innovation is considered a good thing; more could not be considered bad. I don't think it is as simple as that. But, of course, you know the lag of innovation was blamed on we're giving up engineering, research, even basic research (which we addressed directly in the [inaudible] clusters), and the inability for people to find venture capital, the obsolescence and the requirements of maintenance of an old plant that doesn't permit new enterprises, the merger/conglomerate syndrome in industry and corporate world which made it easier to buy something than to do it, and a whole range of other issues.

Soapes: All symptoms of what they call the advanced, industrialized society

Stern: All of it. Then, of course, we had heard as well from some economists who believed that there was a long wave cycle, called the Kondratiev cycle, in which every 40 years when we would get a splurge of new things and a refurbishing of plants and when we were between there was nothing we could do, and we were on the downside so there was nothing to do there. So we got some analysis as well. It just seems to me that a 40 year cycle is not particularly convincing because when you get three of those it means you have gone 120 years into the past and if you're looking merely at that event and ignoring things like the world wars and so on, so more dubious enterprises, it is hard to imagine. We would like to see somebody doing this, but to base policy on this is not necessarily accurate planning. But anyway, we had a few task forces from industry set up. They submitted reports including an obvious wish list. They see government regulation as a chief hindrance to innovation, but they see government regulation as a chief hindrance to everything...and innovation, as I said, was a buzzword then so regulation was hindering that. And tax structure, of course, they were concerned about. [Fire truck sirens go off in the background making it difficult to hear what is being said for several sentences.] So anyway, we had these wish lists coming in and we had an interagency decision...interagency meetings and then we had a series that was also added, what initiatives we actually would take, there are some things the government can do, or something we can't do, and we had...

Soapes: When you say "we" are you referring to you and Stu Eizenstat?

Stern: And Gordon LaRouche and about 4 or 5 others.

Soapes: Okay, okay.

Stern: A small group. We led four or five initiatives. We had a series of recommendations over to the President, including a fairly complex series of recommendations on patent policy which the President was unfortunately informed of in grim detail...He must have had some 20 pages of reading on patent policy. It was something that should not have gone to the President, but did, and he made decisions in response. In fact, the major object of contention then we could not get into this bill that just came out; it was too controversial. We lost that issue. So we had a series of initiatives including some small business items because it turns out that the question of who does most of the innovation is also a question of

Stern, Al

whether it is a large or small business. Small businesses have a track record of doing most of the innovation in society, so there was a question of how we were encouraging that. So we had a series of initiatives, some done by executive order, some by legislation.

Soapes: And the...

Stern: And the last particular part of that, the last one I expect to see, is this one: there are some programs which we started which I am afraid will be subject to budgetary restraints and will not then therefore continue. That's a mistake.

Soapes: And were you able to satisfy most of the constituencies who were...?

Stern: Oh, I don't think you ever do that. I think...

Soapes: Will they be back in another administration to try again?

Stern: Oh, I expect so, I expect so. I also think that some of what they wanted was not necessarily the best thing to do.

Soapes: If you thought so you would put it in a policy.

Stern: [Inaudible] enough the patient is not the best diagnostician of his own ailment, but he certainly knows what's hurting...but why it's hurting and what's to be done about it is not necessarily in the same head.

Soapes: I know that we're coming up, have three o'clock coming. Let me ask you, if we could get back to you in another five years to go into detail....I was just trying to sketch out some of the things you were doing...to go into detail...

Stern: When is this you want to do it?

Soapes: In about five years.

Stern: That's possible, but what makes you think I will remember any details in five years? (Laughs) But, all right, sure, I will be glad to do a follow up interview sometime.

Soapes: Okay. Maybe three, maybe ten. We don't know either.

Stern: Six months ago is what I was going to suggest.

Soapes: Will you be going, in other words, will you be going back to the Detroit area?

Stern: I don't know that. I'm not sure

Soapes: How would be the best way to try to find you?

Stern: Well, there is a suggestion that I hope is pursued. I just mentioned it to Rich Richberg last week. Somebody, I think Jack Watson's office, I suppose, should keep a kind of roster of up to date of where everybody is, both so we can get in touch with each other and others can find us.

Soapes: Somebody recommended to me some sort of an administration alumnae club like a professional alumnae club.

Stern: Something somewhere...and I think that should be done through the administration and not really through the White House.

Soapes: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay, well.

Stern: My immediate... I expect I will return to Wayne State, but I'm not sure yet.

Soapes: Okay, okay.

Stern: I won't be back there until the next academic year.

Soapes: You're going to take some time off, I hope?

Stern: I think I'm going to have some time off, yeah.

Soapes: Thank you.