

## **Exit Interview of Walt Wurfel, Deputy Press Secretary,**

Interviewed by David Alsobrook of the Presidential Papers Office in the West Wing of the White House on May 10, 1979. Transcribed by Lyn Kirkland, August, 2010.

**Alsobrook:** First of all, Walt, when did you come to work in the White House?

**Wurfel :** I came after inauguration time. I had worked in the campaign starting after the convention, after the nomination.

**Alsobrook:** Do you remember the precise day you came to work here?

**Wurfel:** At the White House? Well, oh, yes, it was inauguration day, Jan. 20, 1977. I think I was the last person in the White House to have tequila with his Mexican lunch. It was a Thursday and under the Ford administration they used to serve either a margarita or a Coors beer with the Mexican lunch, so I ordered a margarita. I was sitting in the office next door, which turned out to be Rex Granum's office, and I had come on to be the first press officer actually here while Rex and Jody and everybody was involved in the inauguration at the capital and the inaugural parade and all that. By the next Thursday, it had rolled around, by the President and First Lady's edict, that there would be no hard liquor in the White House, had taken effect and there was no longer a beer or a margarita on the menu.

**Alsobrook:** (Laughs) Was this first day on the job typical of the days that followed?

**Wurfel:** No, as a matter of fact, there weren't any typical days in the press office for a couple of months because everything we did we were doing for the first time. We had to trash the procedure. Fortunately we had Connie Gerhard who had come with Lyndon Johnson when he became President and had worked in the White House Press Office ever since and she was here to tell us what the procedures had been, but one of my jobs had been to study the Nessen press office and find out how it was organized and recommend to Jody during the transition how he should organize it, both in personnel and function. Connie had been highly recommended by everybody, particularly members of the press who said "You've got to keep her." They were right. But at any rate, the first few days were the time the reporters tried to establish new procedures to right the wrongs that they perceived and to gain a new foothold in advancing their cause for access or for any sort of background services or support services that they thought the White House Press Office should offer that they didn't. So we're trying to be responsive, trying to fill the duties, learning our jobs and at the same time trying not to allow them to establish all kinds of new beachheads which might have made staff demands that we weren't prepared to meet.

**Alsobrook:** You mentioned that you studied the Nessen press office and went back and did a little bit of planning. Was this when the idea of the Office of Media Liaison came about?

**Wurfel:** Yes.

**Alsobrook:** Could you tell me a little bit about how that developed?

**Wurfel:** Yeah. Well, I had been on Herb Klien's mailing list back in 1970 as a Washington journalist and they used to mail out a lot of speeches, a lot of texts, in a big White House envelope and I remembered how I loved to be on the mailing list, and so we felt we ought to do something for people who didn't cover the White House regularly. Beyond that, we were perhaps less interested in stroking publishers which is what Herb Klein worked on so much than actually dealing on a hard news basis with editors and broadcasters from around the country and basically figured that Jimmy Carter was a President that would understand the value of the local news media, perhaps more than anybody else, because before he achieved the status of "Jimmy who?" he was running around the country and walking in on weekly and daily newspaper offices and radio stations and saying, "Hi, I'm Jimmy Carter and I'm running for President and give me an interview with you." That was the only media coverage he was getting and I think he has a full blown idea of how valuable it is.

I am told, back when he was governor with Jody, he had worked out radio call-in shows and other mechanisms of getting to the home town media. Now Linda Peek and I had been working in the campaign with the specific job of setting up press secretaries in all fifty states and keeping them informed, again, to keep in touch with the local media and not the national folks who were traveling with the candidate. I had a personal feeling about this because I had worked at various times at local newspapers around the country, most recently at the St. Petersburg Times, and would call the White House at times to get confirmation or denial of something and frequently felt put down. I didn't realize at the time, and nobody's going to, the volume of business that the people who answer the phone at Press Office have--the inevitable elitism that creeps in when national press super-names and superstars who cover the White House everyday are mixing with these folks, many of whom are junior, beginning career press office people who are flattered to be mixing with these folks who travel with them when the President travels, and who develop a rapport and camaraderie which serves the President but which unconsciously leads them to not appreciate the value of all these folks who are just regular working editors and reporters downtown. So we set up a "separate but equal" press office is what we did. It's a lousy term but--

**Alsobrook:** (laughs)

**Wurfel:** But what we wanted to do was have somebody whose sole job was to respond to the local news media and to help them. I just felt that you couldn't have it both ways and that you ought to have one office that did that---as half of Jody's operation which was not responsible for dealing with the Sam Donaldsons and other big names of the media world. Also, there was another reason, which was that I wanted them to have a different telephone system. When I first came aboard on the campaign I felt there was not enough attention given to answering the phone,

responding quickly to phone calls, and just administratively and managerially making sure that everybody got some answer, even if it was the answer “we can’t help you, sorry.” So, that’s why I wanted not only a whole separate office but a whole separate phone system so that that office—its reputation and effectiveness—would rise and fall on its operations and not be affected by somebody else’s less than adequate, in my opinion, staffing and handling of phone calls. That’s very long winded, but that’s how it got started.

**Alsobrook:** I was curious, what was the reaction of the Washington press to the special treatment of the non-Washington press?

**Wurfel:** Always suspicious. And, I was prepared for all kinds of comments about by-passing the Washington media, I was prepared for comparisons with Spiro Agnew and his whole eastern media elites comment, and frankly there was not much of that when media liaison started out, but it was something that I have always been very careful to try to point out is that we weren’t trying to bypass the Washington media but we were trying to communicate fully the President’s programs and statements and that is not done well only through the Washington media. The White House is the best covered place in the whole country. These are journalists out here who just cover the White House. For example, on a given announcement, unless it is of the category of a SALT or a Panama Canal Treaty, we are likely to make an announcement in the White House. They give a one day story and then we move on to tomorrow’s one day story or then they go back and try to develop a new angle on Bert Lance or something else which is “juicy”. But so many things that are announced at the White House are so complicated—tax reform, welfare reform, government reorganization. You need to get into the hands of educated journalists, commentators, editors, and particularly editorial writers; you need to get them a lot of material so that they can make judgments. You don’t get a lot of materials through the media channels in this country. You have the wire services---1000 word stories, 800 word stories. There is no way that an editor sitting at the other end in Pocono or Phoenix, through a series of those short stories, is going to get more than the tip of the iceberg of what we’ve announced. Similarly, the networks. Everything is compressed to the point that if the White House doesn’t make the effort to get the material out in its original form, it’s not going to be done in enough depth by the Washington reporters.

**Alsobrook:** Walt, is that the reason you came up with the packets like this one?

**Wurfel:** Yeah. That’s one reason we started the system of backgrounders done by Jim Purks in the Media Liaison Office which tried dispassionately, but obviously, giving the President’s viewpoint and the rationale to set forth all of the reasons about why and how a program is developed and what it means. We try also to raise and answer the questions, the main questions, that the opponents are going to be using. We discovered again, say take hospital cost containment, immediately upon the President’s announcement of our hospital cost containment effort, all kinds of organizations devoted to private enterprise in the health industry can prepare very effective, typographically attractive information sheets which they bombard editorial

writers with, but nobody seemed to do that even for the President of the United States unless there is an office set up to do that and that's why we have done that. We've done probably more than a hundred of them.

**Alsobrook:** Could you list some of the ones that you feel like have been perhaps more successful than the others?

**Wurfel:** Well, probably one of them on the water projects where we had a running battle with Congress for two years, going on three now. There are projects in every state. The President accepted or tried to cut out projects based on individual analysis of so many factors. What we did was to prepare in 1978--we didn't do it the first year round--but in 1978 we very carefully prepared not only a general document explaining the whole Presidential philosophy, explaining his new set-up of review efforts coordinated with the states, but we also did a separate sheet on each project with a summary sheet for each state. When the time came for the announcement of the policy, we mailed not only the general document and national overview to every editor in every state, but we also did a separate sheet for their state so that they could understand exactly where the President stood on their particular dam and their particular river. That, in my view, was essential because senators and congressmen who were opposing the President were making the arguments in terms of that project in that state and if we had done just the national thing either we would have been mailing a book that would have cost two or three dollars to mail because of its heft or we wouldn't have been able to respond to that, which is why we basically did the book and then split it up for each state for each region.

**Alsobrook:** Were there other issues which you did handle on a national basis though?

**Wurfel:** Yeah, many. Like for example the Panama Canal Treaties. We did an initial mailing and then follow-up mailings as new questions or issues in the debate arose. We will undoubtedly do the same for SALT. We have just mailed, on the announcement of the SALT agreement, the original background paper which has taken--well, let me say that last year we mailed a State Department booklet--which we didn't produce but thought was superb--to editors to say "We think this is going to be an issue in the next year or two. Here is the background material on why negotiations are going on and why the government feels they are needed." Then we mailed a second document to the State Department, put out last fall, and for the last three months we have been drafting, refining, and getting clearances on a new mailing which talks to most of the issues in this particular treaty, the draft treaty, and there will be follow ups as it develops. On a number of other things we have done that, and let me quickly say, media liaison also mails specially produced documents to particular media: Hispanic media, black media, some of the women's magazines which gather together material that they are particularly interested in and gives them that information.

**Alsobrook:** Walt, I get the feeling that the mailings are also tied very closely with your briefings when you have non-Washington reporters come in. I want to ask you a question about timing. Do you send these packets out and then bring the people in or is it the other way around?

**Wurfel:** We don't try to correlate those two because the world is too complex and our staff is too small, but when editors come in for briefings, we give them as part of the packet which is sitting on their desk when they get there, not only the current mailing which relate to the issue they're being briefed on that day, but also an index of everything that we've sent out, so if they want to catch up, they just check off at the beginning of the day anything they might want and by the time they leave in the afternoon, we'll provide a packet to take back with them. But the briefings are something that is new to the Presidency and which President Carter, in the long run, should deserve great credit for. I say that selfishly because I was the one who proposed that to Jody and him. That aside, he has now held about 40 meetings with groups of non-Washington news men and women, generally managing editors, editors, and news directors. The meetings have been in the cabinet room, a half hour long, just like the televised national press conferences. They have been on the record. We have issued a transcript in every case identical to a national news conference with the exception that it is not televised. But my point is that basically this President has not held 50 or 52 press conferences to date, which in itself would be a record, but he has held closer to a hundred because these non-Washington media conferences count and the transcript of those is released the next day here at the White House. Frequently you will see in the paper on Sunday the President said such and such to a group of visiting editors. Now, this is important because a study of those collected transcripts would show that the editors from outside Washington are less the slaves to today's headline development of yesterday's story—less concerned with the top stories and they are more concerned with questions that relate to their areas, with human questions about the presidency, what happens to a man and his family when he becomes President, and to going back on things that are major themes of this Presidency like human rights, which the White House Press Corps has done its stories on and is bored with and will only do another story on when there is a great disaster in the program or a great stunning victory in the human rights program.

These editors come and question the President on how it's doing, if he isn't disappointed with that or pleased with this, and it gives him a chance to be a little bit more discursive, so I'm guessing that for historians they will turn out to be a rich lore of the Carter Presidency as it develops and matures. But at these all-day briefings for the non-Washington editors, also, the President is just at the high note of the day. They come in and spend the entire day. They come at their own expense. The only things we give them are a few documents and a cold-cut lunch. They have a long time for briefings and questions on things that are important to the administration and important to them. For example, right now, with SALT being a major thing, we've got a group coming in tomorrow which will be briefed on the SALT treaty, both by Brzezinski and by Roger Molander of his staff. Generally we do-- the briefers do--fifteen or twenty minutes of talking at the editors and then forty minutes or so of responding to their

questions. The briefing tomorrow will also be on the energy problems, multi-lateral trade negotiations, on the up-coming summit—the economic summit in Japan--and on a couple of things dealing with the human resources area with briefers out of HEW.

Now, the reason I think these are so valuable is not necessarily that there is any news made, but because this helps overcome the psychological gap and physical gap between the people who are really assessing the nation's events and the government in Washington according to the people. It is easy to talk about “pointy-headed Washington bureaucrats” or “those idiots in Washington,” even if you are an exceedingly well educated journalist in Denver, or Cheyenne, or Seattle because there is this mystery of distance. But when these guys come in they get to see Brzezinski, or a guy like Califano, Schlesinger, or Eizenstat. They see how a guy responds to questioning, sometimes quite hostile. They see how they articulate in their own words and they watch the person. This, in my opinion, based on all kinds of psychological barriers which you cannot handle any other way, and also the power, the subliminal power, of a president, in inviting folks to Washington to meet these top people and with him, is frightening because any President has this power and people generally go away “awed” by their experience which is something you have to watch. I've been surprised. As a matter of fact, the genesis of this was when I worked at the St. Petersburg Times, which is a very tough and professional newspaper which doesn't let anybody pull the wool over its eyes. Six weeks before the Republican Presidential Primary in 1972--let's see the presidential year was '72--Jerry Ford invited the editors of the St. Petersburg Times to the Oval Office for an exclusive interview. He didn't say anything new. He didn't make any news at all, but he got a six column color photograph in the paper, he got a banner headline, he got a sidebar article about the mood of the President in the Oval Office, he got an analysis piece the next day, he got the Sunday column by the Pulitzer Prize-winning editor of the paper the next Sunday, and he got an editorial. This was all because they were invited to Washington. So I thought if a hard bitten news organization will succumb to this, when the motive is obvious, the value to an on-going program which obviously has political content but whose main aim is just really to get the news across and are given an opportunity to question, has got to be cumulatively fantastic, and I think it has been and I think the President has been pleased with it.

**Alsobrook:** You really touched on this and I think it is an interesting point that these editors are here in the presence of their President and the senior staff. I was curious, have you found that they're less or more inhibited in asking their questions than, say, the Washington press?

**Wurfel:** More. Only with the President, though. I would say that with the cabinet members and others they let 'em have both barrels. But, I generally say, yes, it is true they are not going to hit the President with hard and embarrassing questions, by and large. Some of them have. I think they are more inclined to ask the question which is either going to give them a headline, for example, “Mr. President, what is your view about the border situation in Texas?” And in El Paso an editor will ask about illegal immigration or they are asking something in which they can get a feel of the man or his presidency at the moment, which may not be hard-hitting guts level

adversarial journalism, but since I think we have perhaps at these times an excess of that in Washington anyway, I think it provides a balance for the other kind of journalism which is also useful.

**Alsobrook:** Walt, have you ever been able to watch the President's reaction to some of these questions from these out of town journalists? Does he seem to respond favorably?

**Wurfel:** Yeah. He will doodle sometimes. He will wrap his legs around the chair when I think he is either bored silly with the question which is going on much too long or when he just as soon wouldn't have to answer the question. Sure. Sometimes the editors will impose on him by making a little speech or by insisting on presenting him with something or telling him how they met three years ago—but I think the President deals with that all the time, and there have been one or two occasions where I have seen him politely but firmly cut off the question when he thought it was getting really ridiculous, but that's rare. He doesn't seem to have any problem going over the same ground month after month and he always seems to add something new based on recent happenings. It isn't a case of reading one of the transcripts and having seen them all, which is why I think somebody who wanted to make a study comparing not only against the press conferences but against earlier ones in the same series, might be able to get a Ph. D. dissertation.

**Alsobrook:** (Laughs) I wanted to ask you too about your news on tape program. Did that develop after you set up the briefings?

**Wurfel:** Yes. It's one I wanted to do all along but it was something that hadn't been done in the White House before. It was something I knew would be more visible and more criticized just because print people can never comprehend electronic media. They are suspicious about it. They are worried about it. They are concerned about the propaganda impact of it more than they are concerned about the propaganda impact of anything that is done in print. And because we didn't have enough people, you know when we came in, there were 68 people in the Nessen press office and other offices doing the job that we started off with 48 people doing, cause we had already subjected ourselves to a 28-30% cut, and then we were later cut a little bit more to 45, and then Rafshoon came along and we were about evenly split. We just felt that we had to do the basic job well and we weren't sure what the load would be and you may recall the mail volume in the first year was substantially heavier than it is even now, I think, and we had also not developed the most efficient means of dealing with them. So, we really got it off the ground back in December of '77. I had done a study and a memo to Jody about what the Democratic National Committee Radio was doing and couldn't do and what we could do that wasn't related to that, and of course we had done rather elaborate radio with positive feeding out of news actualities of Carter and Mondale during the campaign from six regional centers, one of them being Atlanta, and I've seen it from close range. But, you know, by mid-summer of '78 I was in a position of beginning. I had gotten the go-ahead and I found out we did have the budgetary support to buy the equipment and hire the staff and we slightly reorganized the press office and

duties so that we had a position that we could devote to this. And so I interviewed and we hired somebody who was not available until November because he was working for a congressman who was in trouble, who lost. Then it took him a month or so to get it started up, so it started in December of '78.

Our philosophy is that although there are all kinds of audio news services, there are a lot of stations out there who either because of small size or low budget cannot or do not subscribe to any kind of national news actuality services like AP Radio, UPI Audio, or one of the networks. There are some others, which are all news stations or which have large blocks of news, which have such a heavy appetite that they are interested in additional material. Now, we don't feed out positively. We merely have numbers where people who are interested can call in and we also have very rigid standards. We do not create any news for that service. We do not do any fake interviews the way everybody on Capitol Hill does. The only things we put on that system are the events where the President, the members of the cabinet, and such people have appeared in public and where it has been accessible to broadcasters who wanted to cover it anywhere. Also, because this is the White House, the news actualities that we make available are almost always related to something the wire service have sent in the form of a print story over their systems and the radio stations have anyway, so there is no way we could get away with distorting or with misrepresenting the context because they almost always have at hand the story which relates to the actuality.

We were immediately attacked by the print media, the national print media, and by some free lance radio people here in Washington who alleged we were taking away their livelihood. Here again, the reason for this falls into the philosophy that the President, despite the fact that the White House is super well covered, really has to take some rather extraordinary measures to communicate with the American people and in particular radio is a problem. For example, I remember when Califano held a news conference about a year ago, sometime in late '77 or early '78, to describe the guidelines the administration would be following as it developed a national health insurance policy. He held a 10:00 news conference and I remember listening to AP radio news on the 11:00 broadcast on one of the local stations, and the lead story was that HEW Secretary Califano held a news conference today to outline the administration's plans for health insurance and the plans immediately ran into strong opposition on Capitol Hill. Then they immediately went to an audio actuality of some senator saying "This will never fly. This is a lousy idea." There was never in that news report a single description of what Califano had said. Now, the news actuality service doesn't overcome that but it does provide an option to broadcasters. We started off having the thing identified. We have it in two forms and I had consulted with the radio/television news directors association before we started this and they said don't package the stuff for us. Some of the bigger stations had said don't package the stuff for us, just give us long quotes, long stretches of speeches and we can excerpt. Well, we do that on an overnight basis but we also knew from our past experiences, me with the senator's offices and Rich Nelson who does this, that there were a lot of small stations, and you have got to put it in

context for that person quickly. And these are rip and read operations where the D.J. is also the news man and they never have read the story before he reads it on the air and we knew we had to make it quickly understandable to them, so Rich does a lead-in. “The President said such and such today. Then we have a cut of the President saying it. Then we have “This is the President on such and such. This is Rich Nelson.” We started out saying at the White House. We had no desire to hide the origin of the this as being White House provided, but it was immediately pointed out to us, even before we got out of an early test period that that could be misconstrued so we immediately changed it to Rich Nelson at the White House Press Office to make it clear that it was a White House provided thing. That was why we had a trial period because we wanted to get the bugs out and it is only the nature of life that the fact that it was a trial period was never recorded in the medium.

**Alsobrook:** (laughs)

**Wurfel:** Anyway, we are now operating in a stage that without ever having broadcast in the sense of fully disseminating the number to call, we are getting around three or four hundred calls a day. What we did, we had sent letters to news directors that have been in, we’ve sent letters to the all-news stations, and we’ve done some other pinpoint advertising, but we have never told all 10,000 radio stations by means of an advertisement or a national letter. But this is going on now and the other thing that we are doing to keep this thing pure news is to put on a recording saying “there is nothing today, call tomorrow” when there is nothing today.

**Alsobrook:** I was curious too—when a member of the senior staff travels or someone in the administration serves as a spokesman for the President, does your office play any role in that?

**Wurfel:** Yes.

**Alsobrook:** What kind of support do you give that person?

**Wurfel:** These folks have news. They’re news-makers, but they have very small staffs and they don’t have any press people on our staff. I say that somewhat with tongue in cheek because I don’t want to be compared with John Dean, because you remember in his book he said he set out to be the law office, the law counsel to the White House staff. Basically what the media liaison office is is the press office for the White House staff when they travel. We probably better than anybody else in the administration have a picture of the media in any city. We know the editor, we know their predilections, we know which newspapers are interested in meeting with editorial boards or having their editorial boards meet with the arriving staff and we know which ones aren’t. We know which ones are likely to be a lion’s den and which ones are likely to be a love feast. We know what radio and television talk shows are interested in people from us. We know which ones, for that matter; will be willing to be interviewed from somebody back home in Washington. But anyway, when they travel Linda Peek and Charlie Goodwin and our always large staff of interns that help us keep this thing going will put together a media schedule for these folks as they go out. The point we make to all political appointees and particularly to

White House aides, is that when you go out and make a speech you might speak to a thousand people in Omaha on the President's programs, you might be very persuasive, but by and large, you have wasted your time and money going out there unless you also do some radio or TV or newspaper because you go on one little diddly small station in Omaha and you are reaching 5,000 people and you can do it with much less effort and you have just enhanced the amount of impact you've had on the public. And you multiply that by a two or three city trip and it is just marvelous. We've been doing that and people have been allowing time in their schedules.

**Alsobrook:** Walt, are there certain White House units you have to work with to set up these trips?

**Wurfel:** Basically, everybody in the press office, both on Jody's side where Rex Granum helps him with the daily briefings, and on my side is a recorder within the White House, we spend a lot of our time finding out what's going on so that we can be effective spokespeople and that means constant contact with the offices. I have sat in on the staff meetings which started out every morning for an hour Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Pat Bario, the Associate Press Secretary and I, and to a lesser extent Jim Purks, have been involved among us in every single legislative task force, which I think there are about 18 of them now which work on special programs. I guess the first one was civil service reform and I was deeply involved in that. Those task forces represent every office within the White House, but you know, I have a lot of contacts, and Pat Bario and her staff do too, with Ann Wexler's office, Rafshoon's office, Frank Moore's people, all up and down the line in Stu's office with DSP, and we don't act as a clearing house for reporters. Basically we just tell them who to get in touch with.

**Alsobrook:** So, it really just depends on the issue then, depending on who you work with on a given day.

**Wurfel:** Yeah.

**Alsobrook:** Also, in regards to press officers for agencies or other parts of government, do you serve any function or relationship for those people?

**Wurfel:** Yes. As a surrogate for Jody and his assistant, I meet with the Public Information Officers for the cabinet. We started off meeting once every week in early '77 and then it fell off to once a month and then I guess there were some periods where we didn't meet for two or three months, but about a year and a half ago I started—well, those are kind of stilted and you always had to deal with a fixed agenda and since this White House was not passing out marching orders to the PIO's very much, I felt it would be better to move into a less formal thing and so now for the past year and a half we have been meeting the first and third Wednesday at 5:00 in Pat Bario's office in the EOB and, perish the thought, doing it over drinks and it's not a command performance.

**Alsobrook:** (Laughs)

**Wurfel:** I have asked the information officers to either show up or send their deputies at least one of those two times and we have found that we have been able to share problems. When I do have things the White House is asking them to do or not to do, or information we are trying to get out to all of them, that is a vehicle for doing that. We have also had people in, like several weeks ago we had Roger Molander come in to talk to them about the SALT negotiations and the SALT process.

It is a way of involving them a little more in the administration and feeling a part of it, which is something this administration, by and large, has been weak on, I think, which is involving the people who have been presidentially appointed or the high level folks who have gone out to the departments below the cabinet head. But I deal with them a lot on the phone on a daily basis. They call and ask, “Do you announce that there? Do you want to announce it here? Can you help me with this? Is the President coming over to the department, or do you need background material?” Or “We’ve suddenly gotten this query which is likely to come up to the White House and could be embarrassing, and you might want to get prepared for it.” Rex Granum deals with them a lot too and Jody does when it’s a hot item that deals with today’s briefing.

Basically I have been the one who has been most available to talk with them on on-going things. And also we like to get acquainted with and talk to people they are hiring for important slots and we talk to the cabinet members and agency heads regarding their top position so that the White House has the feeling, so that Jody’s office has the feeling, that these people are basically competent practioners of public relations and know the news media and that they get acquainted with us and us with them before they go on the job so that they do remember they are working for Jimmy Carter, President, in addition to their cabinet member who may or may not want to be running for President in two or three years.

**Alsobrook:** I believe this is related to that statement that appeared in the National Journal in the summer of ’77 in which you were talking about the fact that a lot of press and journalistic people had been attracted to this administration. Could you possibly tell me why you think there was a rush of journalists to work with President Carter?

**Wurfel:** Yes, it was very fashionable up front to work with the Kennedy Administration. A lot of well known journalists went into it. President Kennedy and his staff had a good way of stroking journalists, making them feel part of the administration. Lyndon Johnson, although he was liked by a lot of reporters, was less so the kind of guy journalists would like to go work for. And, of course, during the Nixon years in particular, and even with Jerry Ford later, it was hard. Except for a number of conservative news people who felt conservatively attuned to the administration, there weren’t many reporters or editors that went in. So, my theory is that there was a whole half-generation, at least, of news people who felt they would like to try their hand at government but didn’t feel intellectually or emotionally attuned to an administration that they would feel comfortable going to work for between 1963 and 1977, and so I think we have a good pool of working journalists with a good amount of experience and knowledge who were

available and interested in working for the Carter Administration: Eileen Shanahan over at HEW; Cliff Sessions, her deputy over there; Arch Parsons who went to work for HUD; Everard Munsey who is the deputy over in the Treasury Department; Dave Jewel who had started off at Transportation; and a whole bunch of others---and including here at the White House, Claudia Townsend who came in from Cox, the Cox Washington Bureau; and Jim Purks who came, a couple of jobs removed, from the Associated Press in Florida; and Jerry Shechter who came to work for Brzezinski. Also, always subject to the problem, sometimes the people who make the greatest reporters have a “Jekyll/Hyde” mind set change when they become public information officers and suddenly turn hostile and hyper-critical--as government public affairs people--of the people who months before had been their peers and their working buddies.

**Alsobrook:** Why is that? Do you have a theory about why that is?

**Wurfel:** Yeh, insecurity, basically. I don't--that's not the whole answer. I don't understand how and why that happens to people, but it does not serve their bosses well. I think even the best reporters only get the peep show view of government and therefore it is accurate that frequently they are way off base. I think that maybe some of these reporters that become public information officers maybe have all these guilt feelings and insecurity of how to deal with it and suddenly try to set right what weaknesses they may have exhibited over the years, even though they were highly respected, and become too preachy. It puzzles me.

**Alsobrook:** Walt, have there been certain assignments that gave you a great deal of personal satisfaction?

**Wurfel:** Well, I think generally it is in a sense delegated to me in an almost perfect way, he (Jody Powell) is perhaps one of the world's worst administrators from the standpoint that--and part of it is the job he is in--it is difficult for him to plan ahead and to organize staff, to give them feedback, and to avoid duplication, and to make sure that all bases are touched. He does that perfectly well in the things that he is perfectly involved with, but I remember when we had the press staff virtually hired and we had called --[gap in tape]---agreed to meet with the staff at his Washington house in December of 1976, or maybe it was January of '77, before the inauguration. Nan Powell, his wife, mentioned to me that it was the first time in Jody's career that he had had a meeting of the staff and this was since the governor's press office, where I think there were perhaps two or three people, and has also been the last time that the entire staff has been together.

Rex and I have tried to set up regular meetings with him to coordinate and it has been difficult, but I say that in the context of, given that, he knows what Rex and I and others should be doing. And he expects us to do it. Because of the fact that sometimes it is difficult to coordinate everything with him the way that I would like, things that I think ought to be checked with him don't get checked with him and just get done. When they are done he generally says fine, but if he disagrees with you he says “I wouldn't have done it that way; I would have done it this way,”

and then it is dropped. The worst kind of situation would be where you don't get the leadership, then you have to go ahead and do the job, and then you get dumped on. Jody is not that way. He is very good at moving you along and either saying that is fine or don't do it that way the next time. Another thing, I used to keep a file here of things that I wanted to check with Jody on and sometimes we would go days and I wouldn't have an opportunity to talk to Jody on these things because they were not a daily crisis, so finally I would pull them out of the file and make my own decisions. Now, that may be the world's best administrative leadership on Jody's part. I think that probably without a conscious plan he assumed that I only got to him with things that were of top priority. But within that context, I think the highly rewarding things have been the President's commitment and Jody's commitment to these briefings, the start-up of the audio actuality service, the fact that I think the Office of Media Liaison, which has been my responsibility, has won wide respect, both within the White House staff for its competence and the whole staff, and among the people we have had contact with in the news media around the country. I also feel that the news summary, which is another area that I am responsible for, has got an excellent staff. It's put together a product which serves the President and his top aides well. It operates almost without supervision. I am pleased to see that. You get personal ego satisfaction out of going out and making little speaking tours talking to journalist groups, as I have done three or four times a year. It helps to get away from Washington to see how other people are thinking and whenever one gets to feeling in the White House that you are just a cog in the wheel and you're so near to great events but you're so far because you're not actually participating in them, just go out and travel a little bit and people think you are important.

**Alsobrook:** The term "great events" leads me to the next question I wanted to ask you about. Did you witness certain events that at the time really struck you as being of historical value?

**Wurfel:** Well, yes.

**Alsobrook:** Or participated in certain events?

**Wurfel:** I would say "witness" is the more correct. I would say certainly the arrival of Deng Xiao Ping and his whole visit. Our whole office was directly involved in a lot of press events related to the Chinese Deputy Prime Minister's visit, particularly some of the cross country stuff in which we were able to get him together with editors. I think certainly the Camp David things in which I just happened to be a partial participant by the fact that I had the spokesman duty that Sunday here in the White House, the Sunday that the three leaders came back and made the announcement on national T.V. I was not involved in setting it up except for a few logistical things, but it was a great event to be here at the time. I suppose there ought to be other events that will come to mind as greatly significant, but to tell the truth they all----I have found maybe it is a function of age or dull nerve ends, I have found that the glory and the thrill of the White House has not been maintained in me. It is a *very* challenging job. It is a great privilege. It is something I will always value having done, but I have not gotten a daily thrill coming here and I

think a lot of events have become almost routine within the context of working here for 2 ½ years. Yet within any other context, they would be very exciting.

**Alsobrook:** One event I was thinking about was I think in July '78. I think it was your responsibility to brief the Soviet journalists who had to come in. (Wurfel gives loud laugh.) Was that one of your most difficult assignments?

**Wurfel:** Well, I guess so because we really didn't have much of anything to say to them.

**Alsobrook:** (Laughs)

**Wurfel:** The significance of the event which, well, let me say, this was related to some Soviet harassment of U.S. journalists in Moscow and what we decided to do was to point out to them indirectly that there were a lot of Soviet journalists here and they enjoyed equal privileges with a lot of other journalists, including American journalists, and these privileges were not inalienable rights. So, it was decided that somebody at my level, not higher, not lower, would call in all the credentialed Soviet journalists, which was eight, I think, and remind them of their rights, responsibilities, and privileges, as holders of White House press passes. Well, I called 'em in and because this got into the press pretty fast, I ended up meeting with them over in the EOB and tried to do it without making a circus out of it and I think we ended up getting five of them because two had left the country and one was on vacation. I met with four of them the first day and the fifth later, but we came in and sat down in Jody's hideaway office over there which he doesn't use for months and months and I basically went through "you have many privileges here, you have free access to this"-- blah, blah, blah-- and they asked a few questions and they made a few complaints about how they hadn't been able to get one-on-one interviews with the President (Alsobrook laughs), which is a universal complaint of the 99% who haven't, and we kind of spun it out for twenty minutes or so without my ever saying anything about your passes being in jeopardy or even linking it to anything, but we all knew, they knew and I knew, why these meetings were held, and actually to this day, now almost a year later, we are giving short renewals of passes to these folks---a basically dilatory practice. You renew them for 60 days; you say they are under study. You never give an explanation of the thing, but then again, we all know what it's about.

**Alsobrook:** Walt, do you know who made the decision that you be the one to go over and talk to them? Did that come from NSC?

**Wurfel:** Well, yeah, NSC. Oh, gee. There were meetings in the situation room, some of which I sat in, some of which Jody was in, in which we kicked back and forth the status of the negotiations, I think it was the Baltimore Sun and the New York Times whose reporters were involved, the status of the negotiations between the newspapers and the Soviets. We weren't directly involved. The papers were doing the negotiations. We couldn't even have really *free* discussions between the State Department and the papers about how and what was going on. So we were standing a little outside of it. They didn't want to get directly involved with the

government, but we were discussing the implication where you could lift passes, you could kick out a journalist or two, you could restrict their travel, you could lecture them, you could do short renewals and---of course, there was the matter of timing, when it should be done. And we were under the gun in the fact that, with the routine practice of two year renewals of press passes, some of these people were coming up for renewal and we had to decide what we were going to do with those renewals. Generally David Aaron of Brzezinski's staff was the one who chaired those meetings, there was somebody from the FBI, and somebody from the State Department, and a couple of other people from the NSC and Jerry Schechter.

**Alsobrook:** Walt, I have a couple of more questions to ask you, but I'm afraid I'm going to run out of tape and I know I've just about run out of time with you too. Would you allow me to put another tape on here and ask you my two remaining questions?

**Wurfel:** Sure.

**Alsobrook:** Some of these are going to be rather open-ended questions, probably more so than the ones I have already asked you.

**Wurfel:** I can make any question open-ended. (They both laugh.)

**Alsobrook:** Since you've worked on the Hill, I think you worked for Senator Stone in Florida and I think you may have worked for Hubert Humphrey one time.

**Wurfel:** Yes, but not on the Hill. I worked in his '72 campaign.

**Alsobrook:** Could you possibly briefly compare what it is like to work up there versus down here? Are there extreme differences?

**Wurfel:** The Senate Office---well, Stone was a first term. That, I think, is an important context to put it in. For a first term there is a sense of insularity and focus on your state which I think maybe a few senators like the Fulbrights and the Kennedys outgrow. Probably some of the senators who stay there longer, particularly now that party loyalties and regional loyalties are shifting, probably there is always much closer attention to specific constituencies in the Senate Office than there is in the White House, which, of course, makes sense. The other thing is, there is the obvious difference in the volume of work. I felt that as press secretary to a Senator from Florida, the fact that we had 20 people in Washington from newspapers and broadcasters in Florida was a high level of coverage, which, in fact, I think it is. There are few states besides New York and California that can approach that. Here at the White House I am likely to take 30 or 40 calls a day from around the country and I'm only one of eight White House spokespeople. The volume is just so much more intense. Of course, your loyalties shift from explaining Congress and justifying the necessity for a Senator to vote his conscience rather than his constituency, which, I guess is always a long constitutional debate, justifying congressional recesses--which a President whose program is moving slowly will say is time-wasting on the

Hill, but which a member of Congress will, with some legitimacy, say if you are going to represent an area, you cannot spend all your time in Washington. You've got to get back and talk with them. For example, Stone visited all 67 counties of Florida every year and made a point of having public meetings. He worked at it. Some folks don't.

So, yes, institutional differences ---you shift gears from one end of the street to the other. I think you can get away with not being responsive in the press area and any other in the White House. Because the universe is so much larger, you're not likely to bump into the same person again and I think that may tend to add to what has been noticed over the years as White House arrogance on the part of some people, or sloppiness. On the other hand, it is also understandable that the White House couldn't be expected to focus on a particular editor or particular mayor, or whatever, the way his or her particular senator or congressman does. I have been very impressed by my co-workers in this White House for two things—I think particularly on Stu Eizenstat's staff, for example, and I think on the press staff and many of the people on the Congressional Liaison staff, have been super high quality people and really the kind of people that if you were putting together the best and brightest, you would. I think that sometimes this White House has suffered because maybe they haven't always been managed that well or the decision making process has been collegial and fuzzy enough so that you headed towards the least common denominator.

Another thing that has impressed me a great deal is the almost complete lack of back biting. I am not aware of anybody in this White House setting out to undermine anybody else, to take his or her turf, or to speak ill of them behind their back and you don't read about it in the press either. Purely as an outsider in other administrations, I think the whole nation was aware from time to time, of fights going on within the White House.

**Alsobrook:** Have you got a theory about that too?

**Wurfel:** Well, I think it is Jimmy Carter's style and I immediately caught that when I went to the campaign---that it doesn't do anybody any good just jockeying for position. The collective chief of staff of the senior aides has pretty well made sure that perhaps sometimes through their inefficiency and collegial nature that anybody who is hot-dogging it or anybody who is trying to undermine somebody else is just going to self destruct. This also operates for someone who also happens to poke his head up just a little too high and starts grandstanding. I think the one area that it may not work is somebody who is mediocre and there are those kinds of folks around here. They can get by forever. The mediocre folks don't get fired. When people ask me "What's the quality of the White House news media and is the White House reported on fairly?," I basically say , and I'm applying that analogy to the White House staff, "In any large group of people, you have people who excel, a broad gauge of people in the middle who are nice and competent, and you have a few idiots", and I hasten to say I'm not attacking the press and I'm not attacking the White House staff, but that's just the fact of life. Any time you have 351

people together, I say, I think we have a high proportion of people at the high end, but you're also got people at the low end and those folks seem to be able to stick on.

**Alsobrook:** Walt, you already sketched, I think, in some detail how the press office is structured and set up and so on. The thing I don't quite understand is: Jerry Rafshoon came in a year ago almost, I think, a year ago in July. How would you describe his role vis-a-vis the press office and the office of media liaison?

**Wurfel:** Jerry is basically doing a lot of things that should have been done but we didn't have time or inclination to do, other than an intellectual recognition of the need. He is planning ahead in the kind of way that the Jody Powell press office never could because Jody and some of us were always just reacting to the headlines of the moment and trying to keep our heads above water. Jerry is trying to coordinate issues so that when there is an important issue in which cabinet members and other top level political appointees of the President ought to be more or less talking the same line, that that is done and that they have the information; their speech writers and their press people do.

As with everything in the Carter White House, areas of responsibility are not so clearly delineated that you know precisely where your responsibility ends and somebody else's responsibility begins, so that Jerry Rafshoon may be dealing with national media organizations and lining up speakers to include the President for their conventions or I might. You just have to keep talking back and forth. There is a premium on coordination. For example, Jerry has recommended to the President now that he speak to the National Convention of the National Cable Television Association. I have consulted with Jerry several months ago, and with Jody, on a list of things that we would make high priorities and media conventions this year and those which we would not. We had decided months ago that the Cable Television Association wasn't worth it. That's changed now and we didn't talk about that, but that's just the way it is and that's fine. There may be a new priority there.

The other areas are, I think, that Rafshoon's office has been somewhat involved in helping us put together tape interviews, video tapes in which we get news makers together with a video crew here in the White House or in Washington and the station at the other end gets an exclusive interview by telephone. We ship them the video tape from this end and they have made a videotape of their person asking the questions at the other end, and they station edits it together and plays it is an interview and if they are professionally sound they will point out that it is a composite interview, but in many cases they won't. Jerry's office is working with us on that. He talks to the cabinet PIOs a lot. When a cabinet member is going onto one of the week-end network talk shows, he would like to know so that we don't have three people on one week and nobody for the next several weeks, that if there is something we are pushing that week like SALT, like energy, like anti-inflation, that each of them at least has some ammunition to respond to questions. So they call Jerry for that. They call me for long term planning and other areas. They might talk directly to Jody relating to the briefing today. There's this kind of overlap.

Jerry has taken over the speech writers. He has more time to work with them than Jody did and the product has improved. Jerry has taken over the Press Advance, and it doesn't matter where the Press Advance people work, to tell the truth. They worked for Jody before, they work for Jerry now. Probably even though they're supervised by Jerry, they work more directly with Rex in regard to the White House press and Pat Bario's shop in regard to handling the local press when the President travels than they do with Jerry. Jerry also supervises the White House photographers and yet I end up writing the personnel evaluations of the civilian Defense Department official who is the chief photographer and he comes to Rex or Jody or me for a decision on whether or not to release this or that photograph to the press, so there are all kinds of nuisances.

**Alsobrook:** Say Jody and Rex are traveling, would some of their duties fall to you?

**Wurfel:** Yeah. Whichever spokesperson is here is the one that gets asked the question.

**Alsobrook:** Say, you're at home asleep at 3:00 in the morning, do you get calls? Say, you're on duty as the spokesperson; do you have to take calls from somebody on the West Coast?

**Wurfel:** Yes, and you know each of the eight spokespeople in this White House press office has a signal switchboard line at their house. We've changed a little bit. At the start the duty roster, which is one of my responsibilities as the administrative officer of the press office, which I haven't talked about which somebody had to do, was to do the duty roster. We started off by having Saturday duty, Sunday duty, and week night duty on three separate but coordinated rosters. Well, the week night duty is really a killer. When you've been here 12, 13, 14 hours and then you go home and then you have to take these calls. So we've changed it now so that Mark Henderson, one of the Assistant Press Secretaries, comes in in mid-afternoon and works until midnight. He's the guy that handles the week-night thing so that the only middle of the night calls you get now are if you have Saturday or Sunday or holiday duty and that has made life a lot easier. I might say that although we have these eight people speaking for the White House, I'm not yet aware of anytime in which one of us has said something which is so off base that Jody had to turn around and correct it the next day, which really surprises me, but I think says something for the fact that although we don't have a formal set of meetings, we have kind of kept pretty well coordinated.

**Alsobrook:** Do you think there is any way anybody could prepare himself to work in the White House? Is there a certain job you could have?

**Wurfel:** I could only speak for the press office. No, I don't. Jody never worked in the media, but he's a superb press secretary and it's not just because he knows the President intimately and because he is eloquent and all that, it's also because over the years as a campaign press secretary and a governor's press secretary, he has learned everything he needs to know about the media. He understands their deadlines, their foibles, and the competition and the strengths and weaknesses. What I tried to do in media liaison was get people who did have a mix of knowing

Washington , of having worked in the media, and Linda Peek had a particular strength of putting together conferences and things. I do have a philosophy, though, that reporters are better reporters in covering government or politics if they have worked in government or politics, and I think somebody can be a better government public affairs officer if they have worked in the news room.

I'm very distressed by the feeling of young journalists--which I think is based on a kind of misplaced elitism--that if they work for a politician or if they go to work for the government, that they have lost their professional virginity. I go from another standpoint. I moved from radio journalism into the State Department, AID, a decade ago. I moved back out to newsletter journalism, and then I went to work for newspapers as a general manager and managing editor. Then I worked for Hubert Humphrey in the '72 primary and then I went to work for a great newspaper, the St. Petersburg Times, and then I went to work for a senator. So, I think I have proved you can move back and forth without losing your credibility. I think the basic things that you need are intelligence, a sense of self security, because an insecure press spokesperson gets into all kinds of trouble by pretending to know more, and they don't and that's a sure road to disaster. Being conscientious—you can overcome all kinds of other sins by understanding, respecting, and responding to deadlines and being generally helpful in trying to get information to people. If you generally make the effort and sometimes you fail, they'll understand that. But, if on the other hand, you try to set a sense of priorities which hold out everybody who doesn't work for a newspaper of 100,000 or larger circulation or everybody who isn't a reporter right here, then you're not being effective.

**Alsobrook:** Walt, can you tell me anything about your future plans?

**Wurfel:** I'm 42 and I'm not in anybody's retirement plan yet. I've been a gypsy. I've advanced professionally but I feel now that I want to go into an organization where I plan to work for 20 years or more. That's why I'm going to the Gannett group because they have a lot of newspapers and a lot of broadcast stations and they're not top heavy with management. They have a rather lean management and I think there are a lot of opportunities there where I can, as a journalism executive, corporate level, have a lot of future. That's why I'm doing it now. What happened was that I came under consideration for the Deanship of Communications at the American University and in the process of being checked out for that they talked to a lot of journalists around town and Gannett asked me if I was interested in considering it and it kind of put me in the position of realizing that if I were going to move now, it better be before mid '78 because otherwise I would feel a moral commitment to the campaign and not to leave. At that time I was offered the Deanship and I had the Gannett offer, so I decided at 42 you're Dean for five years, and then what do you do? I don't want to teach the rest of my life. At age 60 I might want to teach the rest of my life, so I did this. But, I kind of backed into a situation in which I probably would not have acted before the 1980 election except for the fact that the journalism deanship only comes up once every ten years or so, so I thought I better be considered for that and then this other thing came along.

**Alsobrook:** For use of the future Presidential Library could you give me a permanent legal address and telephone number? Is that a possibility? Any alumni association we could contact?

**Wurfel:** The Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, Stanford University, Pomona College. All three of them have me.

**Alsobrook:** Good. Great.

**Wurfel:** For other things—my wife, whose last name is Fitzgerald, her first name is Sarah, is an editor of National Journal, which is why I've occasionally been covered in National Journal.

**Alsobrook:** (laughs)

**Wurfel:** And, so, yeah, I'm very, very proud of her credentials as a journalist. So, she will probably be around as a journalist since she's fourteen years younger than I am, long after I am pulling the potatoes or planting the tomatoes.

**Alsobrook:** Thank you for your time.