

Exit Interview
With
NEAL BALL
On
April 5, 1973



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Exit interview with Neal Ball
conducted by Susan Yowell
in Room 157 of the Old Executive Office Building
on April 5, 1973

SY: ...talking with people right when they are leaving the staff.

NB: They're kind of pre-occupied, mostly.

SY: It certainly changes the perspective.

NB: Yeah, it's just mostly pre-occupied in getting out and not having time to reflect on this sort of thing. But go ahead.

SY: You came in early '71.

NB: Yes, actually came in March as a consultant and became Deputy Press Secretary on April 19, 1971.

SY: Did your role remain fairly much the same?

NB: Yeah, the same title, and you do, like everyone else you do more as you learn more and you learn how to affect things, you do more as you go along, sure.

SY: May I close this door?

NB: Yeah, you may.

SY: The typewriter will pick up on here and make it very difficult to use.

NB: Yeah.

SY: Well, could you begin by just describing your major areas of responsibility as Deputy Press Secretary?

NB: It's hard to know where to start. First of all, the operative word is "deputy", so anything that the secretary does on assignment; by the secretary or in place of him if he is away; briefing the press; handling something with the President; taking press inquiries; doing things on assignment for him, by him, or in

place of him if he's not here; you serve as acting Press Secretary during times when he was in China for example, or Russia. The, why, I don't know really how to, I really can't....

SY: Were there specific areas where you maintained major responsibilities where Mr. Ziegler delegated to you as...?

NB: Yeah, to some degree we had two Deputy Press Secretaries, Jerry Warren and myself, and we tried to--Jerry worked with the kind of a daily schedule and mechanics of the press operation, and I helped in that area as well, but had as a specialty area (if you could call it) domestic activities. I call it because it is not really a specialty; it kind of goes all over the board, but it meant that when there were any activities or statements or briefings or developments in the domestic area, I was involved in those, sometimes in international as well, but primarily in the domestic field.

SY: Could you just for the record describe how the information was received by you: whether this was something where you would actively go out and pull together [unintelligible]?

NB: Sure, both. Yeah, it could be in a very formal way. The first thing I do for anybody working in the White House is to find out what's going on, right? You do that in two ways: one, the formal things that are sent to you because people feel you ought to have them or because it's known that you need them or you request them; the second way being that you find out, you just have an idea of what's going on. So, both of those are ways in which you find out what's happening.

SY: Well, what about...? I may have [unintelligible] my question. In

a particular area of domestic policy, were you receiving most of the input from the department involved, [unintelligible]?

NB: The department involved, the Domestic Council, the cabinet members involved, cabinet meetings which I would attend on occasion and have input from those, staff people working on a thing, OMB [Office of Management and Budget] people, our Congressional relations people. From all those aspects, because they all had a bearing on what our position would be, our press position would be, or what our posture would be on an issue, so I would talk with all of those.

SY: You would usually do this person to person rather than through reports.

NB: Yeah, there's never a time, the nature of it was such that you didn't have time for written reports. You really had to do most of it by telephone and in meetings and very little in the way of written reports. Some, if I were to guess a percentage, maybe ten percent of the information was written, received in written form.

SY: How--this may be difficult to answer; certainly you couldn't do it in percentages--but what was your input on policy?

NB: That all depends which policy. You know the official job was not to affect policy, but you can't help but be around here without, you know, nudging it this way once in a while or pointing it that way other times. I wouldn't at this point try to define a role on various activities or decisions, this sort of thing. Call me in 1996.

SY: But you did; in the course of, say, a cabinet meeting, you were given the opportunity of....

NB: Of sitting in primarily to hear what was happening in areas that I'd be responsible for and to have an idea of what went on in the meeting as it related to domestic affairs particularly.

SY: Would you usually handle the actual press conference or briefings then [intelligible]?

NB: Most often, Ron[ald] Ziegler would do the press briefings and on some occasions when he wasn't here I would do it. But I would handle press inquiries on a daily basis before and after the briefings, really throughout the day and into the night, I'm afraid. It was a twenty-four hour process. Yes, I would handle press inquiries.

SY: But you would never be assigned, say, a particular area, a major policy area such as revenue sharing.

NB: I'd be, I would....

SY: You would handle most of the briefings...

NB: Yeah.

SY: ...that were [unintelligible].

NB: No. In an area like revenue sharing I would either prepare things for Ziegler to use in his briefings, use the information and develop positions for my own handling of press inquiries on it. These would be anywhere from a quick question by telephone to an in-depth interview with a member of the press about the program. Thirdly, [I] would sometimes do press briefings in which I needed that material or would arrange and introduce perhaps a special press conference on that topic.

SY: Would it be possible for you to describe your staff organization?

NB: The White House Press Office staff?

SY: Your staff immediately under you.

NB: Yes, it's very easy: I had a secretary.

SY: OK. (Laughter) What about the other people you worked immediately with in the Press Office?

NB: Yeah, there were two deputies. We had three or four girls in the office to handle things, and we eventually added a kind of a staff assistant to do some of the writing in preparation for the briefings which I had formerly done. That's about it as far as staff.

SY: Is there any way possible for you to describe a typical day?

NB: No, there weren't any.

SY: Some kind of division, how your time was actually spent.

NB: No, the only points that had, the only parts of the day that were similar from one to another were really the preparation in the morning for the morning briefing. That was a focal point for each morning. Sometimes there'd be briefings in the afternoon, but usually there'd be a less formal press opportunity in the afternoon. The mornings for the most part--this isn't true of the entire two years--but for the most part of the two years, the mornings would start with a seven-thirty staff meeting in the Roosevelt Room. This was a very general discussion, a very quick and around the table discussion. INTERRUPTION So, after that meeting, which was [a] very general one in which people kind of just said what they thought would happen that day, we would generally have some time to review what the press had to say about things that day, read the President's news summary, just get involved a little bit in what the stories were that day as well as

going over what it was that we had to dig it out in the way of statements or announcements or bills or positions or what it was. Around eight-thirty or nine o'clock we would generally meet with the Press Secretary to talk over both the problems and the items of information that we had to get out that day or that morning. Then the time from then on until eleven o'clock was spent in preparing, kind of a double preparation, preparing in my case domestic guidance for the Press Secretary. Sometimes questions and answers for him, sometimes rather lengthy discussions with guidance that he would use at his press briefings. Sometimes just a statement that was appropriate on a particular subject or issue.

This would go on until eleven o'clock or so, and then we would have a press briefing done by the Press Secretary. In many cases he would designate, if he weren't available, Jerry Warren to do the briefing and in fewer cases, but occasionally, he would ask me to do it, depending on the area, depending on the topic and so forth. So then they'd have the briefing going on for forty-five minutes to an hour. Following that, you'd have individual inquiries from the press either about the briefing or other things that they didn't want to raise at the briefing because they were particularly interested in the story and wanted to follow through on their own, that sort of thing. So you'd spend some time with the press, and by this time it was one o'clock or one-thirty. You'd begin to look through wire stories about the press conference itself in terms of how they were carrying, what had come out, and very often having to correct or call back and discuss, for example, something that had taken place in the

briefing. There might be some confusion or some fact lacking.

Then generally around three o'clock we would have additional information, either a posting or a briefing, so that one had about a forty-five minute period to an hour period of preparing very quickly for that. This would be followed then by a brief opportunity to do some mail and take phone calls that had been coming in until that time until about four-thirty or so. Then it was necessary to, very often there were afternoon meetings of one kind or another. I used to have a meeting on a regular basis with a research woman who was just in here and with a couple of other people on the staff from the standpoint of--these were meetings during the time Congress was in session--from a standpoint of what had come out in Congress that day, what had happened in hearings, what had happened on the floor of the House or the Senate which we might have to address, be prepared to address the next day.

After that, preparation for the next day, which might be anything from reviewing speeches, drafts of speeches for press office input on Presidential addresses or, if they are in the domestic area, looking at materials for special briefings, fact sheets and this sort of thing, working with Domestic Council staff or people from the departments on materials that we were going to use in the briefing the next day. That would run generally until seven or so. At six-thirty you would start watching the news again, watching how things were handled and seeing what else had come up that might give you a clue as to what was happening the next day. At seven-thirty¹ you'd finish watching the news and then resume getting ready for the next day again and looking through

the late afternoon papers, working in where you could such things as any speeches or statements or policies or getting ready for trips and preparing material on special events. This would go on until sometimes very late at night. That's the way it would go five days, sometimes six days a week. Weekend activities were pretty much confined, unless we were traveling, to press calls. Sunday evenings preparing for Monday morning, but during the day on Sunday primarily press calls on things for Monday's papers and television.

If we were traveling, it could be quite different. We might have briefings on Sunday, briefings on Saturday afternoon, postings, things of that kind, so that the travel weekends, although they always sounded very good, in terms of going to Key Biscayne or California, were a bit more hectic than Sunday activities. Any time, of course, that there was any Presidential activity, we'd be involved in that. Even if you were going out to dinner, you know, if he [the President] walks across the park to go to Trader Vic's, it's a news event; there're press involved, and he's had something to say. There are transcripts and mechanical things to do, even with the briefest social activity that the President might undertake. So, it's very hard to say what a typical day was like. I'm just suggesting what many of them were like, but events have a way of getting in the way of schedule, and there just were not too many that were alike in very many ways.

SY: One area that you mentioned was going over the wire stories or evaluating what had resulted from that [unintelligible].

NB: You would talk with wire reporters for example, and they'd ask you something or present something to you, and you'd discuss it. Of course you're always curious to see, anxious I should say, to see how it turned out: did they get your point or did they use the material or did it convey what you intended to convey? Sometimes you thought you were conveying one thing, and you find that your words conveyed something else and you needed to do some more explaining. Perhaps a figure would be transposed; it could be a pure typographical error. Plus being informed on what else was happening in the world by the wires. The wire services are a very important part of our input as far as what else is going on in the world, what's happening on the Hill, what's happening elsewhere in the world. We rely upon them very heavily for our information as well.

SY: There was no formal procedure then for reviewing how the news handled that day. You're just talking about the more informal....

NB: Yeah, largely informal, right. Now, if there were particular problems, you know, if several stories didn't carry something which you'd hoped to get across, you might have a discussion on it and see what had happened. There were times where very complicated stories were, would be garbled--perhaps our fault, perhaps the press--but in any case would be garbled, and you would have to think about holding another briefing or doing some telephone contact to get out some additional information. That would happen from time to time.

SY: You did mention briefly the News Summary. Did you rely heavily on the News Summary?

NB: It was one, yeah, one piece of information, yeah.

SY: Did you all ever, kind of toward the beginning of the administration, did you all have more input in the News Summary?

NB: Input in the News Summary? None at all. It was done by other people, who prepared the News Summary always. You see, it was not to have input. It was to be, and is to be, a summary of everything that has appeared and been said on television, all the important aspects of it anyhow. It's not, you don't send in things saying, "here."

SY: In some of these more, I guess more technical areas of just day to day responsibilities in the Press Office, were there areas where you held the major responsibility for, say, making sure that all the, reviewing all the releases before they were handed out.

NB: Yeah, anything domestic. Now I shouldn't say "anything," because a lot of them would be routine personnel announcements and that sort of thing; I would not be involved in those. But wherever it was a proclamation or a bill or a bill signing statement or any of these things I'd be involved in that, yeah. I wouldn't write them; speech writers would write them; we didn't do much in the way of writing, but I would have to edit them and look at them and see if we had to, if they raised problems or questions or if all the information would be there and that sort of thing.

SY: How, one area that I really, how closely did you work with other spokesmen for the administration, [unintelligible] they prepared, while you were preparing for a news conference?

NB: It really all depends. I think if I had something that I wanted to get them, if we had just announced something or found out

something and they were about to go on and do a briefing, I might call them, yeah. I would ask them to call me if they were giving, perhaps if they were giving a briefing at eleven o'clock on an issue, let's say the wholesale price index, and we were going to go out at eleven-thirty, I'd be very eager to know what they had said about it as part of our information for our briefing.

SY: What about, in particular would someone here, say Mr. [John] Ehrlichman was giving a briefing on a domestic issue.

NB: Yeah.

SY: How much input did you get prior to...?

NB: Some. He would be on domestic affairs; he would know better than most anyone else what the issues were and what the policies were. One might know in terms of what had been happening in the last few days, let's say that a certain question was apt to come up and so preparing some questions or reminding the people who were preparing questions for him on the staff that this would be a topic he would want to address. [That] would be part of it.

SY: Are there areas which stand out in your mind which should be documented through a more [unintelligible] oral history project which would go into policy areas, either...?

NB: I think the whole question of how information is released by the White House, how information gets to the press, and how much goes to the press weighed against what the press uses, you know, is pretty interesting. It is a very complicated thing because obviously all communication doesn't go out through the Press Office. A very important part of leadership is communicating, and that's not restricted to any one person or one department so it's

hard to dissect and look at one facet, the Press Office aspect of it. Nevertheless, it's a very important area to look at carefully and thoroughly. As much as most people, once they're out of school, rely very heavily on the press, on the media for what they get, the information they get. Their opinions and judgements are very often based on on what they've read, so that process I think is extremely important and worth some time.

SY: How do you think that that can really be approached in terms of documenting...? First of all, I guess you want to know who had the input on what would be released and when it would be released.

NB: It's very hard to do because it's not a static situation. The press, for example, doesn't rely entirely up on us for its information; it has sources elsewhere in the administration, elsewhere in the White House , elsewhere in the country, and so it is not a static situation that you can really analyze that easily.

SY: First of all, did someone keep minutes or keep records of the morning meetings where you would discuss...? What...?

NB: No, not that I know of, not formal minutes. I would take notes as they related to areas of interest to me. If something came up that was useful I would jot it down; if it was something I already knew and didn't need to make note of it, I wouldn't. I don't know if anybody kept thorough records. There for a while I used to, tried to prepare minutes of it for [Ronald] Ziegler, but the preparation of minutes of a half-hour meeting would so butt into the preparation time in the morning that I needed, that I would generally just include in some general guidance to him [a] few of the points that had come up. They weren't anything like complete

minutes.

SY: Who were those who regularly attended the morning meetings?

NB: These were not planning meetings, they were daily meetings just to discuss some of the issues, whatever we happened to have on our minds that morning. Sometimes a guy would talk for a few minutes, sometimes he would not be heard of for weeks, hear from for weeks. John Ehrlichman, and Cap [Caspar] Weinberger, [Peter] Flanigan, [Raymond] Price, military aide, the people from really all the administrative sections of the White House, heads of departments that sort of thing would be present.

SY: Depending upon the issues which were...?

NB: No, it was about the same group every morning. It was just to run around to say, how does the day look to you?, what are you going to do? Virginia Knauer will be going out to give a speech, or Herb[ert] Stein would mention that the unemployment figures are coming out that day, what they looked like and what the impact might be. Someone would talk about what they were going to do on the Hill that day as far as testimony. Somebody would point out what the Congress was apt to do that day as far as measures on the floor, coming to the floor, and what the outcome looked like at that time. Somebody else would discuss maybe a series of things he'd read, which suggested to him that we ought to do a better job of getting out this point or that point. Somebody would occasionally have a funny story. Just a very general meeting to put out as quickly and as concisely for our own use internally what the day was apt to hold, and that would usually be good for about thirty-five minutes. Then events would tear up even that

outlook and require that we start anew, but it was a good general way to get a feel for what the day would hold as seen by those people at that time.

SY: What about your relationship to other offices in the White House? obviously the Press Office is not going to have contact with virtually every [unintelligible] of the offices....

NB: Yeah, just about every office.

SY: Ah, but in particular what was the relationship between the Press Office and Herb[ert] Klein's office or Charles Colson's office?

NB: Relatively little. I met Herb Klein about three months after I came into the White House and there wasn't much contact on the day to day operation of the Press Office.

SY: What about the overlap, the functional overlap, [unintelligible] inquiries from the press and the media? Did you work very often with members of Mr. Klein's staff?

NB: No, almost never.

SY: Or refer...

NB: No.

SY: ...inquiries back and forth?

NB: No. If it were a cl-, a sub-, often there'd be a.... We deal in the Press Office primarily with the White House press corps, a group of anywhere from twenty to six hundred people, depending on the event, plus all of those who call the Press Office. There might be times when there'd be special briefings; we would announce that the President has done such and such. The general press would be there, but there might be a need for a technical briefing. If it were let's say the energy question, there might

be trade magazines that we'd call together for a special briefing by Klein's office. So, he would be talking very often to a different press group. If he, if the same people wanted to call him for input or questions and that sort of thing, of course he would talk to them too, but there was no attempt at any coordination or....

SY: What about when Mr. Klein's office would prepare a special mailing or a special statement or one of the larger...?

NB: Yeah, yeah. It's fairly, it was done rather independently as a matter of fact.

SY: [Unintelligible] it was not [unintelligible].

NB: Very independent. You'd get a copy of it. We'd know what happened, because we got a copy.

SY: Was the same thing true of Mr. Colson?

NB: Yeah. Of course they weren't doing quite the same things. They were involved, many of the people on his staff were involved in special interest groups; so that we might do something which had general interest for our press corps but might have very high interest, let's say, with one of the groups that his people were relating to: maybe the elderly or maybe a minority group, or whatever it was. It would be a matter of their building on what we had done or extending some of the things that we had done.

SY: Did the press office then [unintelligible] not get involved in say the efforts on Mr. Colson's staff to develop the communications systems in departments? [Unintelligible] the input which would be coming from the White House press office [unintelligible]....

NB: Well, to some degree but there is a lot of discussion of what the

organization should be, and what the, how things should work, and who should--there're always these discussions but the fact is that there is a great deal to be done, and one does them. It wasn't so formal as all that, not at all.

SY: Would you then say that your major contacts with other staff offices were in the domestic area?

NB: Yeah.

SY: Policy people.

NB: That's right. In the White House and the departments.

Occasionally I'd be involved in international things, not too often. Very often our summit meetings, for example the one in Canada with [Pierre] Trudeau, was very much involved in what might be called domestic matters, trade and environment, things of that kind, so I might be involved in something of that kind. [I] have traveled on a number of the summit meetings, not China and Russia, but a number of the others where there was some domestic involvement or where another body was needed to help out. For the most part they [major contacts] were with the people the White House involved in domestic staff matters. I would have to stay briefed on international things because I'd be getting questions from the press on international matters as well and didn't always have the luxury of saying, "Call so and so, he's got, he can help you on that." I would be very often the person who got the call on some international question and simply have to be briefed and informed on international matters, but that wasn't my chief function.

SY: How were you recruited for the staff?

NB: You wouldn't believe it.

SY: Well....

NB: I had always wished when I was being asked in the first few months that I could say my grandfather had been a governor or that I was the biggest contributor or something like that, or that I went to school with Ron Ziegler. I got a call from Fred Malek, from his office, when I was in my prior job, and I was asked if I would like to come and talk to the White House about a job. I said that I got into Washington occasionally and at some time would stop by; I was very relaxed about it. They had in mind the next day. So I eventually came and talked, and they had simply decided apparently to have a second deputy press secretary--there had been only one--and apparently also had decided (I think, I don't know) that he would come from a background of corporate public relations or something related.

SY: From Chicago

NB: Yeah, yeah, and so I was one on many people looked at and was offered the job. Just that simple.

SY: You had had no prior contact with members of the staff?

NB: No.

SY: [Unintelligible] introduced by someone? Do you happen to know how Malek received your name?

NB: No, I don't. I think they probably had the names of people about my age who were heading up public relations functions in fairly large companies, and perhaps that reduced it to a workable number and perhaps had asked around and had had recommendations. I really don't know how they got the idea to begin with. I had been

asked about government jobs from time to time before that but had never responded with any particular interest. I think, when you are called by a department or someone in government, you should discuss it of course, but had never responded with very much interest before. The White House made it substantially more interesting that it might have been otherwise, but there was no other.... I still hear stories about how I must have known Ziegler a long time ago, I must be somebody's, be sponsored by somebody somewhere. A lot of the people in the White House are not necessarily people who have had political experience before; a lot of them have come from academic backgrounds, nonpolitical kinds of backgrounds. It's always hard to convince people outside that that's the case, they almost feel that there is some very special connection, some special reason why you are asked, but if there is one, I don't know it.

SY: I think that has been very much the attitude of this administration...

NB: Yeah, yeah.

SY: ...trying to get some of these people who are not [unintelligible].

NB: That's quite so. It's been kind of very professional approach to recruiting which I think has been good.

SY: I think it is very good. What kind of files do you have?

NB: Personal notes, copies of letters, notes to myself, detailed notes to myself about activities and trips.

SY: Do you think your files could be interpreted by someone to give an accurate reflection of your [unintelligible] duties?

NB: I think they're my observations of things that struck me as being of interest. I'm not even sure that some of it interests me anymore; I think it's the sort of thing that I need to digest and reflect on for some time to find out if there's anything of value there as far as what I have. Almost entirely personal reactions to things, and things that struck me as being new or different or unusual at the time, even though some of them came to be quite ordinary in a sense; just things that struck me as being interesting at the time.

SY: Do you have a very large correspondence file?

NB: Yes, fairly large, although remarkably little: not as much as one would have let's say, in an ordinary business job in two years. The letter writing that came in, the unsolicited things that came in could be answered rather simply, and the press questions, the important things, really were handled mostly person to person or by telephone. Very little went back and forth by paper. I think people are always curious, they call for the news releases on a subject or an appointment. We might not even do a news release; we might have a biography sheet or something that we'd hand out along with the announcement, but the bulk of the announcement would come from what we had to say at a briefing or in another forum about the appointment, about the person, and won't even be on paper. They're transcribed of course and the copy of the transcripts [unintelligible] but it is not handed out via paper.

SY: What about your major press inquiries, either in person or by telephone? Were they documented a all in [unintelligible]?

NB: The telephone calls were.

SY: What type of information...?

NB: No. The telephone callers were--to the extent that we could and thought of it--were documented. Who'd called, we would have a record of that in case we needed to get back with somebody or follow something else they were interested in, and but it was [a] matter of trying to remember who was interested in what and which people were doing stories on which topics and not in any formal way.

SY: These were just logged in rather than having any memo of [unintelligible] those conversations?

NB: That's right, that's right. Now in some few areas, I might have sent a memo to Ziegler, for example, if he were away during a period of time, over a weekend, and perhaps I had a half dozen calls on a certain subject and dug into it and responded with some things. Then I'd send him a record of what, since there had been something more than just one or two people interested in it, I might send him a record of it. In certain areas at certain times, during questioning on Vietnam for example, certain sensitive areas I might from time to time send him an indication either of the kind of questions or what I had said on something if it was very sensitive. But that wasn't typical; it was very, very rarely done, as a matter of fact.

SY: [Unintelligible] the only major [unintelligible].

NB: As far as the press conference itself, yeah, and an awful lot goes on outside the press conference, and those simply are not documented. I don't know, it's not a bad idea to have done, but it's usually, a reporter walks in, and you don't know what he's

going to say: "Good afternoon" or launch into a discussion. If you do launch into a discussion, you tend sometimes not to keep notes, unless there's something really quite unusual that happens during the discussion. Most of the time you don't; I at least didn't keep notes and I can remember them pretty well enough for the most part.

SY: [Unintelligible]. I was asking you earlier that areas [unintelligible] which are not documented.

NB: Yeah.

SY: Which should be.

NB: Well, I tell you another way to document however from the press standpoint. When you get, just to interrupt you for a second, when you get press calls and you are asked about something, what you say is very apt to pop up in a story someplace. So in a sense there is documentation in the sense that responses appear in stories, and wire copy and that sort of thing; there is that kind of record.

SY: Although they frequently do not use [unintelligible].

NB: Almost always, yeah, almost always, White House source or I suppose the President. That's right, you can't trace them to one specific person but at least the content of it would be generally available that way, although sometime they will take the information on background and just use it as part of their own knowledge in building a story or an opinion or an editorial, so it might not even come out, quotes might not even come out from a meeting. That would be a large area in which there isn't documentation, very large area.

SY: What about other specific issue and policy areas, do you feel that your contribution was greater than just the normal day to day...?

NB: Specific issues? In which...?

SY: Well, specific domestic issues possibly in which you had a larger input.

NB: You mean into what the White House did or what the President did on some issue or into how it was...?

SY: Well, either in policy or influencing how it was presented to the press.

NB: Well, almost always in a domestic issue on how it was presented to the press, yes, almost always. Some issues were more lasting and would come up from day to day to day. Others would be very short term kinds of things. But almost always in domestic issues [we] would have provided some guidance as to how it could best be presented or what it was we wanted to say about it at that time based on what we knew at that time or raise questions about it.

SY: Something we usually ask people, for someone in the press office it's an unusual question in some ways, but there has been a lot written by the press on the White House Press Office itself. Are there any of the larger articles which stand out to you as having been fairly accurate?

NB: Most of them are fairly accurate I think, limited but fairly accurate. The thrust of most of them is either along the lines of manufacturing things or credibility gap or something kind of negative or looking how the press staff operates. You really can't understand it from outside. I can't blame the reporters; it's very hard for them to understand the relationship, let's say,

between the Press Secretary and the President or even a Deputy Press Secretary to the Secretary, because so much of what you're dealing with can't be commented upon. So, they take stabs at writing about how the Press Office works, how information goes out, the frustration of reporters in getting information, that sort of thing. Most of the ones I've seen have been fairly accurate although very limited. They've taken just one facet perhaps of the thing. Most of them were not very good, I don't think. I don't think it was very comprehensive or very instructive, but I can't call very much of what I've seen really inaccurate, except by emphasis that I might not agree with from time to time.

SY: Can you think of any by name which are some of the better ones?

NB: No, I've really read them all and can't.... One of the last ones was in, I think in the Atlantic not too long ago, something called, "The Reselling of the President" or some darn thing. It's really a very surfacey [sic] kind of a thing. I can't think of anything that was too useful, too good or too memorable, no, I really can't. I think it's an area that's not very, it's much talked about: there's always a debate about the press and government, government and secrecy, that sort of thing. People, one is always being invited to give speeches on this, or be part of a panel on this thing. They generate a good deal of heat and not very much light. It's a subject that I think is not adequately explored, adequately documented. It's usually going to involve some loaded situation or some charged situation of some kind, and so it hasn't been too well done. I'm not sure really

that it's all of that much interest to most people. I think it should be; I think the way in which they get so much of what they use as a basis for their activities and decisions in a democracy is very important, but it usually comes down to the professional interest of either the people in the government side or the press side. As I say, it is very much argued and debated but not a great deal of good stuff is produced. I don't think very much useful material has been produced by the debate so far; I think it's been unfortunate, but nevertheless it hasn't come forth.

SY: Did you coordinate very frequently with the people who were trying to, the President's own involvement with the press, now I'm speaking of both his speeches [unintelligible] the technicalities would be handled by [unintelligible].

NB: Yes.

SY: What was your role?

NB: Well, again we might look at a draft and make some recommendations on how we felt something would come across or perhaps something that was omitted. We would be involved with some of the mechanics as far as the advance text and the announcement of this to the press, we would be prepared to handle questions that it would bring up. We very often take some statement and have to document it or make sure it was documented so that we could answer additional questions that would be sparked by the speech or by the address. Some mechanical involvement in getting out transcripts of it afterward, that sort of thing. So we were almost always, almost had something to do with speeches and talks of that kind, even if they were television. Of course Ron would be very much

involved in the whole decision as to whether or not such a speech took place, what was needed at that time or useful; but the rest of the staff was not.

SY: [Unintelligible] there any [unintelligible] Press Office?

NB: Yeah. In other words, you know recently he had a series of State of the Union addresses, one of them dealt with crime and drugs. I would take these and go through them all, both making some general remarks for the speech writers and for Ron and also challenging things that I thought would be questioned; or documenting things, getting documentation for statements in the speech that I thought would call for more information. That after the press heard them, we would be then asked for additional information in all kinds of areas. This could be a statistic or it could be a Presidential activity or whatever was required, so there was usually that kind of involvement on my part.

SY: Where are you going when you leave here?

NB: When I leave, the organization I'm going with has to make the announcement. That'll be made, May 5th I think is the date, but I'm not immediately going to work. I'm going to take several months for rest, which I need very badly, and travel, which I have not been able to do, independent travel, vacation kind of travel which I have not been able to do for two years. I'm certainly going to take advantage of that, plus I have a lot of speaking dates, and I'm going to do those, some writing and some reading of these notes which we talked about to see if they tell me anything. Some experience of this town that I haven't had time to do in the last two years. I have not seen any of the tourist kind of

things: the museums and monuments, that sort of thing.

SY: Are you staying in government?

NB: No, I won't be. I'm returning to private life. I shouldn't say private life; I'm sure it will be public in some way. This question we were talking about--information and the press--interests me very much. I may be doing some writing and some talking about that and hopefully, when I have some time, some studying of it as well. I should study first and talk after, but the schedule just doesn't work out that way. [I] just really want to have some time, after a very intensive experience, to enjoy the city a little but and to have some free time and to catch up on an awful lot of things that I haven't been able to do in the last couple of years. As I'm sure everyone says in these interviews when they leave, it's a very intense experience, very good one, very intense one. It doesn't permit any other kind of life beyond the one that one has in the job. At least, I think it's true of our office inasmuch as things do happen around the clock and they do happen on Sundays and we travel a lot. I counted back the other day for somebody, who thought I was exaggerating, and found out in two years I had had five Sundays off and that was it; no vacation period and two one-and-one-half day periods for Christmas in each of two years, one period in each of two years. Somehow it's just not enough.

SY: No, that...

NB: But, but...

SY: ...doesn't give you time to....

NB: ...by the same token I would never say that, even for this

purpose, without saying that it's an extraordinarily important experience for anyone to have. I would say that is true of government, any government job, federal government job. I've urged a lot of people to come here to work and they have. I've gone urging people to do it, because no matter how well-read you think you are, how much you think you know about how it works from outside, you simply cannot, you simply cannot know it. It's a good experience which, for your own understanding of government and life in this country, it's a very, very good personal experience. It may and may not help one in his career, it may or may not help him as far as academics or whatever he's interested in, but for one's own understanding it's very important. I feel very strongly about that, and I've tried to explain that I'm leaving only because I feel that two years is a good amount of time for this job. By the same token I would urge people who have an opportunity to come in and do it for even one year, two years. It doesn't have to be a career; one doesn't have to make a life out of it but a very, very important insight. I think that could be true not only of the White House, where it's very obvious that it would be stimulating and exciting and important, but I think it would be just as true at a department, maybe well on down into the bureaucracy, important for different reasons and revealing of different things, but nevertheless very useful to have as part of one's experience.

SY: You don't find many people who have regretted their White House jobs.

NB: No. I think we all have the feeling that it is demanding as far

as time. I suppose some people are perhaps more ambitious than I, feel that they would like to be moving upward, more rapidly than they have; I suppose there are some people who have feelings of that kind, but, no, I shouldn't think so. I should think that no matter how difficult, how frustrating, no matter how much tension there can be in it--and there can be lots of difficulty and lots of frustration, lots of tension, lot of demands--but no matter how bad it is, it's not so bad. Certainly when one can reflect on it and think about it, it's mostly all very good, very positive.

SY: Do you have a permanent address or [unintelligible]...

NB: Yeah, I do have now but....

SY: ...where you can be reached over the next ten years?

NB: Yeah, well, I can't promise for the next ten years; I no longer make plans for that duration. My Washington address, I don't know if you have it.

SY: [Unintelligible].

NB: Yeah, that is my permanent address now. And in my next position, I will be living either in Washington or in New York or Chicago; I haven't decided yet. Certainly the address here will serve for awhile until I make up my mind. What I want to do is spend some time just seeing the city and finding out what I think of it as a place to live; I've never really looked at it in that way. I know remarkably little about it, just very, very little and experience getting around it, and it's something I want to catch up on before I leave.

SY: You have not lived in Washington prior to....

NB: No, I lived in Chicago. I visited here a few times, and when I

visited I enjoyed going to the Hill to listen to debate and going to the museums and that sort of thing. I did some of that as a visitor but virtually none of it as an employee.

SY: It's even more embarrassing to be a native Washingtonian and not know it.

NB: I find many Washingtonians don't get out and see it; I guess they feel it is always available. The one exception to that has been the President has been very, Mrs. Nixon has been very generous with their box at the Kennedy Center. There's a Presidential box in each of the theaters, and so quite often I've had a chance to go to something at the Kennedy center, sometimes kind of work-related, you know, in terms of the guests and that sort of thing. That's that's been very enjoyable, but that's about all I can say that I've seen outside of the White House. I don't ask for pity; I think I saw many things in the White House that were far more exciting than many things in the museums but it will be fun to get out and look around and see what the town has.

SY: Obviously, you plan to take your notes and other....

NB: Well, copies of all, copies of anything, even things that I've typed. One of the things I've [unintelligible] to do is use this little portable, because in the rush of the morning there simply wasn't time to get things transcribed. Guidance and that sort of thing I would type out, and copies of all of that went into our files, and all of our files from the first term have gone into Presidential records or have gone someplace into storage.

SY: When you say "our files" you mean the...

NB: Press Office.

SY: ...Press Office files.

NB: Yeah, yeah. Things since the election (I think that was the cut-off point) are still in the files, and that includes copies of correspondence and things that I have written and memos to Ron or to other people. I don't know how much of it is in Central Files; I suspect very little, but it certainly should be in our files. The only thing I have very much beyond it are notes to myself, personal notes for meetings and that sort of thing. As I said, I'm not even sure the're going to make sense when I dig into them, but I'm going to start looking at them next year or so and see if there's.... They're mostly reactions and impressions of things and more heavily on the period when I first came in than in the last period, because I was more conscious of trying to do it at that time and was able to do it. As things moved on, there was less and less time even to keep notes, and perhaps less and less strikes one as being important. It's very tricky, and I imagine you have this problem in talking to people. You begin to take for granted ways of working and contacts with people which would have been more noticeable when you first came in. You are aware of everyone you talk to and who you have met that day and what each guy has said; each cabinet member you talked to you remember exactly what he said. As one deals more frequently with these people and with the issues, you just can't remember; they don't impress one quite so much. I'm aware of that because one day, not too long after the inauguration, I remember I limped home rather late one night, it was nine-thirty or ten o'clock. I had guests who had been waiting since about eight, and I said, "It's really

been a terrible day." They said, "What did you do?" I told them we had a couple meetings in the morning and a briefing and went up to the Hill for [Lyndon] Johnson's funeral service and then came back and had a meeting with so-and-so on such-and-such and then I went to a Cabinet meeting and after that I had to call. They said, "You know, if you have to have a bad day, that's the kind of bad day to have, you know, at least there have been five or six...." But you see, here I was thinking kind of in terms of the schedule and the impact, all the things that had to be done that day. Yet, almost any one of those events, had one done just that thing or come into it fresh, [it] would have made a lot more impressions than it did in running through them in a very, very quick series during the day. So I'm afraid that happens, and I'm sure it makes your job difficult in trying to get people take note of things and trying to reflect on things and tell you what has impressed them....

SY: This is so very true. First of all, so much of what is done, you know, on the telephone or in terms....

NB: Well telephone was used, you know, it's a real problem. Even as far as mail, you know, people simply call in from all over the country. They simply call in, they don't write letters in many cases. They phone to tell you their opinions and to ask questions, so you don't even have a record very much of what's taken place. There's just not that much correspondence during a day. It's not that hard to call, it's not that expensive to call anymore, and people do that regularly. You talk to them by telephone, and you may or may not make a note of it. It's a

strange call or something that sounds very important or sensitive, you might make a note on it, but usually not. So you don't have a very good record on those things either. I don't envy you your job of trying to piece all this together.

SY: Well, we're not going to try and intepret it but just to make sure that they say [unintelligible], so it is there for historians to write books from or for the President himself to--when he retires from office--be able to go back and write his memoirs. However, all the little things.... One thing that a lot of people don't really think about is that very often the notes, and the reactions which you may have scribbled on a yellow pad during a meeting or just during the course of your day, very often those are some of the most valuable as an historical record...

NB: Yeah.

SY: ...because they are a more candid response first of all to what is going on.

NB: Yeah, that's for sure. I think a lot of that, though, needs to be weighed. One can be quite impressed by something that's not at all important, one finds out later it's not at all important, or on the other hand can feel that there's a gap or problem where really none has existed. On the other hand that something was very complete, whereas events later show that it was not well done at all. I think it takes some time to digest all of that sort of thing. At some appropriate time I may send you a stack of notes for your project, but it takes some time to digest.

SY: Well, you mentioned you are planning on doing some writing,...

NB: Yeah.

SY: ...and probably some of that is going to be based on going through...

NB: No, no, I think not, I think not.

SY: ...your White House experience?

NB: No, I think not. I mean, so much as my experience has contributed to my ideas on things, I suppose it will. No, I don't like the kind of writing that people do when they leave places like this for the most part. I think a lot of it is very self-serving, I think if it's not responsibly done, historically well done, I don't think it is worth very much. I'm not going to write what I think about the world in four hundred pages and that sort of thing, my view from the White House, two years at the White House, that sort of thing. I just don't like that; I don't think it makes very important contribution to things. Some writing about, about information, starting at the public, a lot of the public need to know and what kind of information it gets and what the process is by which it gets information: I'd like to do some things, and I've been asked to do some pieces on that and some talking about things related to that. So I'm going to do these, and eventually I would like to do some things along an academic line.

I think that, I've always felt that a part of high school, somewhere in a high school curriculum, should be an understanding of the news-making process: sort of what it is that is required to make news, how news is handled and hopefully without any bias in whatever I do. I think it is very important, inasmuch as one is using these materials all the time as a part of one's study of

contemporary affairs and civics and that sort of thing, that there be a course, a journalism course for non-journalism students which looks at the news-making process. You know, we're always asked if we have any news. We're the wrong people to ask; the press kind of decides what's news. We have a feel for what they will use and we have a feel how to relay things in a way that will get their attention, might not be attractive to them but at least will get their attention. We think we have an idea of that; it doesn't always work. A very little of what the government says or what people here say or do is communicated in the press. They're limitations of time, limitations of space, and those limitations are always dealt with in about the same way, a kind of predictable way. I think some of these things might be interesting as either a book or some ideas for a curriculum in this process for people who are not journalism people but who would like to know about it: how we get the information we get and some of the factors, what the dynamics are of that process. That's the first kind of thing I want to do and then later on do something historical, and after that I have three or four more that I want to work on.

SY: [Unintelligible].

MB: Yeah, but I think they all need to be well-done, need to have some time between the experience and the writing. I think it takes some time to digest.

I don't like an awful lot of the things that people do when they leave jobs that they think were important, and they get together a lot of photographs and some of the amazing things that happened. There's one, I won't cite it, but there's one fellow

who wrote a book, he worked for a President one time. He's written this amazing book, and he's never where the action is. He talks about each of the major events, but one of the things that goes through the book is that wherever the major event was, wherever the crisis was, he was somewhere else, but he talks about that day and where he was when it happened. It's not particularly exciting and not particularly useful. Even though I think I've been where the action was on a number of occasions, I don't think any real purpose is served just by getting out a lot of personal views on that sort of thing. Most of what has happened, most of what happens in the White House, I think a great deal of what happens, is written about. I think people would be surprised: as far as events and major issues and major positions, there isn't much that isn't covered one way or another or won't be by the time that all of the people [who] have worked here get through writing books. But how it happens, the how of it, I think is more interesting and less, less written about. Those are some of the areas that I have some interest in. You get to do the whole thing, you get to write the whole history of it, the administration. That's a big [unintelligible].

SY: Well as I said we're archivists, and we're really not trying to write the history. We just trying to make sure...

NB: Collect it.

SY: ...it's there for history, to write the [unintelligible].

NB: What are the gap areas? What are those things that are hard to get, hard to...?

SY: Well, we don't go out and say we're going to document this

particular policy area. That's really not our job at all. A lot of people have a lot of misconceptions about Archives. In many ways [the National] Archives is really established as more of a passive institution.

NB: Oh.

SY: We kind of accept the official files which you've mentioned in custody and take care of them for the next fifteen thousand years for future generations to go back and look at. This is the first time that an administration has requested to have a [unintelligible] staff for the library in residence...

NB: That's a very good idea.

SY: ...while the President's still in office, and it is....

NB: You get a feel of how some things work and kind of know what the activities are that need to be documented and who the people are, which I think is very useful.

SY: Most of all it gives us an opportunity at times to make other people who are actually doing this aware of the value of the papers, if it is papers, or just aware of the value of documentation. Many people feel, once an issue has been, gone through the Congress or whatever, there's no need to keep the first draft...

NB: Yeah, yeah, I can see that.

SY: ...or first piece.

NB: Yeah, yeah, I think we always all have the same tendencies. We deal of some of these things as problems or as events of the day and, when they are over, they're really over, and we don't need papers on them.

SY: They think they don't need that anymore; it's not going to come up again.

NB: I suppose so.

SY: Take a speech draft, the first draft of a speech is completely ditched. It's very often as revealing to know what was, what was cut out [unintelligible].

NB: Of course, you've already seen some of these where the President changes.... [Unintelligible] it's always interesting to see his changes even of the final draft in terms of what he focuses in on or what he emphasized and how it.... It is very impressive to see how he handles that, ways of making it more personal or relating him to the viewers or the listeners. It's fun to watch those being marked up and developed, and I think very instructive.

SY: You know what what options were presented, whether it be through the President or [unintelligible].

NB: Well, I'm sorry things moved so fast for us that we didn't have a chance to record more of it for you, but there wasn't always the chance.

SY: Well, we think that....

[END OF CONVERSATION]

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to exit interview with Neal Ball
conducted by Susan Yowell
in Room 157 of the Old Executive Office Building
on April 5, 1973

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