

SEYMOUR WISHMAN
EXIT INTERVIEW

This is an exit interview with Mr. Seymour Wishman, former Deputy Assistant for Public Liaison, Office of Public Liaison, June 29, 1978, four o'clock p.m., Old Executive Office Building, Room 492. The interviewer is David Alsobrook of the Presidential Papers Staff.

ALSOBROOK: Mr. Wishman, first I would like to ask you a few questions about your career before you came to the White House in October of 1977. You served as a Peace Corps legal advisor to the National Agency of Public Works in Lima, Peru, from 1966-68. Did you acquire certain skills as a volunteer that were of use to you later after your return to the States?

WISHMAN: Do you mean generally or specifically in connection to the job I had here?

ALSOBROOK: I think specifically, if you can elaborate on that.

WISHMAN: Well, it's hard to identify particular skills or traits. The two years in Peru were very significant for me in a variety of ways. I was placed in a situation without any structure where I was forced to call upon my own resources or imagination to make up a day, to make up an agenda, to make up a project, and so on. So, that was hard emotionally as well as professionally. And, I think, in both respects it probably had some benefit to me when I was here. The job, when I first arrived, was unclear to me in terms of what I would be doing and what the goals of the office were and once that was established, how those goals would be accomplished. It required sitting down with a

blank tablet. On the other hand, it was an overwhelming agenda; as the tasks were described to me, it included working with virtually every constituent group that was organized into a reputable organization in the country. It didn't take long to realize that virtually every American could qualify in one constituent group or another, whether it's women or ethnic or minority groups or victims of "Moonies" or "Moonies," as we say. It was necessary to make constructural decisions on how I would be spending my time. So the work primarily would be supervising a staff and servicing Midge Costanza, who was the Assistant to the President for my work. But I was left pretty well alone in trying to decide how I wanted to go about doing that. So in those respects, there was maybe some skill that I picked up in the Peace Corps.

ALSOBROOK: Would you do it again?

WISHMAN: The Peace Corps? Oh, yes, I have absolutely no regrets about it. It was a fantastic opportunity for me. I learned another language, traveled, met some very nice people, did some interesting work. [I have] no regrets about that.

ALSOBROOK: Would you tell me a little something about your position with the New York City Department of Consumer Affairs?

WISHMAN: That was a job that I took as a consultant. I thought [about it] for a couple of months, but then it turned out to be a year or so. Initially, it was to work in several programs that they were in the process of formulating. Then I became a Hearing Examiner with the Chief Hearing Examiner for the Department. I listened to complaints

from consumers and the responses from the retail organization that was being accused of some consumer offense.

ALSOBROOK: Did you find that there were certain types of consumer problems that became more of a concern to you personally than others? Did you become interested in some more than others?

WISHMAN: I can't, at this point—that was about nine years ago—think about what particular consumer group may have interested me most. I had some interest in the general range, interest in trying to see if there were patterns, but feeling a particular identification with someone who is buying food in a retail store as opposed to someone who's applying for a particular kind of license. No, I can't at this point.

ALSOBROOK: You've had a very varied background in law, including your private practice as well as experience as Assistant Prosecutor in Essex County, New Jersey. Do you feel that your job as Assistant Prosecutor in Essex County was valuable to you?

WISHMAN: Yes, I think that was an excellent experience for me. In a more short-term sense it was very valuable. I had plans, at that point, to become a criminal trial lawyer, and as an Assistant Prosecutor it was an opportunity to learn the law. In the first six to nine months I was doing appellate work, and that was a very good way for me to get back into law; I had been away for about four years or so, from studying cases, and it also was an opportunity to argue before the appellate courts in the Third Circuit in the state of New Jersey. Subsequently, I then tried cases, one felony after another, back-to-

back for the remaining year-and-a-half. That was, at least for me, I think, the best way to learn to be a trial lawyer. It was also an extraordinary chance to see how the state operates. If I was going to do defense work, which I eventually did do, you do have a pretty good sense of what we're up against.

ALSOBROOK: An article that you wrote in the New York Times last July referred to your novel about a criminal lawyer. Have you completed this novel?

WISHMAN: Yes, I have.

ALSOBROOK: This will be in print in the fall?

WISHMAN: Yes, in October. It is being published by Delacorte. \$8.95.

ALSOBROOK: I don't want you to tell me everything about it, and certainly not the ending, but could you give me a little bit of insight into it? Maybe a brief overview?

WISHMAN: Well, basically, it's a heavily plotted story. There's some measure of mystery or suspense in it, but in a more grand way. What I was trying to do was describe a character who has spent a career in criminal law, criminal trial work, and is very successful, and the reasons for his success are, in the book, the same reasons for the tragedies that he encounters. Basically, I think the article that you refer to, which was about a brutalized criminal lawyer, is the same kind of character that I was trying to describe in the book. It was a man who was very skillful, insightful, and competent, who was, at the same time, failing in those skills about himself and also failed to

take responsibility for his actions. I'm going to have to work on that answer because I may be asked that in other contexts. It's not a very good one.

ALSOBROOK: Do you feel that your pursuit of the novelist trade at this point in your career, do you look upon this as sort of an escapist means from your daily activities as a lawyer, or does it complement your life? Exactly how do you look upon your activities as a novelist?

WISHMAN: Well, I've been writing for about fifteen years, twenty years. The only difference about this novel and the other one was that this one's being published. Actually, I also think it's better. I do see myself now as a writer; but, there is a big difference to me, psychologically, that it is being published because there is a kind of recognition, at least by one other person, the publisher, that maybe I can make a career out of it. I would expect to continue to write. Writing has always been an important balance. It was an opportunity to be a little bit more reflective and solitary and at the same time, somewhat creative.

ALSOBROOK: I'd like to move into a few questions now about your duties in the White House. Who recruited you to work in the White House?

WISHMAN: Midge Costanza.

ALSOBROOK: Had you known her a long time?

WISHMAN: About a year.

ALSOBROOK: What were your initial impressions of her when you first met her?

WISHMAN: Well, my first few meetings with her were social ones, and she struck me as a complicated woman with some contradictory personality traits. On one hand, she seemed to be very self-possessed and self-confident, yet there were moments in conversations where she would allow great insecurities and unsureness of herself. She seemed to have a very clear idea of what she wanted to do and accomplish, yet at other times, specific goals seemed still unformed in her mind. She seemed a very forceful personality, and other times, I thought that she was more passive and even shy.

ALSOBROOK: As your job began to unfold, how did you find you were spending much of your time?

WISHMAN: I spent much of my time doing administrative details, as I was responsible for a staff. I guess that was a necessary part of my work. It was a staff that was continually changing in size; the responsibilities seemed to be changing as well. There were originally fifteen slots allocated to the Office of Public Liaison. When I arrived at the end of September, beginning of October, the reorganization that had been approved, I think in August to go in effect as of November, included a reduction in the slots in Public Liaison to twelve. That meant there would be a loss of three. At the same time, we had something like four detailees, which I learned were employees of outside agencies assigned to work in the White House and get paid by an outside agency. They were, in every other sense, a part of the staff. We had two or four interns who were students working full-time at some accredited course for their work here in the White House. And then, we also had a number of volunteers who would come, if

not on a full-time basis, at least three days a week or so. So the staff, while it seemed to be reducing in size when I first came, grew to almost 29 people. The administrative details of getting and expending these resources took up a lot of time, and also the kind of support that would be necessary to make it function took up much of my time. The primary responsibility was to supervise their work which required me to try to get a sense of what their assignments were and what they were doing. One of the first things I tried to do was read everything that had been circulated through my predecessor's office so that if I were to think about an idea, it might be good to know that it had been considered and dismissed a long time before and maybe save some time and embarrassment as a result. So, that's what I did the first six weeks or so, was to read hundreds of pages of memos and documents and at the same time try to keep track of what was then being generated. I spent a lot of time with Midge trying to get to know her better and to have her feel more comfortable with me. While I had met her a year before, basically, that was only on two or three occasions over that year. So, when I arrived I felt that she didn't really know me very well, nor did I know her very well. So we spent a lot of time together, with me trying to be supportive of her in whatever ways that she would ask. That would include speechwriting or letter writing, general advice for the more basic decisions that she was making. Almost coincidentally to my arrival, there was an article published in Newsweek that was very critical of Midge and that created a kind of crisis for her and required a number of decisions as to how she would deal with it, and when that started to subside there were several articles published in the Washington Post by Walter Pincus about

Midge's problems with the FEC [Federal Elections Commission]. She'd apparently filed an election return late and was in violation of the regulation of the FEC. So I did spend some substantial time with her.

ALSOBROOK: Did your job require contact with the President during this period?

WISHMAN: I never met the President. I was never introduced to him. The contact was indirect. We frequently sat in on meetings for him. I would attend, on occasion, some of those meetings, although, I guess I was welcomed at all those meetings. It didn't seem to be essential nor particularly productive if I went to those meetings, so I usually didn't.

ALSOBROOK: Was there a typical day during this period that you were working for Miss Costanza? If you could think of a typical day, could you describe that?

WISHMAN: Well, if I can be general, there was something that was typical in that I would arrive around 7:00 or 7:30 in the morning. I would go through the "in box" to see if there was any immediate crisis and see what kind of documents I would want to be able to read through the day and put them in some kind of priority. I would skim the newspapers and read the Times, the Post, and the Journal. On two days a week at 8:00 I would attend senior staff meetings. Midge had asked me to take her place at those meetings; she was frequently on the road. I would represent the office. I think those were on Wednesdays and Fridays. On Wednesdays, I would attend and take notes and then write Midge a report about what transpired. On Fridays, I would give a

report of what our office had been doing and was planning to do in the next week. During the course of the day, I would try to leave my time as flexible as I could to respond to the staff if questions or problems arose during the day. We were inundated by calls and requests throughout the time that our office was functioning. Most other offices in the White House would refer questions, or requests, or complaints to our office. If they involved substantial groups, we would try to deal with them. I tried to call out and free the rest of the staff from having to deal with individual cases. We simply didn't have the resources to do casework when we really weren't in a position to conclude anything.

ALSOBROOK: Can you recall any significant projects that you were involved in, things that really stand out in your mind as you think back about this experience?

WISHMAN: There were a number. The first one that comes to mind was the proposal I had written for Midge which she sent on to the President. It suggested to the President that our office be responsible for a study of citizen participation. The President as Governor and through the election had spoken frequently about his desire to have a more open administration with this participation of different citizen's groups. As best I could determine, there hadn't really been a comprehensive study that had been done. What I was interested in was the involvement of citizens and citizens' groups in the formulation of policy at the earlier stages, which I think, unless people were sophisticatedly experienced with this kind of issue to realize in government and out of government, that what we were talking

about was a significant change in the way fundamental decisions in the government would be made. The President approved the proposal, and we set off on a study by contacting every Cabinet secretary, asking for a designee in his office to respond to our request for information. That was done after a series of meetings with each individual agency. There were a number of requests that were made of them. It was, I think, an enormous undertaking by the executive branch of government as a result. Unfortunately, as those answers were being prepared to be returned to us, we went out of business.

ALSOBROOK: Do you feel like these activities on your part are well documented by the official files that you created during the period that you were in the White House?

WISHMAN: I haven't seen the form that these files would take. I know that there was an enormous amount of paper generated that would evidence what we did, and whether that's retrievable in any meaningful way, it's not my job. I don't know.

ALSOBROOK: I'm going to ask you a rather esoteric kind of question. Do you feel that your experience in the White House has enabled you to gain new insights into the relationship between our government and the needs of these various citizen interest groups?

WISHMAN: Has it given me new insights? Well, it's hard for me because I never really took a good accounting or good inventory of what my appraisal was before and what it is now or what my expectations were or whether I was disappointed or not when I saw it. Perhaps I suffer from not having that kind of memory. I think that at this juncture I do

have some sense or at least an opinion of how things work and how outside groups connect or don't connect. It's hard for me to determine whether that perception was new or changed from what it was when I came.

ALSOBROOK: I'd like to ask you this question, but you don't have to answer it; your future plans?

WISHMAN: At this point they're not clear. I do know that I will be writing. I'm obligated to my publisher to show him my next novel, and I've already spoken with him about it. He seemed enthusiastic. I'm pretty well started. I think I have a pretty clear idea where I'm going with it. I could go back and practice law. I've spoken to my partners about it, and that's an option for me. It's a comfort to know it's an option. I don't yet know if that's what I want to do. I'm trying not to make any decisions for another six weeks or two months or until the end of the summer. I've committed myself to a tour with the book, and that will be in October. By then, after that, I'll probably have to make some decisions.

ALSOBROOK: There is one more question I wanted to ask you. As you worked in the White House, did you find that there were other White House Staff units and other government agencies you worked with frequently in carrying out your duties?

WISHMAN: The reorganization proposal in August defined the duties of Public Liaison as reaching out to different constituent groups in the country and bringing them into the White House and giving them access to relevant government officials who might be able to respond to what

requests they came with. So the result was that our office dealt with the full spectrum of different kinds of political constituent groups. They would come, have meetings and depending on what they were most concerned with, we would get the appropriate government officials to come meet with them. For example, they were like the gay organizations who came to the White House, who had grievances with the federal prisons. We set up meetings with Norman Carlson, who was the head of the Bureau of Prisons, and with representatives of the Justice Department and with the President as well. Or with different minority groups or ethnic groups. We helped to set up a coalition of Puerto Rican leaders who came, and we were able to bring to that meeting representatives of the Domestic Policy Staff who were then in the process of formulating a comprehensive urban policy. This was somewhat typical of the way we would try to do business in bringing in those members of the staff, for example, of Domestic Policy--have a continuing involvement in a particular issue, or on occasion we would try to have the President or Vice-President, as appropriate, or Eizenstat come speak to the groups. For the most part, the different individuals in the White House were very responsive, eager to be cooperative. We'd frequently have briefings, for example, on the Panama Canal issues being pressed in Congress. We set up a series of briefings where we would have representatives from the State Department come and address these groups that we brought to be enlisted to support the treaties--similarly with Energy programs. People from the Department of Energy come over or Domestic Policy. So our work, at least at its best, was to include almost every important office in the White House and have them meeting with the different groups.

ALSOBROOK: So, would you agree then this is one reason that future historians will be quite interested in the work of your particular office?

WISHMAN: I think so, yes. They might be interested from several perspectives. One is that the President made a major commitment about trying to make the White House accessible to these different groups, and that was a major departure from prior administrations. And they might be interested also because, in many respects, it's been a failure. I think that kind of continuing connection with the groups has proven too inchoate, unless it's focused on a certain issue that the administration is at the time working on, trying to adopt. At least as decisions unfolded, there has been a change in that respect. I don't think there is any interest at this point in a continuing relationship with the whole variety of constituent groups without it being focused to the specific issue. For the first fifteen months, I think that the effort was to establish the contact and then connect it with the issue. Now I think the effort is reversed, focusing on the issue and then reaching out to what groups might be relevant to it.

ALSOBROOK: I certainly appreciate your taking the time to come by and share these experiences with us. It's really our pleasure.

WISHMAN: No, it was my pleasure. Thank you.