

Jimmy Carter Library  
Exit Interview  
Robert (Bob) Thomson, Congressional Liaison  
December 11, 1980

**Dr. Thomas Soapes:** This interview is being conducted with Mr. Robert Thomson in his office in the Executive Office Building on December 11, 1980. The interviewer is Dr. Thomas Soapes. Present at the interview are Mr. Thomson and Dr. Soapes.

Could you just tell us, first, some background about where you were born and your formal education?

**Robert Thomson:** Well, I was born in Spokane, Washington and grew up in Washington State. I went to the University of Washington for an undergraduate degree in political science and then spent three years in the army. After that, I went to Georgetown Law School. I've lived in Washington for about the last 11 years.

**Dr. Thomas Soapes:** Did you get into politics at a young age, early age?

**Robert Thomson:** Not really. When I came back to Georgetown Law School, I worked as an assistant to the executive director of the Democratic Senate Campaign Committee and, of course, was involved up there with various [inaudible] Democratic campaigns.

When I graduated from law school, I left the committee and went with the law firm Preston Thorgrimson Ellis & Holman, which is a Seattle law firm, but I was in the Washington, D.C. office of that firm. And in that capacity, I advised several senators and congressmen and political committees on the new campaign spending laws.

So I was involved to that extent, never really in the operational side of politics, and I really never performed an operational role in any campaign until the President's re-election campaign this year, when I was an assistant to the state coordinator in Illinois during the primaries, and I ran in the State of Washington for the President's re-election campaign during the general election.

**Dr. Thomas Soapes:** How did you come in contact then with the Carter administration?

**Robert Thomson:** When I was working for the campaign committee, Senate Campaign Committee, I met the President, Hamilton Jordan, and other chief staff members when the President was advising the Democratic National Committee. They were holding meetings around the country to help candidates who were up for election during the mid-year elections.

**Dr. Thomas Soapes:** Was this '74?

**Robert Thomson:** That's correct. That's correct. And I also did some volunteer work for the Carter campaign, legal work, on the Coast during the general election in 1976.

**Dr. Thomas Soapes:** And then how did you then come into the administration?

**Robert Thomson:** About two months after the administration was in office, I got a call from Frank Moore asking me to come over and interview for a job as senate liaison with his operation. I came over and interviewed for that job and was eventually hired. Came on board in about April, late April.

**Dr. Thomas Soapes:** In '77?

**Robert Thomson:** '77.

**Dr. Thomas Soapes:** Could you outline for me what your -- the general scope of your duties were and who it was you reported to and--?

**Robert Thomson:** I was initially hired as one of two senate liaison persons. Dan [Tate] was the other. He and I represented the administration, specifically, the White House, in the Senate, and my job was more or less to supervise the lobbying on issues of key importance to the President, things like the Panama Canal Treaty and waterway user fees, truck/rail deregulation, air deregulation, Civil Service Reform Act, and issues of that nature. I lobbied senators on that -- on those issues and coordinated the administration's approach to the Senate. In addition to that, I responded to the general casework requests and things of that nature that the White House Congressional liaison traditionally sees from the members of the Senate. I also worked on appropriations and budget matters.

**Dr. Thomas Soapes:** And what -- and where did you fit in the chain of command in the congressional liaison office?

**Robert Thomson:** Well, Dan Tate was actually handed the Senate liaison office. He and I reported to Frank Moore. We dealt on numerous occasions with the President and the Vice President, but we reported to Frank Moore.

After, let's see, it was mid-year in 1978, I was promoted to Frank's deputy, and in that capacity, I was more or less responsible for coordinating the internal operations of our CL staff and represented congressional liaison in the policymaking process within the White House, coordinating agency congressional liaison, making sure they were properly utilized to support presidential priorities, generally making sure that for each issue we had a White House congressional liaison first [was assigned] and that regular reports were made, and the progress on each of the issues was transmitted to the appropriate senior staff or to the President himself.

**Dr. Thomas Soapes:** Would you characterize what kind of meetings you would have directly with the President?

**Robert Thomson:** Well, there are the routine and -- as deputy?

**Dr. Thomas Soapes:** Um-hmm.

**Robert Thomson:** There were the routine regular meetings that we had. I chaired a 7:45 deputy's meeting. Each morning we met in the Roosevelt Room and went over the issues of the day; was heavily weighted towards Hill matters but also concerned other internal matters in -- on relations with the public at large. And that meeting was generally used to set the agenda for the senior staff meeting, which followed immediately thereafter.

I attended the senior staff meetings and participated on some occasions. And when Frank Moore was gone, was unavailable, I would also attend the 10 o'clock meetings with the President. Those were the routine and regular meetings that we had scheduled, scheduled meetings. Over and above that, there were numerous meetings that were ad hoc, that were dealing with a single issue we happened to have before the Senate or House. We would hold a meeting

with the President, either an internal meeting with our staff or a meeting with the appropriate members of the House or Senate, to discuss those issues, a substantial number of those meetings.

**Dr. Thomas Soapes:** Would these meetings with the President be meetings at which he would make decisions and give direction, or was it mainly for you to simply inform him of the progress of things?

**Robert Thomson:** They were both types, both types. Usually, he made decisions on paper, and the meetings were to give directions on strategy or to inform him of development or to provide a forum for members of Congress to present their views to the President or members of the White House staff or cabinet people to present their views to the President on the pending legislative issue prior to his decision. On some occasions, they were decisions made at the meeting.

**Dr. Thomas Soapes:** Who would you say was the most frequent source of legislative strategy in the administration?

**Robert Thomson:** Oh, I think it's difficult to say that one individual was the most frequent source. Certainly, Dan Tate and Bill Cable, Frank's deputies for the House and Senate -- Senate and the House, respectively, were valuable resources. We also relied on the good offices of domestic policy staff, some of the people who were experienced in the Hill and Hill work, to advise on what should be done in particular pieces of legislation. And an important source was the House and Senate itself. We looked to our allies up there to provide assistance and advice on what course should be followed. On numerous occasions, the cabinet secretaries and their chief deputies, their congressional liaison assistants were also particularly useful. Those were the chief sources.

**Dr. Thomas Soapes:** What role did the Vice President play?

**Robert Thomson:** Well, in the Senate, he was particularly important. He, of course, has constitutional duties in the Senate, but over and above that, he had substantial experience in the way -- ways that that body works and, of course, knows virtually all the members personally and dealt with the leadership up there a substantial number of times. So we would look to him for advice and counsel on

how to proceed, and also, we used him as an important communicator with the senators and on certain occasions [inaudible], as well. He would contact members of the House or Senate and express the President's viewpoint and the rationale behind our position. He was extremely -- extremely helpful and invaluable really.

**Dr. Thomas Soapes:** What would you say were the two or three most difficult issues that you had to deal with?

**Robert Thomson:** Oh, I think the Panama Canal Treaties was perhaps one of the most difficult. I was in charge of that effort in the Senate [through the] congressional liaison [shop]. It was obviously an issue about which right-wing elements in the country felt strongly.

Treaties were not completely understood by the American people, but when we came into office, of course, when the President took his oath of office, the Latin American community, the various South American and Central American nations, were expecting the treaty to be completed very, very soon.

And it's my understanding the process had been stopped in midstream when President Ford was going into re-election for obvious reasons. And the Panamanians and their allies were becoming impatient with the progress. In my view, the President had little choice but to proceed immediately to get the treaties presented to the Senate and approved by the Senate, and it was a very difficult and contentious issue.

I think the energy bills, which I worked on, were also very difficult, easily the most heavily lobbied legislative proposals in the history of our nation. There was a constant battle between consuming interests and producing interests, a battle between states which had energy resources which were net exporters and states that were net importers, a regional battle between the West and Southwest, the Northeast, the frost belt and sunbelt, battles between various types of energy producers -- the coal producers, the oil producers, and battles even within the oil-producing community itself in the independents and the majors, and personality conflicts that are attendant to any major legislative fight in the Congress.

All these cross-turns and conflicts were at work in this

battle over energy, and it was all taking place in an environment which bordered on crisis. We exported \$80 billion a year in good American currency to oil-exporting nations. It became apparent that -- it was apparent even when we took office our sources of foreign oil were not as reliable as they should be and they could be cut off at any moment. There were crosscurrents of Arab-Israeli conflict that was involved, a very complex, extremely complex issue. I guess that's why it was the most heavily lobbied issue in the history of our nation because it probably was the most complex legislative issue that the Congress has ever had to face.

When taken in its entirety, given the complexity of it and the heavy lobbying that went on, the fact that the President was able to get the vast majority of his legislative proposals passed through the Congress is an accomplishment which is nothing short of miraculous, and I think that when history looks at that particular period of time when we were working on those energy proposals, they would be seen as a major turning point in the way this country faces -- the way this country faces its energy supply problems and deals with them.

What was at stake was no less than a major change in our lifestyle. Virtually every aspect of the way we conduct our lives on a daily basis could be affected -- the temperature at which we keep our houses, the types of cars we drive, the extent to which we use mass transit, how we get to work and what we do when we're at work, how comfortable we are when we're at work. Pervasive, the subject was. So that was a major accomplishment, and like I say, one which history will recognize as being a major accomplishment.

I think, also, the deregulation measures -- truck deregulation, rail deregulation, air deregulation -- will be seen as a major turning point by historians in the way our government approaches basic industries in our country. All of those measures, of course, were politically contentious. Many of the companies that we -- who we sought to unburden this kind of regulation were really quite happy with the status quo, particularly when we talked about trucking deregulation. They all -- the established figures in those industries were prospering and really had no desire to increase the amount of competition that was present in the industries, and of course, that's

what deregulation meant in many, many instances.

So those were contentious issues, as well, and the fact that the President succeeded in substantially deregulating those three basic industries, I think, will be viewed as a major accomplishment.

**Dr. Thomas Soapes:** You said that on the energy legislation, it was such a heavily lobbied issue. Did you have an overall strategy for confronting this and dealing with this lobbying effort?

**Robert Thomson:** Oh, I think so, yes. We made every effort to, on each of the issues that presented themselves before the Congress, to isolate those elements of the society, particularly those who were organized, who could be counted as our allies.

For instance, on oil back-out, utility back-out, and the oil back-out bill, coal-conversion bills, we dealt substantially with the coal industry and tried to convince them the merits of our bill, worked with them in hopes that they would provide substantial assistance on the Hill to achieve this legislation.

In other areas, the aid to the poor for -- to help them pay the utility bills, we worked with some of the traditional Democratic constituencies who represent groups that are -- people that are underprivileged in our society and solicited their help in -- or at least explained the issues to them in hopes that they would help us out on the Hill.

So we made an effort to use the constituencies that would naturally favor our positions. In addition to that, we analyzed rather carefully the makeup of the appropriate committees, worked closely with those committees and those committee chairmen and our allies in the House and Senate to draft a mutual strategy dealing specifically with how to get the measures through the Congress step by step. And I feel we worked quite well with key members of the House and Senate to achieve substantial victory on this issue.

**Dr. Thomas Soapes:** Were you personally involved in dealing with these constituent groups?

**Robert Thomson:** On occasion, I would be asked by Anne Wexler and others who would be open to brief them on the

Hill situation, to talk about where we were in the legislative process. So I, on occasion, [inaudible].

**Dr. Thomas Soapes:** But it would be Anne Wexler and some of those people who would be working more directly with the more [constantly on]?

**Robert Thomson:** Anne Wexler, of course, is responsible for public liaison, and she -- we worked closely with her and developed in these -- developing these constituencies. On occasion, Frank Moore would convene meetings or members of our staff, the Department of Energy staff, would convene meetings, but we met on a regular basis with both [inaudible].

**Dr. Thomas Soapes:** How did you work in the Congressional liaison office with the House side people, especially when you got into conference committee situations?

**Robert Thomson:** Usually, the person that worked the bill in the Senate and the person that worked the bill in the House would both cover the conference on important bills, each dealing with their respective members. And, of course, they're physically right there together so they can communicate on a regular basis, plus we had our regular strategy meetings, and so we had very little difficulty doing that.

One meeting I forgot to mention was the Hill staff meetings, which Frank convened on a regular basis, on a daily basis, which was for congressional liaison -- staff meeting for congressional liaison, and that was an important coordinating mechanism overall.

**Dr. Thomas Soapes:** This office was physically divided at one point, wasn't it, East and West Wings, and was that a problem?

**Robert Thomson:** We started off with the House and Senate liaison shops over in the East Wing of the White House. Frank's office was in the West Wing, as were the legislative coordination section, which [Les Frances] at one time headed. That was in the West Wing, as well, plus the fact that we had a correspondents section, which was here in the EOB. But we didn't recognize it as a problem at that time, but after we did move over here, about the same time that I was appointed deputy, we all were grouped

together in this one wing of the EOB on the first floor. I think coordination improved substantially. I think the fact that we were in the East Wing cut us off not only from Frank and others in his staff who were physically located there, but it also cut us off from the main body of White House staff members, particularly in the domestic policy staff and OMB, who were housed here in the Executive Office Building. There's no question in my mind that it was a major improvement to have us all grouped here as we are now.

**Dr. Thomas Soapes:** When you needed information, who in the White House complex were you most likely to go to?

**Robert Thomson:** Well, each person has their own sources.

On the domestic policy staff, there were several people we would look to depending on the issue. As far as general information about where an issue was and what the administration's position was, David Rubenstein was extremely helpful.

There was a group of issues that could be generally categorized under the human needs category. Bert Carp was substantially useful on the domestic policy staff.

Energy issues, [Kitty Shermer] was the person I dealt with substantially, and she worked with domestic policy.

On environmental issues, Kathy Fletcher, when she was here, was extremely here, as was [Tom Lambrechts].

So others on the staff with government reform issues, [Si Landers], we dealt closely with all of the domestic policy staff people, but Rubenstein was the one that had the best overall knowledge and always seemed to know where things were.

With regard to OMB, [Mark Gordon] was extremely helpful because like -- you know, he was our window into the OMB process and was well informed on where issues were within the OMB bureaucracy. So I communicated with him on a regular basis. It's not that he was disloyal to OMB or anything like that. It's just that he knew information that could be legitimately be transmitted to those who were working on the issue, and he was very, very useful to us.

Likewise, most of Jim's -- Jim McIntyre's policy assistants, the assistant directors, were very, very valuable.

Elliot Cutler on energy when he was here, very good. Worked with him quite a bit.

I guess one coordinating mechanism that we should mention was the task force mechanism which we had developed in an interdisciplinary group of people gathered together to promote the [inaudible] piece of legislation. What brought it to mind was mentioning Elliot because he headed the Energy Task Force, which we had, which was an organization which really overlaid the existing White House organization, a task force with several different components for each of the major bills. We had a boiler room operation which tracked daily and which issued daily reports on the progress in each of the bills and the strategy and how it was working on each of the bills.

Elliot Cutler oversaw this. I worked closely with Elliot to put it together and to make sure that it ran properly. We also had task forces set up in civil service reform, trucking deregulation, Panama Canal treaties, many of the major pieces of legislation. We used this task force concept with representatives of the various White House offices, as well as the cabinet -- the appropriate cabinet agency, and it was an important coordinating mechanism we had.

**Dr. Thomas Soapes:** What about sources in the various departments and agencies?

**Robert Thomson:** We normally -- I normally went through the congressional liaison people in those various departments and agencies, and they were all extremely -- well, [Nick Attus] at Labor, Gene Godley at Treasury, [Andy Menatos] in Commerce, Brian Atwood in State, and Susan Williams, Department of Transportation. I know I'm leaving out some because they were virtually all -- [Gary Catcho's][inaudible] department -- virtually all very good, very responsive, and most cooperative. We dealt well with those people. Part of my job here on Frank's staff was to coordinate their activities and to hold a weekly meeting with the cabinet-level people, the assistant secretary for congressional liaison to discuss the administration priorities and to compare notes about where we were, and so

we did that on a weekly basis.

**Dr. Thomas Soapes:** What about sources on the Hill?

**Robert Thomson:** I think on the House side, we relied substantially on the leadership, on the speaker's assistance, on the majority leader [right], on the speaker himself, on the whips. They were extremely valuable sources of information.

On the Senate side, the process was more complicated. We did not have a satisfactory relationship with Robert Byrd, never did. He was an inadequate source of information for us, as was his staff, I assume, by the express direction of Senator Byrd. Our sources there were other members of the Senate, key committee staff.

An important source, a person who kept his fingers on a lot of things that were happening, the attack [inaudible] sort of way, was [Bill Smith] of the Vice President's staff, administrative assistant there. But there's no question that our operations, etcetera, were substantially hampered by the lack of inadequate working relationship with the Senate leadership.

**Dr. Thomas Soapes:** Why do you suppose that was?

**Robert Thomson:** It's difficult for me to speculate. I imagine Senator Byrd would say it's because he was treated improperly. There are people down here who would say that the senator cared more about the [progress] in the Senate than he did about us mutually succeeding. Who am I to say? I can say this. Senator Byrd is one of the most brilliant legislative tacticians whose ever served in the Senate and certainly on Panama Canal Treaties, on Civil Service reform, on virtually every major presidential initiative, there was no single senator more important to our success than Senator Byrd.

On the other hand, the fact that we were -- everybody from the President on down was unable to communicate adequately with him, that there was no open flow or free flow of information back and forth between the majority leader and the President and his staff, created an atmosphere in which even victories, when achieved, oftentimes were achieved at a greater price than would normally be the case, and an atmosphere of acrimony and distrust sometimes pervaded when

just the opposite -- when one would judge in the victories that we've achieved and the successes we've achieved that a happier relationship should exist.

So who am I to say? Maybe -- I would be ill-equipped to judge, but I think I have a pretty accurate -- I think I could accurately observe what happened, and it's up for others to judge whether we were at fault or whether Senator Byrd was at fault or whether the system that existed is actually the way it should be.

**Dr. Thomas Soapes:** This administration got some -- quite a bit of bad press on its congressional relations. Frank Moore was criticized pretty heavily. What can you attribute that bad -- the bad press that Frank Moore got?

**Robert Thomson:** I attribute it to the press and the Washington establishment feeding on itself. Some mistakes were made early on in [inaudible]. Some myths were built up around the character of Frank Moore and the way he operated. Those myths were perpetuated by the Washington establishment. Those myths had very little basis in fact. Frank Moore certainly had his shortcomings, as all of us do, in the way he operated. He has organizationally -- was probably -- did not have the instincts and the experience that maybe others have, but I will say that he knows the Congress and learned the Congress faster than anyone I've ever seen. He developed a personal relationship with members of the -- that will last far beyond this administration.

People who worked with Frank and dealt with him on individual issues came to respect him very much. When asked to do something by the President, he did it. He had the courage to call members with bad news. He had the courage to call members and ask them to take difficult decisions for us, and he was loyal to the President and [inaudible] the President.

Almost as important in my mind was that somehow, some way, this man was able to devote more of this time to this job than almost anyone that I can imagine, and by that, I mean attending the obligatory/semi-obligatory evening functions. At the same time -- and this is the key, I think, to at least my respect for Frank -- at the same time, he -- [inaudible], I guess, in simple terms -- he was a good family man. There are so few good family men in this city

who are able to spend time at their job, the total amount of time at their job, and maintain an excellent family life. I've never seen -- he and his wife and his kids, just excellent family situation, and they're happy and the kids are all well adjusted, it's a good marriage, and he cares very much about what they do, they care very much about what he does, and he's able to maintain this solid foundation for his personal life, at the same time, spending an inordinate amount of time on his job, and by that, I mainly mean the late-night cocktail parties and receptions that I [inaudible], that I didn't attend even though I should have and said [inaudible]. But he always did it. And how the man ever combined those two lives is beyond me. It's a side of Frank Moore that nobody [but me] recognizes.

Those early mistakes may or may not have been made were the ones that people talked about for four years. Rarely did you find people in Washington talking about the other Frank Moore that those of us who worked closely with him saw from the inside. He got the bummiest rap in the city.

**Dr. Thomas Soapes:** Did you ever notice that any time that the President might have taken the criticism that Frank was getting seriously?

**Robert Thomson:** I never saw any indication that the President had less than full confidence in Frank. He always received the support of the President, and we always felt that when we had an important matter that maybe we brought to the President's attention that we had a person in charge of our staff who would get that done.

**Dr. Thomas Soapes:** How about with his peers on the senior staff?

**Robert Thomson:** I imagine there was some criticism of Frank mainly because of his image, but -- image in Washington -- but he was well liked on the staff and respected, and he was looked to for advice. He gave us substantial responsibility in deputy positions -- myself, Dan Tate, Bill Cable. We had substantial responsibilities, and he was not at all hesitant to allow us to step forward when we had some unique opportunities and present them ourselves to the senior staff, to the President, and to others who needed to know. So I -- there may have been some senior staff there that have been critical, but no

more than what is natural, I think, given the  
circumstances.  
*[End of audio]*