

GERALD RAFSHOON EXIT INTERVIEW

[This is an] interview with Jerry Rafshoon, Assistant to the President for Communications, September 12, 1979, approximately 11:00 A.M. in room 175 of the Old Executive Office Building. The interviewer is David Alsobrook of the Presidential Papers Staff.

ALSOBROOK: Mr. Rafshoon, now when did you first come to work for Jimmy Carter in this White House?

RAFSHOON: Well, I first came to work for Jimmy Carter in this White House, officially, I started July 1, 1978. But, when he asked me to take this job, it was I think May 15th or May 17th, 1978. And I said, "Yes, I could come." I said I could come. He asked me when, and I said that for business purposes I had to finish up some things in my business; that I would come July 1st and not go on the White House payroll until then. However, immediately I started to move in and started working over here and didn't do too much in my whole business anyway. So I was here from May '78. The first time I started working for Jimmy Carter was 1966. That was on his first campaign for [governor].

ALSOBROOK: Did you have some unofficial input into media events before you came on board here last year?

RAFSHOON: Yes I did. Ever since the inauguration. And I did the advertising for the Presidential campaign as I had done the advertising for the two gubernatorial campaigns. And then I worked on the inauguration. After the inauguration, I told the President that I was going to continue my business. I was going to open an office of Rafshoon's Communications up here, and that I would be available to help on various media events. I did some consulting with the White House or with the White House Staff in helping with such things as fireside chats and press conferences and things such as that. Every once in a while, I'd give my input on speeches that the President was going to make. In May of '78, the President said that about 90 percent of my advice was good. But the other 10 percent was not so good because I didn't know what was going on in the White House. And I laughed, and he said that the only way that you could do that would be to come to work here. I found that 10 percent was pretty significant because I had been always saying that, "You got to do this," and "You got to do that," and "Why aren't y'all doing this?" and "Why aren't y'all doing that?" When I got in here I found out that it wasn't y'all who had to do it, it was all of us that had to do it. And that it wasn't that simple.

ALSOBROOK: You were talking about your advice and your relationship with the President. After you got here, did you find that you gave most of your advice

face-to-face or was it in the form of memoranda or how does your advice--?

RAFSHOON: Both, both. The President likes things orderly. He likes to have you work out conflicting viewpoints with other staff members. I find it easy sometimes to just sit down at a typewriter and type out a memo and put down neat places to check off or to disapprove. And when I would do that, I would do that myself and then have Becky Hendrix type it and then if it was something that other people could see, I would staff it out. But in many cases I would just put [out] an eyes-only memo and take it to the President and let him read it. Then he'd give it back to me within twenty-four hours. And it saved a lot of time--saved a lot of his time and made it easier for me to articulate. However, if there were things that I needed to immediately ask him, or if I wanted to argue something that he had rejected in a memo, then I would go in and see him and discuss it with him. Some advice was given in meetings. There would be meetings with me and Hamilton and Jody and Stu, Dr. Brzezinski and others, and, of course, then I would give my advice in person.

ALSOBROOK: You were talking about when you first came to work here. Could you tell me something about the background behind the creation of your office?

RAFSHOON: Well, we were thinking before I came here, that there was a need to have somebody worry about the long-range communications problems, who wasn't mired in the day-to-day reaction problems that the Press Secretary is--Somebody that could help formulate themes, formulate speeches, expand the interview process that--where the President would see more people, and more or less work on ways of communicating not only on what President Carter is, but what he stands for, what our programs are and try to sell our programs, not only to the public but to the congress.

So, I had been talking to the President saying you needed to get somebody like this. And I had been arguing for somebody like that, and then one day he and the First Lady said why don't you do it. And I was a little surprised. And they said that I may not be the best communicator or the best advertising man, but I guess I do know Jimmy Carter since I've worked with him so many years that I decided that I would do it, but I had to put a limit on the time I'd be able to do it. I hadn't planned to stay more than about a year.

ALSOBROOK: This time frame of, when you were talking about when you were setting up this office, was this back in spring of '78 when they had the meetings at Camp David?

RAFSHOON: Yes.

ALSOBROOK: And you went to Camp David--.

RAFSHOON: I didn't go to Camp David but I had a meeting with the President when he got back from Camp David that day. I was in Peru on business for my company and I flew back to Washington, and I remember that afternoon I met with him.

ALSOBROOK: You mentioned the First Lady and the President approached you and said that you should do it. Do you know who else had input in the decision to--?

RAFSHOON: Hamilton Jordan and Jody Powell.

ALSOBROOK: Were there similar offices in previous administrations?

RAFSHOON: Well, Nixon had an office of communications that was headed by Colonel [Herbert] Klein and later by Ken Clausen. And they did a lot of stroking of news people and trying to sell some of their plans. Unfortunately, a lot of it was designed to get support for the bombing of Haiphong Harbor and going into Cambodia. And ultimately it became the office of apology for Watergate. So, that's the tradition I inherited.

ALSOBROOK: The earlier tradition obviously didn't really give you that much assistance during the early days of planning.

RAFSHOON: No, not really.

ALSOBROOK: Now the media frequently has characterized you as the President's image-maker. How would you describe your role in the White House?

RAFSHOON: Well, to say that I'm an image-maker is just false. It also tends to impugn the President's motives. I remember when the President vetoed the nuclear carrier bill, [the] Wall Street Journal said that he had done it because Rafshoon, the image maker, wanted him to look tough and that he wanted a confrontation with congress. Well, that's just hogwash because the President never approved of having a nuclear carrier. He was against the bill and hadn't signed the bill. He would have one hell of a time trying to justify why he'd gone back on his previous stand. And his image would have been lousy doing that because you can't do something that you don't believe in and look very credible. All I said was, "If this is the way you feel, and there may not be much chance of getting it sustained, but hell, go ahead and veto it and we'll try to sustain it." And we did sustain it. The Wall Street Journal impugned his motives because they were for a nuclear carrier. And they called it Rafshoon's veto or they had one headline saying Admiral Rafshoon. That's just silly. Because you know--he did it because he believed that. You don't make an image. You can't make a person's image. I mean, he's the President of the United States. He is what he is. All I do is try to define what he is; to sharpen, to clarify, to use an old, old cliché, tell it like it is. If you tell it like it is, it's going to come across in the best way possible. Sometimes we don't succeed. Sometimes we do.

ALSOBROOK: Who do you feel will do this job after you're gone, though

RAFSHOON: Well, I'm irreplaceable, of course. Parts of my empire are being divided up; the speech writers are going to work for somebody, maybe go directly to the President. But Jody will take back some of the functions. And I'll still try to help from the outside. I'll be working on the campaign. So, I'll be able to give some input.

ALSOBROOK: I'm interested in the structure of your office as well as some of the duties of your staff. Could you briefly tell me a little bit about the other members of the staff, Greg Schneiders, Becky, and--?

RAFSHOON: Greg is my deputy and has been running the day-to-day operation of the staff. [He] assists me in everything I do. Becky Hendrix is my administrative assistant and is really my eyes and ears, barometer of what's going on. She handles all my correspondence, all my phone calls. [She is] very sensitive to public relations, very sensitive to what goes on in the White House, who to talk to, who not to talk to, how to get things done. I have the speechwriting department, which is headed now by Rick Hertzberg and they answer to me. And we work--I tell them what the President wants to say or what we need to have in a speech. I edit them. I listen to what they have. I am a go-between for them and the President. Press Advance has been a part of my organization. That will go back to Jody Powell--that's Mike Pohl and members of the Press Advance. They go out on the road and set up Presidential appointments, Presidential visits. Anne Edwards works for me. She handles the technical aspects of press conferences and television, television appearances. Alan Raymond is a communications coordinator. He does things like booking people on shows, on television shows, working with the Cabinet, working with the various task forces for various programs such as SALT and energy and inflation. And then we have a few administrative people. I think we have about twenty people in this department.

ALSOBROOK: How would you describe your office's relationship with the Press Office?

RAFSHOON: Oh, we work closely. Some of our functions overlap and some of them dovetail. Jody and I have had a working relationship since 1969. So, some things are done in this area by him and some are done by my [staff]. The day-to-day reaction stuff, the things that are in the headlines--Jody deals with. The things that might happen a few weeks down the road, getting ready for something, setting events, speeches--that's my area. But we work together, you know; he has input on my stuff; I have input on his.

ALSOBROOK: This is sort of tied in with another question I had. What type of advance planning can you do in a job like this one?

RAFSHOON: Well, that's a good question. We talked about long-range planning. I used to say long-range is one week because every time I say I'm going to get started on the long-range some emergency happens, and I get sucked into that. But we try to work with the Scheduling Office to give input and also get their ideas of what's happening and try to look down the road as to where we want to be at a certain time, couple of months in advance and try to structure things. But then, you know, a Middle East peace trip was thrown together in forty-eight hours. And we had to work on that. There wasn't much advance planning except we'd certainly had in our minds for a year what would happen if we could get a Middle East peace.

ALSOBROOK: That's really the other question I wanted to ask you, too. I was concerned about the Middle East trip. You were with the President. As you think back about that experience, was there a certain time when it became apparent to you that the President was about to achieve some type of break-through?

RAFSHOON: Yes.

ALSOBROOK: When was that?

RAFSHOON: That morning.

ALSOBROOK: Was there anything going on--?

RAFSHOON: Well, the night before it looked like we'd had it. I thought [it] was in pretty good shape when we left Egypt, and then after the first night in Israel [the President] told us that Prime Minister Begin was not going to give an inch and that he wanted to take everything to the Knesset and get approval of the Knesset before he signed anything and that he wasn't giving in on various details. And that was the first night--Friday night or Saturday night, really. And it got worse. And by Monday evening it looked like we weren't going to have anything. And then he said, "Let's stay over one more night. We'll stay over one more night and see." He would have a meeting with Prime Minister Begin in the morning. He called him for breakfast. And we were supposed to leave Monday. I remember we stayed an extra day. And I kept hoping against hope, and pacing the floor in the hotel corridor while they were meeting. And when he called us in after their breakfast meeting, me and Hamilton and Jody, Secretary Vance and Dr. Brzezinski, he said, his first words were, "I think we're on the verge of success." And he said he thought that he had an agreement with Begin that he could take to Sadat to sell. And that was Tuesday morning. I didn't want to, you know, say for sure that we had it, but that was my first inkling that we might have it. But my second inkling was when he walked out of the meeting with Sadat in the airport in Cairo that afternoon, and said we had it. So, I didn't take anything for granted until it happened.

ALSOBROOK: Are there other trips that really stand out in your mind, as memorable just like that one?

RAFSHOON: Not as memorable, no.

ALSOBROOK: Are there others less memorable but still significant in your mind?

RAFSHOON: They were all significant. I think when you go on a trip with the President and you go overseas, and you see him able to deal on a one-to-one basis with heads of state, not have to go through the congressional and legislative process to get things done, and where his personality and his talents are put to bear on particular problems, they all kind of make you feel that this is what it's all about. [It] makes it worthwhile.

ALSOBROOK: Mr. Rafshoon, a great deal has been written about the discipline that you've helped bring to this White House, can you elaborate on this?

RAFSHOON: Well, I'm not sure I had a lot to do with the discipline. But when I came, there was a commitment by the President to get things a little more disciplined. What I tried to get involved in was the discipline of themes [so] that you wouldn't have Cabinet members going off in different directions; one saying one thing and one saying another thing. You wouldn't have senior staff members saying one thing and saying another thing. And we put in a system where Cabinet members would check with me before they went on "Meet the Press" or "Face the Nation" or "Issues and Answers." And we tried to see that people weren't on one network saying one thing and another network saying another thing, or that two members of the senior staff weren't on the same program, which happened with the Midge Costanza thing. And in that respect, I guess, I brought some discipline.

ALSOBROOK: You've already touched on this somewhat--you worked very closely with the speech writers. Could you take a particular speech, such as the President's address last spring on energy and possibly tell me what your input would have been on that particular speech as it made its way along until he delivered it?

RAFSHOON: You're talking about the April energy speech?

ALSOBROOK: Yes sir.

RAFSHOON: Okay. We knew we had to make an energy speech. Well, backing up from there, I was part of the argument of whether or not we should make an energy speech. Frankly, I wasn't sure that we should have another energy speech; that the more the President spoke about energy, the more he was associated with the problem, and politically it probably didn't do him any good to be talking about problems that are so hard to solve. On the other hand, that's not Jimmy Carter's way of leading. He will tackle problems that may be insurmountable, and he decided to make the speech.

Then I would assign a speechwriter. And I assigned Rick Hertzberg, who's the top speechwriter on that. And together we worked out an outline of what needed to be said. We talked to the substantive people, the policy people, like Stu Eizenstat and David Rubenstein and Kitty Schirmer in energy and people from DOE [Department of Energy]. [We] sent in an outline for the President. He reacted to that and sent it back and made a few changes. Then we wrote the speech, the first draft of the speech. And I remember in that case Rick worked through the night on the speech and over the weekend. And we sent a copy of the speech to [James] Schlesinger and Eizenstat and Treasury and various people, saying to please react, with also a copy to the President. And I remember coming in the next morning, Monday morning, and he had already sent the speech back and on it he had written, "Jerry, this is one of the worst speeches I have ever seen. After the first half-hour, nobody--no, after the first five pages nobody but the Mobil Oil public relations man would be awake." [The President said,] "We need to be tough, concise," (a few other adjectives), "see me at 2:30, and be ready." And I called Rick and I said, "Let me read you what the President wrote on the speech." And

he said, "He seems pretty sure of himself." I said, "I don't think he likes the speech, Rick." I said, "Maybe if we make a few minor adjustments." And we went back to the drawing board. And we met with the President. But, I felt good that he really, you know, he certainly must have read it. From there we went to other drafts.

And then the big part, [the] big function was to negotiate with the various policy people that get involved. There are too many of them. You know, there's DPS [Domestic Policy Staff] and different Cabinet members. And I remember, in this case, rather than have the speech run all over and have people try to, you know--you can't write a speech in a committee. I remember we had a meeting in Stu Eizenstat's office and it might have been twenty people in the meeting in this little office--oh, more than that, thirty people. And in this meeting, going over word for word, trying to edit the speech were the Secretary of Energy, the Secretary of Treasury, the Secretary of Interior, the head of the Environmental Protection Agency, the Secretary of HEW [Health, Education, and Welfare]--I don't know, were you in the meeting? I mean, if anybody had run into you in the hall, they'd have brought you in, and you could have had the input. "Well, I think this ought to be this way, this ought to be that way." What I did in this case was go through the whole meeting knowing that they all [were] busy people who had jobs, that they would run out of steam. So, I devoted those few hours for everybody to give their suggestions, some of which I wrote down. And then we went back and rewrote the speech, took the suggestions where people really had come up with substantive things to correct, inaccuracies. That I would change. But, we then rewrote it, the speech, without taking much of what they had to say to heart. If we had, it would have been, the speech would have been hodgepodge. But in the long run, the final editor is the President, and he's an excellent editor. There are no speeches given by Jimmy Carter that aren't anywhere from 50 percent to 99 percent his.

ALSOBROOK: You've been dealing with Jimmy Carter's speeches, I guess, since 1966. Has he altered his editing technique in his method of preparing for speeches since those early days in Georgia?

RAFSHOON: He spends more time on practicing now, which is good. He hasn't really altered his technique. He feels more comfortable with his speech writers now than he did. I mean, in 1970 he had no speech writers. He wouldn't have a speechwriter. He wrote all his speeches, many of which did not have prepared texts. They were right off the top of his head. They were very good.

ALSOBROOK: And he liked to use notecards.

RAFSHOON: Yes.

ALSOBROOK: Does he still rely on notecards?

RAFSHOON: Yes, but we try to force more text, to use text more. He does better when he just has notecards. But, you know, when you're dealing with some issues that are very sensitive, you have to have a text. You have to make sure that you say it the

right way. Unless you have a text for the press; press is kind of lazy--They don't listen to speeches, and they have to have it written out for them.

ALSOBROOK: You were talking about his practice sessions. I think you instituted the use of video practice, too. But, when did you first try that with him?

RAFSHOON: I've done it from time to time over the years. But, in this past year we've done it more often.

ALSOBROOK: And you've used it, I think recently in July at the Camp David--.

RAFSHOON: At the Camp David speech.

ALSOBROOK: As you recall that particular experience are there certain mental pictures or events that stand out as you think back about it?

RAFSHOON: Camp David?

ALSOBROOK: Yes.

RAFSHOON: Yes, we have a lot of them. Well, I remember the Vice-President, Hamilton, Jody and myself and Pat Caddell going up by helicopter the day after he canceled the speech on July the 4th. Everybody was joking around about, you know, how was the President going to be when we get up there? Where is he, and all of that. When we got up there I was impressed by how much in control he was of the situation and how clear he was thinking of what he wanted to do, and how he really told us what he wanted to do. I remember long nights trying to hammer out a speech to be used on Sunday, July 15th. I remember the people coming up--people like all the way from Jesse Jackson to Lane Kirkland of the AFL-CIO, Clark Clifford, governors, mayors, religious leaders--and how impressed I was by the knowledge and the experience that they brought to the President and how he was able to take what they had to say and react and synthesize. I was impressed by the whole process.

ALSOBROOK: Now, how were you able to hammer out that particular speech? Could you briefly tell me a little bit about that?

RAFSHOON: We had several people working on it--Rick Hertzberg, Gordon Stewart, Wayne Granquist from OMB, Pat Caddell. And we had listened to what the people had been saying the first couple of days. We took a lot of notes. We listened to what the President said to them and made a lot of notes from that.

And [we] worked through the night, another all night session, and gave the President something to react to. And he basically rewrote the whole speech. Not that there was anything wrong with what we gave him, but he had gone through this process for ten days and was so much into this process, so much in his mind that he wanted to get out, that he kind of came back to us with maybe two-thirds of our draft rewritten, and various things that we did give him restructured.

And I wrote him back a memo and said that, "You have some good ideas here. We know what your thinking is. What I would like to do is to take this and let us edit you. And we'll put brackets around what we think of yours [that] should go out. We'll put parentheses around what we think of ours should stay in." And we went on and did a markedup speech, which was excellent. He said it was an excellent way for us to work. Then he was able to go through it, read it into his tape recorder. Then he came back with another draft to us. And then we re-edited and argued out point-by-point [where] we thought he was right, and where we thought he was wrong, very candid, very loose, very congenial. We won about 50 percent of our arguments which means that he won 50 percent of his. Then he made the finishing touches.

ALSOBROOK: And then he went to the video practice.

RAFSHOON: We had video practice on Saturday in Camp David. We set up a little Oval Office in the theatre there--that little theatre that they have church services [in] on Sunday. We cleared it out, put a desk and the flags behind there. And we did a video-tape practice there. [We] came back Saturday night. We got to look at the video-tape. Then Sunday we did it again.

ALSOBROOK: As far as the practice session goes, you were there and who else?

RAFSHOON: That's it. Me and the President and technicians

ALSOBROOK: Okay. This is a rather philosophical question; you can reject it altogether if you wish. How do you feel electronic media over the last twenty-five or thirty years or so has affected Presidential campaigning as well as the institution of the Presidency itself?

RAFSHOON: Well, it certainly has affected it. Jimmy Carter wouldn't be President if his campaign hadn't been covered by television--If we hadn't had the ability to go out and advertise on television and show what he is, who he is, where he stands. And in the campaign, I think, the paid media that you use are probably more educational to the public than what they see on the news. In fact, I'm not just blindly saying that. There has been a survey by some people at Syracuse University that showed that in 1972 and 1976, the public felt they got more information about where a candidate stands, what he's about, what his character is, what his personality is, what his record is from his paid commercials, and his opponents' paid commercials. I mean, so [it] is not so subjective--you find out a lot from your opponents. You accept or reject as you wish then with the news. Well, because, you know, the

paid advertising goes into the things about a candidate, each of the candidates. Then people can judge the positive and also negatives about opponents.

Whereas, I'm afraid, TV news trivializes campaigns, as it does trivialize the Presidency. Most people in this survey felt that on the television news, on the network news, all they got were the ballyhoo of a campaign--the mistakes, the polls, the crowds. It was like television reported it like they do a football game. In that respect, I think

television does a disservice to the electorate on their networks because what they do is take what is the most sensational and what is the most entertaining minute-and-a-half or two minutes of a campaign each day. They do that with the Presidency. They do that here everyday, and I think it has been a great contributor to our problems. You go back and look over the last couple of years of how the networks report energy. You don't see the merits of our energy program. You don't see analysis of what's in view--of what a windfall profits tax on the oil companies might buy for energy security. What you see reported most of the time is Carter having a squabble with congress. What are the chances of getting it passed? How it affects his political fortunes for re-election. I don't say that the networks are unfair to us. But what we've done, we've given them a free show everyday that they can cover. And they cover it as best to get viewers as they can. And also, since Watergate, there's been a tremendous distrust of all institutions by the press. And the press felt there, you know, they exercise their strength during Watergate and they found themselves on the right side of a cause. And I'm afraid they've come to be kind of the bullies on the block since then, because if they see something inherently wrong in everything that's happening; they're not looking for the positive story. They're going to catch you, even if there's nothing to catch you at. But they have a tremendous impact.

ALSOBROOK: You know, along the same line, do you feel that the electronic media today exerts more pressures on the members of the White House staff--than say twenty-five or thirty years ago--?

RAFSHOON: Oh God, yes. twenty-five, thirty years ago nobody knew who had my job or Hamilton's job, Jody's job, and all. Now they try to sensationalize what we do, too.

ALSOBROOK: How do you combat that? Like if the media tries to make you into a media star in your own right, how do you--?

RAFSHOON: [I] try to avoid it as much as possible. But here again, I mean, Becky can tell you that so many times people have called saying that we're going to do a story on Jerry or a feature on TV on Jerry, we want to see him. We're going to do the story even if we don't see him. Well, you have a choice there; cooperate, and maybe try to get, you know, your part of the story in positively, but then on the other hand, you're giving it an imprimatur that you cooperated and let them do a hatchet job on you and say well, I wouldn't even talk to them. That's a judgment call you have to make all the time. I don't care what they say about me. It doesn't hurt me. It helps in some ways, you know, it gives me publicity and, you know, people know me. And I'm certainly better known than I would have ever been if I hadn't been involved with Jimmy Carter. But I do care when it hurts the President. And we try to avoid these people. But, you know, you need to talk to them about substantive things. Then you try to get the best face on everything that they're going to do about the administration. Sometimes you don't succeed because, you know, I've had people talk to somebody on television for an hour, selling administration programs. And when they edit it down to two minutes, it's the two minutes where I made a mistake.

ALSOBROOK: I'm not going to ask you about the entire '76 campaign but what were the high points for you? I know you got your man elected, that's about as high as you can get but--?

RAFSHOON: New Hampshire and Florida primaries, the convention. The thing about a campaign rather than being in government is that there's a weekly challenge. You know, you have all these primaries and you have various events, and whether they're a success or a failure, it's a tremendous challenge. It was a real marathon. But I'd say the early, early victories were the real high points.

ALSOBROOK: Could you tell me briefly about your future plans, immediately?

RAFSHOON: Immediately. Well, I'll go back to my company, Rafshoon's Communications. And then I will do some work on the [campaign]--I will do for the 1980 campaign what I did for the 1976 campaign.

ALSOBROOK: Media, electronic media.

RAFSHOON: All media. And consulting. My company will also do public relations, marketing, and some film production. I want to make movies eventually.

ALSOBROOK: I came across something about your interest in Robert E. Lee.

RAFSHOON: I have a 12-hour treatment for a mini-series on Robert E. Lee for television, which I hope to sell to a network, in a few years.

ALSOBROOK: Where did that particular interest come from? Is that a boyhood thing?

RAFSHOON: Not in Robert E. Lee, but I've always been interested in movies. Before I went into the advertising business I worked for Twentieth Century Fox. So, I've been involved in movies, and marketing of movies for many years. After the '76 campaign, I tried to think if I wanted to make movies, where the public's mind was. And I knew that '76 showed that the public was interested in the South, patriotism, in ethics and morals and values. All these things helped elect Jimmy Carter. The Robert E. Lee character which really had never been done in movies; he's always been the guy, you know, in the Civil War movies. He's out there fighting the war but you don't see him. But that would be of interest to the public. He's really an authentic American hero who has had a lot of irony and paradox in his life.

ALSOBROOK: Well, obviously, the President has some interest in the Civil War.

RAFSHOON: Yes.

ALSOBROOK: What was your connection with the Shelby Foote tour? The President just expressed an interest that he wanted to go to the Gettysburg battlefield?

RAFSHOON: Exactly.