

Exit Interview
With
GERALD L. WARREN
On
October 24, 1974



Nixon Presidential Materials Staff
National Archives And Records Administration

Exit interview with Gerald L. Warren
conducted by Terry W. Good
in Room 352 of the Old Executive Office Building
on October 24, 1974

- TWG: To start with, just for the background purposes, when did you actually join the White House staff?
- GLW: I joined a day or two after the inaugural in 1969, in January 1969. I think the morning of the twenty-second.
- TWG: When you came on board what was your title?
- GLW: I came on board as deputy press secretary to the President.
- TWG: And without going into a lot of detail, Jerry, how was it that you came to be hired by the White House?
- GLW: Well I was known to Ron [Ronald L.] Ziegler. I was assistant managing editor of the San Diego Union. And Ron had come through San Diego periodically on campaigns with Mr. Nixon and with Herb [Herbert G.] Klein. Then, in mid-January, he was looking for a deputy. And we were brought together by a mutual friend in California. And I flew out to New York and met with Ron at the Pierre Hotel and it was decided that I would join them, the Nixon administration. I met with the President-elect that same day and my appointment was announced that afternoon.
- TWG: Your responsibilities when you first came on--were they outlined for you? Did you know exactly what you were going to do or was it kind of a loose knit type...?
- GLW: Well it was, you must remember that we were all new to government and we, all of us, had some idea of how a press office might operate, but we really were sort of feeling

our way along. And the responsibilities in the office evolved as we went along. And my main responsibility developed into, and almost started out this way too, the development of facts for Ron Ziegler to use at his briefing. Then, taking questions from the press outside of briefings, and finding answers from within the White House and within the administration.

TWG: Who were the other primary people in the White House press office in '69?

GLW: Well, when we began it was Ron Ziegler, of course, as press secretary, Tim [Timothy G.] Elbourne, as a press assistant, [M.] Alan Woods, and [J.] Bruce Whelihan. At that time Tim Elbourne was doing a lot of traveling on behalf of the press office, both in advance of a presidential trip and during the presidential trip, to make the press arrangements. Alan was doing pretty much the same thing I was doing, and that is gathering information for Ron to use. Bruce was doing that also, but in addition to that, he was doing some technical things in the office, as I recall, making sure that the reporters and the cameramen were where they were supposed to be and that sort of thing.

TWG: I seem to recall Bruce said that he was involved in taking care of the clearances for members of the media.

GLW: That's true. He handled the creditation for many years, before I took it over.

TWG: Would it be fair to say that you--that Alan Woods was more or less your assistant? Was he working more or less

directly under you?

GLW: Well, I think it evolved that way, yes, yes. Although I think it's also fair to say that in those early days, even though I had the title of deputy press secretary, all of us in the office, all the men in the office were reporting directly to Ron and getting instructions directly from him. But Alan and I evolved a relationship where he was pretty much reporting to me, yeah. By the way, Alan is going to be around here.

TWG: Is he?

GLW: Yeah.

TWG: Now he left before we started doing these interviews.

GLW: He's going to be coming back and helping Bill [William] Walker for a few weeks, so you might have a chance to get to him.

TWG: Good. That's, that's a--thank you. I appreciate that. Well how does one go about gathering information? How did you do it then?

GLW: Well, that's a long time ago [laughter].

TWG: Well then....

GLW: I'll try to remember.

TWG: I don't want to spend too much time on that period...

GLW: Yeah.

TWG: ...unless it is representative of how the process was carried on throughout this five or six years period.

GLW: I don't think it really was representative.

TWG: Well then maybe we don't want to spend too much time on it.

GLW: In the early days Ron would get a lot of the information himself. We were occupied, in the early days, with a lot of appointments and nominations to the new administration. So, much of my job was helping prepare releases to the press, announcing the appointments to the various positions in the administration. When a--but generally, throughout the five and a half years, the process would be something like this. You would know from the stories that were generated the day before, overnight, and in the morning papers, what the principal areas of interest would be during the briefing. And you would work to prepare Ron Ziegler or me, whoever was doing the briefing that day, as well as we could, for the questions that we expected.

Questions of foreign policy naturally we would go--we would work through our liaison with the National Security Council staff. And that person would then coordinate with the Defense Department and with the State Department in coming up with a position. After the position was arrived at, it was still the press secretary's responsibility to--ultimate responsibility to make sure that that indeed was the President's position. And with Dr. [Henry A.] Kissinger having as close a role as he did with the President, in the White House, it was at most times enough to talk with Dr. Kissinger about it. There were times when Ron would go to the President and, before he briefed, to double check on that.

In the areas of domestic policy it would depend on what the situation was. In the early days we would go to John Ehrlichman. That was after he became principal assistant for domestic affairs, after he was counsel to the President. And he would get us our guidance. Then as the Domestic Council, itself, evolved, and there were individuals assigned to various areas of interest in various departments and agencies, then we were able to coordinate our guidance with the various departments, similar to what we were doing with the National Security Council staff. And then when a query came in, if it was in the area of an appointment or something, we would go to the office in the White House which was charged with working on personnel matters. If it was domestic affairs we would go to the Domestic Council. And similarly with National Security Council affairs. If it was a matter of scheduling, of course we would go to the scheduling office. And try to make sure that what we were doing was consistent with the President's policies and with his plans. Many times the information we received we would not use in a response immediately because perhaps the President was planning to speak on that subject, or we just weren't ready to announce an appointment, or an initiative, or a piece of legislation.

TWG: Was there any breakdown in terms of who was responsible within the press office for handling specific areas-- domestic affairs, foreign affairs, appointments...?

GLW: No, although Alan, when he was here, pretty well worked in the appointments area. And then after he left, there were others. Toward the end of the administration Tom [Thomas P.] DeCair watched that very carefully--scheduling appointments, that sort of thing. I oversaw the guidance in the foreign policy field and Ron was very close to that too. I worked very closely with our liaison with the National Security Council staff. In the last couple of years we finally got to the point where we had a full time liaison with the Domestic Council and he operated in a similar way. He would take the questions to the experts in the field and come back with the answers.

TWG: Who was that?

GLW: John Carlson. That worked out very well.

TWG: I also interviewed Andrew Falkiewicz.

GLW: Hm hmm.

TWG: Would he be the counterpart to John Carlson on foreign affairs?

GLW: Not really, not really. He worked with us in that area, but there were people on Dr. Kissinger's staff who were our liaison people. Originally it was Bob [Robert] Houdek. Then in recent years it's been Les [Leslie A.] Janka. And he would do the ground work and the spade work in getting the departments and the agencies together to provide the background information necessary, and come up with the President's response. So we worked through them. Now Andrew, as I'm sure he told you, worked very closely with

Ron Ziegler on his dealing with foreign policy matter, worked closely with Kissinger's office. He also dealt with the members of the foreign press corps here in Washington and he was of great service in that regard.

TWG: Your contacts then, outside of the White House press office, would have been, with just anyone within the White House itself.

GLW: Anyone on the White House staff, yes.

TWG: And would that also apply to departments and agencies, or would you have worked...

GLW: On a limited,...

TWG: ...with PIO's [Public Information Officers].

GLW: ...limited basis. Yes, sometimes, to coordinate things. Perhaps we would be having an economic briefing of some sort and I would call someone in Treasury. Undersecretary [George P.] Shultz, I remember, was the Secretary over there at the time. Generally, though, we tried to deal through the Domestic Council apparatus, because they had constant contact, so to speak, with the agencies, with departments.

TWG: Were your contacts with the news media people, let's say outside of the press conferences, were they frequent? Would you be on the phone all the time?

GLW: All the time.

TWG: All right.

GLW: Yeah. All the time.

TWG: Would it be a case of them calling you and asking

questions, you getting the information, and calling them back?

GLW: That's right, that's right. And in addition to that, in recent years my office was right outside of the press briefing room, and my door was always open. So that they could walk in anytime that I was there, with any question they might have. So, I was the principal figure that they dealt with on a daily basis. And they would call, whether I was at the office or at home, with a press inquiry. It was not unusual to get calls as late as midnight, one, two o'clock in the morning.

TWG: But of course your background in the news business,...

GLW: That's right.

TWG: ...I guess, in a way, prepares you for these kind of strange hours, at least strange...

GLW: Well,...

TWG: ...from the standpoint of those of us who aren't in it.

GLW: ...prepare you as well as you ever could be prepared. It's a--this--working in a press office is much more demanding than working on any newspaper I've ever heard of, or ever experienced.

TWG: That leads us to another question that we ask. Was there any sort of a routine to your day? Did you know what time you were going to come in? Did you know what you were going to do for the first couple of hours?

GLW: The first couple of hours were probably more predictable than the rest of the time. I tried to get in the office

by seven or seven-fifteen in the morning, because I had a lot of things to read. All the papers that are available here in Washington, the five newspapers that are available in the morning. I tried to read all those, the President's news summary, and the wire service reports from the night before, so we could get a start on the day, so we would know, pretty much, what the main topics of interest would be for that day. Completing that, then I would attend meetings occasionally. I would attend the seven-thirty domestic meeting, domestic and legislative and OMB [Office of Management and Budget] meeting, and bring back whatever information I could from that, and then start to compile the information necessary for the briefing. And that usually led right up until the briefing. Then, interspersed in that time, would be items on the President's schedule which would involve press coverage. That would mean, sometimes, a picture in the Oval Office or the Cabinet Room, where we would have to pick a group of reporters, a small representative group of reporters to go into the Oval Office with the photographers, come back out and identify thoroughly for the main body of the press who was in the meeting and what the meeting was about, the participants and that sort of thing. At the same time we would be preparing information for release at the briefing. Whether it would be an announcement of a new Secretary or Assistant Secretary at one of the departments, or a foreign policy announcement, or a legislative

proposal. Then we would have special briefings in the White House briefing room with Cabinet officers, for example, or economic advisors to the President, on new initiatives. From time to time there would be events over in the White House proper which demanded press coverage, because the President would be participating. We would have to prepare for that, make sure there was a press area, and a camera stand, and make sure that the press was over there in position. All of this demanded our time.

TWG: Now this would strike me as being kind of a technical, logistical responsibility. You say that "we" were doing this. Were you involved in that too?

GLW: I was involved in that as the deputy, as the principal deputy in the press office--in the news operation in the press office. I was responsible to see that all of that operated correctly. Now we have had people in Tim Elbourne's position who are really expert on this type of thing. Advancing a presidential appearance and then making sure the press corps is well situated during the appearance, both here and out of town. But he was called upon to travel quite a bit and say, he would be preparing for a visit in--overseas someplace, or out in the country, and there would be other presidential appearances here in Washington, in the White House and outside of the White House, on a day or so preceding that trip out of the city. So the rest of us in the office then, would have to do what Tim would have done had he been here. So I had to

be thoroughly conversant with that, as well as everything else.

TWG: Well, then your morning, as you say, was rather predictable.

GLW: Well, it's as predictable...

TWG: Then after the briefing....

GLW: ...as anything.

TWG: Yes. Then after the briefing, would it just be more of the same--keeping up with the...?

GLW: More of the same. There are always questions remaining after a briefing that you did not anticipate and were not prepared for. So you must get answers to those. There would be problems to solve, problems that might have been identified by questioning in the briefing, or by a news event someplace in the country or the world. Then you had to get the experts in the White House and the administration to sit down and attempt to come up with a position to meet those situations. So that was part of it. Preparing for trips is one of the most demanding and time consuming things that this press office did, and any press office does. The most visible thing you do, of course, is the daily briefing, but preparing for trips, all the various technical aspects that have to be taken into consideration.

TWG: Now, when you say "preparing for the trips," are you saying that the preparations that go into the planning for how to handle the news...

GLW: That's right.

TWG: ...corps that goes along with...?

GLW: That's right, that's exactly what I'm talking about.

TWG: Hm hmm. So you would have to make sure of what--for transportation for them, for their wire service lines, telephones?

GLW: Transportation to the city or country. Then ground transportation, busses, cars, cars to go in the motorcade so that the wire services and the others that travel in the motorcade would be transported. Then hotel accommodations.

TWG: Passports?

GLW: Passports were usually handled through the transportation office, so we didn't really get into them. If anything went wrong it would be my responsibility, but they were always handled very well. Communications is a very big part of it. Making sure that the press corps, once it's there and has observed the President, then is able to get on a phone or on a telex and communicate with his office.

TWG: Your afternoons then are taken up with this, and from what you say....

GLW: This and everything else, you know. And then preparing for the next day, preparing for special briefings on major legislative initiatives and that sort of thing.

TWG: So your evening didn't quit at, or end at five-thirty or six o'clock?

GLW: No, generally it was never before eight-thirty. And sometimes as late as midnight. Of course if the President had a speech or a press conference in the evening, then we

could expect to be there til one, two o'clock in the morning.

TWG: When the President had an event to go to, would you generally accompany him,...

GLW: Hm hmm.

TWG: ...or would you stay back here in the office?

GLW: I would generally accompany him. There were some trips into the city, you know, a speech in a hotel, or a visit to a department or agency that, some of those I would not go on. I would stay in the office and prepare for briefings and answer queries, but most of the trips by the President, even in town, I did go with him.

TWG: As you became more and more involved in the actual briefings themselves, did your activities change to any marked degree, Jerry?

GLW: Not really. I was still, in addition to being the principal briefer for a period, I was still the principal man to prepare for briefings, so I still had a lot of work to do. And then I was still the principal contact for the press, so I had just as much activity as before, really, and more, because I was briefing.

TWG: As you collected information to prepare for a briefing, would that information have been put down on paper in a way that...?

GLW: Some cases it was, in some cases it was. And all of that, even when I was briefing, I continuously provided that information to Ron Ziegler, so that if he made the deci-

sion that he would brief on any given day, he would have all the information that I had. And that then, I am sure, went into Agnes Waldron's press office files there, and it should be documented.

TWG: Would we be able to determine what information you actually gathered and collected, or...?

GLW: In many cases you would. A lot of it would be--my guidance would be to Ron in the form of memos, which I signed, of course, or my name is on, one way or the other.

TWG: So there would, in many cases, be more than simply a little handwritten note?

GLW: Yes, yes. In some cases there would be handwritten notes. Say, Ron was on the podium, in the middle of a briefing, and a new subject was raised, and we would get the information while he was out there, discussing other subjects. We would hand him the information on the podium, which he would then use or not, depending on whether he was comfortable with it. You'll also find in those files daily memoranda, from either Bob Houdek or Les Janka, on foreign policy matters. And toward the last few years, during the last few years, daily memoranda from John Carlson, and you'll find some in there from Neal Ball, on domestic issues.

TWG: The telephone calls that you might have had from various members of the news media, would you, on occasion just have jotted down that information--the request itself, as well as the response?

GLW: Occasionally, yes, in memo form, yes.

TWG: And that memo would probably have gone to Agnes...

GLW: It would have I'm....

TWG: ...and been filed by subject rather than by name of the newspaper...

GLW: By subject.

TWG: ...that requested it?

GLW: By subject.

TWG: Well then, by and large, the files will reflect your activities, your involvement, your [unintelligible].

GLW: To a great extent they will, yes.

TWG: The inevitable question--to what degree did you feel that you were involved in establishing policy?

GLW: I was not.

TWG: OK.

GLW: I was not.

TWG: You were simply passing...

GLW: I was involved...

TWG: ...along information.

GLW: ...yes, I was involved in the establishment of press policy and how to handle the press corps on any given occasion, but as far as policy decisions on issues, foreign or domestic, no I was not.

TWG: I didn't think you were, but I felt...

GLW: No.

TWG: ...that I had to ask the question...

GLW: Sure.

TWG: ...to get your opinion on that.

GLW: Right.

TWG: Well, would you say then that your activities are documented to a sufficient degree that no one is going to be terribly misled by what they find in the files? Frequently someone will say, "Gee, maybe five percent of my activities or responsibilities are in the files there. And ninety-five percent of the rest of it was done over the phone or in face to face meetings." What do you...?

GLW: Well I--to a great extent that is true. I--there were many times that I would get a query from a member of the press, or a call from someone in the White House saying, "This has just happened and this is what the President is doing," or "This is what he feels." I would then pick up the phone and relay that to Ron verbally. He and I would then discuss it. He would decide, yes that's the correct response, or the correct step to take, or we need more information. We would then go and get more information. Sometimes that would result in a memo. Many times it would not. So now that you mentioned it, I am sure there's a lot to my activity that is not reflected in the files. I--my phone calls were, you know, incessant. I cannot tell you on an average how many calls a day I took from someone on the outside of the White House. And many of those I answered and then did not generate paperwork that went into the files. I answered of my own knowledge, because I knew something was fact, or something was fiction, or incorrect.

And others, because it was a fast paced office, we did not have time to sit down and dictate a memo after every phone call. We would operate verbally.

TWG: Did you, yourself, make any speeches, I mean did you go out and speak to any groups or anything during the period of time that you worked here?

GLW: Rarely. I just didn't have time. I did some of that, but not often.

TWG: The organization of your office was one that was rather loose knit. You probably didn't have any staff meetings per se.

GLW: No.

TWG: If there were, they were on an ad hoc basis?

GLW: That's right, that's right.

TWG: How about contacts with the First Lady's press operation?

GLW: I had contact with Helen Smith on a liaison basis. I would inform her of things that we were announcing and she would inform me of things that they were doing. I would call to find out if members of the family were accompanying the President various places, that sort of thing.

TWG: Where could we get in touch with you, Jerry, let's say three, four, or five years from now? Do you have any sort of a permanent mailing address, or a...?

GLW: No, I don't. Well, I very well may be in my home, here in Washington, at that time.

TWG: Are you a member of any professional organization that you will continue to be a member of that will undoubtedly have

a current mailing address for you?

GLW: No, I think I let all those things lapse. I may get back into them some time, but I'm not a member of anything right now.

TWG: Would the San Diego Union newspaper possibly have your current address? You know, I'm just reaching for any....

GLW: Possible someone there would, yeah.

TWG: Was there anything that gave you a particular sense of satisfaction or a sense of accomplishment, whether it be one assignment that you had, or one event that you covered, or just a general feeling?

GLW: Generally I think we did a very good job in providing logistical assistance and support to the nation's press corps in covering the President of the United States. Particularly on trips, and even more particularly on foreign trips. I'm very proud of the job that this office did in supporting the President on foreign trips. Many, many things that I did that satisfied me throughout the years, and many that didn't. But, if I had to point to one thing, I think that would be it.

TWG: You obviously were written up in numerous newspapers and magazines during the period of time that you were here. Are there any of those that come to mind that were particularly good in terms of the depth that they went into on your job or your responsibility, or were some of them so terribly inaccurate that you might want to alert us to those, so that...?

GLW: Well there was one in Newsweek that was very inaccurate. It had to do with my lack of access to the President. I cannot think of any one that was particularly exemplary.

TWG: Potomac did one on you, didn't it? I seem to remember--if it wasn't Potomac it was another, I think, a Sunday edition, because I remember a picture of you with your wife and your children, or something.

GLW: Yes.

TWG: Out by your home. I'm sorry I can't give you the exact name or anything.

GLW: Yes.

TWG: But that seemed to be--that was a three or four page thing.

GLW: Yeah, I don't remember it.

TWG: Well.

GLW: Yeah.

TWG: As I say, I'm sure there were so many that, again, that's just one of those questions we throw out.

GLW: Hm hmm.

TWG: If there's any guidelines that we can be given, fine. If not, it doesn't surprise us. Did you have any one secretary during this period of time that worked for you, or did all of them report to you?

GLW: All of them reported to me. The gal who was probably as close to me throughout the period, was Shirley Browne. She was Bruce Whelihan's secretary and then started to work for me.

TWG: Did you do much in the way of correspondence? Did you

write a lot of letters?

GLW: Not a lot. A lot of form letters, especially with accreditation. And then once I started to brief, then I recieved a lot of mail because my name was in the paper every day. And a lot of those were form letters too that Wanda Phelan would work up answers for me, you know, and I would sign them.

TWG: I think that touches the questions that we might cover during what we like to think of as an initial...

GLW: Hm hmm.

TWG: ...interview with you. Is there anything that comes to your mind that you think is particularly significant, that you want to give any guidelines on for future research or whatever?

GLW: Not now. Maybe when I see the transcript of this it'll jog my memory, and I'll be happy to point you into what I think are the right directions.

TWG: Well a lot will depend upon what we find when we go through the files. I'm sure there will be questions....

GLW: When are you going to be able to do that?

TWG: Well I don't know. With the [Charles R.] Richey order right now we're prevented from doing anything with those without the prior knowledge and approval of Mr. [Philip] Buchen's office, and Mr. [Arthur F.] Sampson's representative, and Mr. Nixon's representative. And the Secret Service gets involved in it to a degree. So the lid is really shut down on these at this point. And I don't

know what's going to happen. Again, not being a lawyer,
you know, I'm just totally mystified by this whole thing.
It's, well....

[End of interview]

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