

**Interview with Anne Wexler, Assistant for Public Outreach
December 12, 1980 in her office in the West Wing of the White House
Interviewer: Emily Soapes of the Presidential Papers staff.**

Soapes: I know you were one of the early supporters of the President but I've never seen a question-and-answer where what was it that attracted you to this little known Georgia former governor?

Wexler: I knew him in 1974 because I served on the same committee that he did, of the Democratic National Committee planning committee and he was chairman of the Democratic National Campaign Committee and I was one of the people on that committee; it was not a large committee. He was an activist chairman, probably more activist than any chair in the past. It had always been a token position and he made it into a real operation. Hamilton [Jordan] became his executive director. They set up a whole staff up here and put together what was in effect a political consulting firm for the Democratic National Committee and they did a very good job. At the same time that was going on with all the nuts and bolts activities, there was a parallel in issues development operations going on that had been initiated by [Bob] Strauss but which the President piggybacked on in terms of developing particular issues papers for candidates that year. And Stu Eizenstat worked on that but that came out of Georgia. So I got to know him on that committee and I was impressed him only because he took something that was kind of a marginal operation and made it into something real. And I don't doubt at all there was some sort of ulterior motive to all that, because it allowed him, among other things, to piggyback on the hearings and meetings that were going on around the country.

I also served on the Democrat Charter Commission that year and every time we had our regional meeting the President, then a governor/chairman of the campaign committee also showed up at those meetings to meet with potential candidates. Pull rank with Congress and so forth. So that's how I got to know him, and I made up my mind very early that, once I knew that he was going to run for president, that there wasn't anybody else in the field that was going to outclass him. I never had much doubt that he was going to be elected once he made up his mind to run. I didn't think there was any opposition that said much that meant anything.

Soapes: And you were impressed with his organizational skills?

Wexler: I was impressed with his leadership quality and the fact he was determined to do it and the fact he was the most self confident person I ever met in my life. He seemed to have a sense of where the country was going and what he thought he could do to lead it. Plus, I didn't think that anybody else in the field came close to defining what I thought were the important issues in the country. He just happened to come along at a time when people were disgusted with Washington. I never had a role in the campaign until after the nomination. I became kind of an informal advisor; Hamilton and I would have lunch occasionally when he came to Washington but I was associate publisher of a magazine and involved very much in the political section of the magazine so that it would have been a conflict-of-interest for me to have been involved in the campaign so I kept my

distance during the campaign except, as I said, in an informal way until just before the convention when I took some time to work on the Rules Committee for the President. I had a role at the convention as a floor leader, and then took an honorary role on the Carter-Mondale campaign committee which was a kind of overall umbrella committee that didn't do anything but meet once in a while and took care of a lot of people who needed to be taken care of in terms of having a title.

I did not work in the campaign as my husband did. My husband took a leave of absence from his job and ran the Washington office for the Carter campaign during the campaign. But after the election, when Hamilton asked both us to join the transition committee, we left our positions and went to work. There was no going back.

Soapes: I wanted to get your description of your job. I've heard it described as a "lobbyist with lobbyists"-- I like that!-- a coalition builder. I've noticed those words crop up frequently in building support for the President's policies among special interest groups. First let me ask you how did he or maybe Hamilton Jordan describe the job when you came on staff in spring of 1978?

Wexler: Neither described the job to me. I described the job to them. They didn't have any idea what they wanted.

Soapes: Because special interests had been something where you had brought the expertise—

Wexler: When I went to meet with the President, in the first interview I had with him, when I was offered the job, the President said: "We need to know Washington better and we need to deal with Washington better. We're missing that," but that's all he said and he never defined it more clearly than that. Hamilton didn't know what he wanted—he only knew what he did not want--

Soapes: Which was?

Wexler: Well, it was clear that we needed to have a more focused effect that brought the public into the legislative arena in a way that would be more helpful to the President. And I was not here during the Panama Canal legislative effort and that became the model for Hamilton in terms of trying to describe the kind of operation that he thought was useful although he never really translated that to other issues—very much. But he was not happy with the Midge Costanza operation in the sense that it was formless and had no beginning and no end. It was just there and didn't do anything except react to people. And he wanted an initiative kind of effort. Having said that, we built it on what we perceived and I perceived to be the needs of the White House at that particular time in terms of what was missing. So it was a combination of all those things you said. It was coalition building, it was working with interest groups, it was lobbying the lobbyists, it was working with special interests and building consensus and responding to people and getting people a seat at the table. It was all of those things, and continues to be all these things. But my job was really primarily--my first job was to build support for issues and

that was very specific, so at any given time, there could have been five or six issues on which I and my staff were working, building at different stages of developing when we were putting together what would become a working coalition on the Hill to get legislation passed and at the same time a grass roots effort to support that working coalition on the Hill.

So, when people ask me to describe at least that part of my job, I try to describe it as creating campaigns around issues rather than people. All my life, I've been in politics and all my life, I've run campaigns. Only this time instead of doing campaigns for people, I'm doing campaigns for issues, and that's what it is--and it's the same kind of thing with the same techniques. No different.

Soapes: In your Meg Greenfield interview you commented that you've got to start from scratch on every issue. And I've spoken to several other special assistants who were working with special interest groups; they all are emphasizing coming together from diversity. Yet we heard of so much about the diverse groups. How do you ever get a group together?

Wexler: Self-interest--the greatest motivator of all. When you start with an issue, whatever it is--hospital cost containment, the synthetic fuels corporation, or the energy mobilization board--or the Windfall Profits Tax is a good example, you start by sitting down and defining who it is that will benefit from that tax, the Windfall Profits Tax, and that's where you start. After you have determined who's for you, you have to spend as much time figuring out who's against you. At the same time you're building the group that's going to help you, you have to be working with the group who's trying to stop you because you know that nothing ever comes out like it goes in. We never turned our backs on our opposition. We always try to bring them in and talk with them and reason and negotiate and it always worked for us.

Sometimes we failed, sometimes we succeeded but we never burned our bridges with anybody, which is what enabled us to go on to the next issue, and work with a group that we had fought on an issue before. A good example of that would be the Energy Mobilization Board on which the environmentalists had fought us every step of the way and the Alaska Coalition in which we had worked hand in hand with every environmental group in the country. I could just cite you issue after issue like that, but that is just another example of how you had to go back each time and start all over again--making/defining who you're going to go after and getting those people motivated and putting them to work to demonstrate to the Congress that there was a lot of support out there for whatever issues happened to be. Take an issue like Windfall Profits Tax, which is going to pay for a new synthetic fuel industry, which is going to pay for mass transit, which is going to pay for low-income assistance to pay the people who can't afford to pay for increased energy bills and you've got a big coalition going, none of whom would talk to each other under normal circumstances but all of whom have a vested interest in getting this legislation passed. If you talk about the synthetic fuels business, you're not only talking about people in the coal business, people in the gas business, people in the oil shale business; also the road people, the port people, railroad people and the operating

engineers, and construction unions, the big construction companies who make the big earth-moving equipment.

You really put your mind to thinking about who is impacted by a piece of legislation—it is a far bigger group than you might think when you start. It was our job to identify those people and then get them in here, allow them to participate in the processes, legislative development and policy making, writing the bill, testifying in favor of it, working on a strategy to get it passed, being a part of the compromise. It's a very comprehensive and complicated process. Remember we were doing four or five of these at once in different stages. It was like having fourteen balls in the air at the same time, but you can also imagine how interesting it was.

Soapes: Working with so many diverse issues-----

Wexler: Yeah, we'd bring people into a room who came from all different kinds of backgrounds. Sometimes we couldn't do that so we'd split them up and bring different groups in who had more homogeneity to them. But, in the end, they were all up there, and when it came time for the vote they were fighting like the dickens for us. And that's when we were successful.

Soapes: Which offices here on the White House staff did you work with the most? DPS?

Wexler: We worked very closely with Congressional Liaison because we had to—that was the closest association. The two closest offices were the [Domestic] Policy Staff and Congressional Liaison, but in a particular stage in the development of any issue we worked very closely with the media staff too because we did a lot of PR on our issues and during certain seasons of the year we would work very closely with OMB because we did all the outreach on the budget, and that's a very complicated process too. Our office was a very seasonal kind of place because our activities changed with the seasons. In the fall when the congress went home and everybody else took a deep breath and was able to relax, we were always marched into these huge priority setting and budget priority meetings with interest groups. We give them a chance to come in here and outline their priorities for the year and what they think were absolutely important in the budget.

During the time everyone else was kind of relaxing, for the policy staff, the OMB staff, and our staff we did extensive outreach. What we were basically saying to these groups was: "Okay, tell us now, what are the things you absolutely must have in the budget next year? Now we will tell what our priorities are, we will tell you what our preliminary thinking is in terms of the amount of money we have to spend, we will tell you what we figure your problems are and where we are going to differ and how we are going to disagree and let's see what we can work out. It is a matter of record that in the two years that we did that when I was here to set that up, when the budget was announced in January that nobody complained. There was no screaming and the reason was because we spent months working on those groups, so that many of them were unhappy but nobody was surprised. Because of that we were able to work through a number of compromises

on upcoming appropriations bills, but everybody knew where everybody else was coming from. That's a very important principle involved in our work, especially on the budget.

We have books, big thick notebooks—all of which you will have in the Archives—you can have them all now; I'm not going to do anything with them—that outlined the report of every budget, every recent meeting, every meeting that we had with every interest group was summarized and typed up and was submitted to the various people who needed to see them and then on to the President. Then, as we got to the appeals process, you know, first the reviews to the President, then the passbacks to the departments, then the appeals, the President already knew from having seen all these reports exactly where the pressure points were going to be, and what the reactions were going to be to what his decisions were, which helped him enormously in making his own assessment of how much leeway he had.

Of course, MacIntyre [James T. Jr] went on to Eizenstat—because whether we like it or not we have to admit that to a large degree budget does drive policy in the government. There is no question about it. Nobody likes to talk about it, but the fact is that the budget comes first and the policy comes second. Everybody knows it. Nobody ever says it, but it's true.

Soapes: This brings up two things: one is access to the President. From your discussion you had, it sounds to me like more than many of the people that I have spoken with, that you had rather free access to the President.

Wexler: I had access to a lot of his time because it was the only way since, as I said, ours was a cyclical kind of process. When you got to the point that the bills were up there, the subcommittees were beginning to move and the committees were beginning to make their decisions on legislation on very important issues, we used the President *a lot* to meet with interest groups. That was the time that our campaign was at its most public, whatever the campaign happened to be. And so we did a lot of East Room briefings and meetings in the Roosevelt Room or the Cabinet Room with interest groups who wanted to go out and lobby for us and the President was always very generous with his time on that.

Personally, I never spent a great deal of time with the President. I think that was a mistake on his part. I may as well say it but, you know, it is something that I think was a mistake. It wasn't until Jack Watson became Chief of Staff that I started attending those 10:00 meetings in the morning which I should have been attending all along because I could, I think, have made more of a contribution. By that time the campaign was winding down and it was really too late—but I think a lot was missed because of that. Hamilton had a funny way of running the White House, I think, and I never could tell if it was him or the President, to tell you the truth, but I have always thought that it was a mistake.

Soapes: I was going to ask what effect it had on your office when there was a switch. Let's start with the switch when Jordan was named Chief of Staff after Camp David and then it was Jack Watson.

Wexler: Nothing really changed [when Jordan was appointed Chief of Staff]. Nothing. He got the title but nothing changed. He shifted every responsibility he didn't want to Al McDonald and went on doing the things he had always done. He never had any involved relationship to the staff since I've been here and he certainly didn't have any more afterwards. Hamilton is a very nice, gracious, courteous young man who is about as far over his head as anybody I have ever known. Maybe that is a bad assessment--he *chose* not to be involved in a great many things going on in this White House. Things changed drastically when Jack took over; Jack was a real Chief of Staff, entirely different.

Soapes: I wanted to ask you about the initiative. Did your office offer its services to any office that needed a big push for an item—or is this something where people came to you?

Wexler: Well, it just sort of began to happen. You know, it was one of those things that, when you come in during the middle, like I did, nobody knows who you are or what you are doing and so forth. When it became clear that we could do things that would help other people, then they began coming to us. And because we did so much work that involved large meetings and events with the President and we had the logistics and the organization and the list development and the process down to a science. We were so very well organized and did it so well, you know, meeting after meeting with 200 people to 500 people without a hitch. People that came to us knew we would do the same for their projects because it was easier for us to do everything than have other people do them and screw things up, which they did routinely. I thought after a while we would just do them all. My staff got to be known for the fact that they could do everything well and we did--I've always been known for my modesty!

Soapes: If you don't speak out, no one is ever going to know. Can you straighten me out on exactly where the line was drawn between your duties and Sarah Weddington's? Was it that women's issues were left to Sarah Weddington? Before I go see Sarah, it will be helpful.

Wexler: You have to remember that my office did not focus on broad-based issues per se. We focused on specific legislative issues. Sarah handled women's issues which meant she was the person in the White House you go to about a whole string of things. If I felt that women's groups could have a strong impact on helping us lobby for hospital cost containment, then I would go to Sarah, to Louie Martin or Hal Sheppard or Ed Torres or Esther Peterson and say: "Listen, I need help with women's groups" and she would provide me with the list and often organize the meetings. I would need to have these women get to work on whatever it was I needed them to work on. That was the relationship I had with all people who had special constituencies.

Louie [Louis Martin, liaison to Black community] helped us a lot with the initial work on hospital cost containment and so did women. You have to remember Humphrey-Hawkins. Louie and I have worked on dozens of issues together, everything from fair housing to Humphrey-Hawkins and lots of others. That is the context. My responsibility

was putting together a lobby which included every interest group I could think of that I thought would help me. Their responsibility was working with a particular interest group, all the time, so it was a very different form of relation.

Sarah's additional duties were to do political coordination in the White House and she was also responsible for working the [Democratic] National Committee—state chairmen, political leaders and so forth. So she ran all those state briefings where people identified as Democrats from all of the states would come in to be briefed on domestic and foreign policy.

Tim Kraft started all those before Sarah was shifted to a senior staff position. Sarah just took that over and did it very, very well. We ran the issues meeting. Our briefings were always geared to a specific issue or set of issues. In January of 1980, in a post budget period, we did a number of briefings on inflation and energy but we decided at that point to combine the issues because we wanted people to understand the linkages between the two. Our briefings were always bi-partisan; they weren't political except in the sense that we were either trying to get legislation passed or we were trying to educate the public—they were always made up of leadership people and we didn't pay much attention to political affiliation. It got us into trouble sometimes. Sometimes we would invite a Republican leader from a state if we thought he/she could help us and we would get a frantic call from a congressman saying, "Why are you having that person in the White House?"—and it was always because we had a reason to. But sometimes it was in conflict with other things.

Soapes: This administration began without special assistance for the various areas but they've come [to be appointed for each group that was singled out by?] previous administrations--

Wexler: And probably a few more.

Soapes: And you said that "our staff has come to see that success breeds success." Now, what about the President? Do you have a theory that he has realized that you have to work with each individual group on an issue?

Wexler: Well, I think he understands that you have to build coalitions on an issue. You don't have to work with each individual group. You have to take each individual group and make them into a consensus group. That is different from having a special assistant for ethnic affairs or minority or blacks or Hispanics. That is being responsive to a particular interest group for other reasons. That is being a case work operation; that is not a legislative strategy operation. They're different. But it is important to do both. That, I think, is what the President planned. In an age of special interests, you can't ignore them. You've got to deal with them for they are powerful lobbies and powerful groups and they have particular agendas, but it was my job to broaden their agendas beyond their particular narrow concerns.

Soapes: Remind me, if you would, how you differ from Public Liaison on this.

Wexler: It was the Special Assistant's job to try to represent the President's position but in addition to that to be an advocate to a large degree of their concerns to the President. And that is very different from what we do. We use that but our job was more, as I said, to build coalitions. And sometimes key to an issue we spend a great deal of time trying to educate people on leadership and inflation problems. More special to our mission was the fact that this was the thing that the President had us focus on more than anything else. And the reason we spend a lot of time on it was because we were, as I said in the Washington Post, trying to shift from an age of broad horizons to an age of limits and making people understand what that means in terms of their own lives. I really think it is really too bad that we didn't have another four years because I think we were beginning to be successful in doing that. It is very hard for any President to do that because people are having to face things that are essentially unpleasant.

I have been trying very hard to make the Republicans, the transition people, understand what I have been trying to make you understand. Everybody makes the same mistake and that is, you know, identifying special interests as being the only interest of the White House, and that is not the only interest to me. It is important to have people like Esther Peterson, Louis Martin, Bill Cable and Sarah Weddington to deal with these constituents in a varied way but that is casework and it is important to do that because otherwise they have no place to go and they must have an outlet in the White House. Also it is very important, equally important, to be able to get these people to look beyond their own noses to the national interest and that was essentially what I tried to do. By defining how their special interests, or self interest, could be involved in an issue which is what we did, and that is why we were successful. Nothing motivates like self interest, sometimes we have to convince them of this.

Soapes: And if you had had another four years, how would you have seen your next four years? A continuation of the last--?

Wexler: Yeah, but I think we would've -- I would've tried to do more reaching out and be more aggressive with groups on the outside. I didn't have time, but I think I would have been able to talk the President into giving me more staff in the second four years if I'd stayed, which I don't think I would've, but whoever was my successor, and be a little more -- being a little more aggressive and having, I think, a better internal relationship with the President, which I think is very important, and also having a stronger relationship with the Congressional Liaison staff, which was coming very nicely and would have been stronger in the second four years.

You know, a lot of times, our efforts were almost an afterthought for them. They would forget how important it was, and every time they did, they'd lose. And every time we built a support mechanism for what they were doing, they won. We won. It's that simple.

Soapes: My husband's doing most of the interviews with Congressional Liaison people.

Wexler: And what are they saying?

Soapes: Well, I haven't listened to any of them in total, so I probably couldn't -- if I gave a snippet, I probably wouldn't be correctly representing it, but the fact was that, yes, oh, well, it was very hard to get at the leaders of power essentially.

Wexler: Well, they're very disseminated up there now. They're all over the place.

Soapes: Yeah. Oh, yes.

Wexler: So I mean it wasn't -- they did a very good job. For the most part, I think they were highly professional.

Soapes: He's [Mr. Soapes, fellow interviewer] been impressed.

Wexler: And --

Soapes: Because they've had a bad press, period.

Wexler: Yeah, they've had a bad press, and they are to be --

Soapes: Quite impressed.

Wexler: Good. They are good, and they know their business, and I think that they did about as good a job as anybody could do under the circumstances. And as I've often said, when we worked together, we usually won. I mean there were a couple times when -- toward the end when everybody was working on the campaign and working on paying attention to 15 other things, sometimes they would forget to pick up the phone and say, "Gosh, can you help us on this?" And, listen, sometimes when we did help, we lost, too, but if -- on the major things where we sat down and built our strategy together, which we did on almost everything, and carried it out, we did pretty well.

Soapes: Good to feel that way about it. What success are you proudest of?

Wexler: Well, I think most of the energy stuff is what I'm proud of because it was the hardest to do. And it was the hardest, in many cases, to convince people on the outside that it was doable and that they should support it, but we did that, too. And we got them all working, and we really changed a lot of minds up there, and a lot of people didn't think we were going to be able to do it and we did it.

Soapes: I know you're going to continue to stay active and very visible. Do you have a permanent address so we could pick out a card in Atlanta that said "Wexler permanent address" if we need to get in touch with you?

Wexler: Sure, yeah, 2801 New Mexico.

Soapes: Okay, good, good. And I'd say I think that for anyone who is involved in as many issues as you, that it would definitely serve us better to go into a number of them in the depth they deserve. I appreciate your allotting an hour of your time this afternoon to do this interview.

Wexler: You will find extensive files on everything -on the MTM, on all the budgets, on hospital cost containment, on virtually every major issue [inaudible], so voluminous on -- well, on everything, on all of the tax bills, on -- oh, I just can't even remember now, you know, on -- well, the energy conservation, stuff we did on inflation, on virtually everything. The files are in pretty good shape.

Soapes: Good, good. That's always good news for anyone who's going to a presidential library. Thank you again, Mrs. Wexler. I really appreciate it.

Wexler: You're welcome.

[End of audio.]