

Oral History Interview
With
JOHN C. WHITAKER
On
December 30, 1987



Nixon Presidential Materials Staff
National Archives and Records Administration

**National Archives and Records Administration
Nixon Presidential Materials Staff**

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John C. Whitaker
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Oral History Interview with John C. Whitaker
conducted by Frederick J. Graboske and Raymond H. Geselbracht
at the Nixon Presidential Materials Staff in Alexandria, Virginia at
3:30 p.m. on December 30, 1987

RHG: All right, Mr. Whitaker, thank you for talking to us.

JCW: You're welcome.

RHG: Can you tell us how you first met Nixon, and first became acquainted with him, involved in his political career?

JCW: Yes, I went to the beach one weekend, in Ocean City [Maryland]. I'm not crazy to sit in the sun on the beach, doing nothing all weekend, so I brought a book along called Richard Nixon by Earl Mazo, and I was a bit like Saint Paul on the road to Damascus, getting knocked off a horse, and quite impressed. Impressed to the point that I decided I would try to do something, other than just be a casual person who'd vote for Nixon. I did not know then how to become involved. I called Ann Devereux, a girl that I used to date in college, over in the White House, who worked for Ed [Edward A.] McCabe, who was [on] President [Dwight D.] Eisenhower's staff. I met Ed, and Ed said, "Well, I don't know, but there's a guy named [H. R.] Haldeman somewhere you ought to meet, and see what he has to suggest." Ed got me an appointment with Haldeman. I had never heard [of] him. And Haldeman said, "Why don't you become an advance man?" I didn't even know what an advance man was. Anyway, I volunteered to do some advancing.

The first advance I did was in Lincoln, Nebraska. Haldeman showed me how to advance. I thought that then Vice President Nixon's speech was rather banal, boring, and I was rather embarrassed about the whole thing. In the interim I had

negotiated an understanding with my boss and the company I work for, that I could take a leave of absence, you know. A leave of absence to do this kind of work, and then come back to the company.

RHG: Was this all during the campaign?

JCW: This, no, this was in about the spring of '59 as I recall. I mean he was obviously going to be the candidate for President. But he was not nominated at that point.

RHG: And you had read the book...

JCW: Yes. I read Mazo's book in the summer of 1959.

RHG: And, and I mean you just felt sufficiently inspired...?

JCW: Yes. Sufficiently motivated from Mazo's book to do something about it. Right. So, anyway, the interesting part was that I really was quite unimpressed by the Vice President's speech. And a little embarrassed sitting on his plane going back to Washington. Haldeman introduced me to Mr. Nixon; it was just a perfunctory introduction, and I never talked to him or had any communication with him. I was just thinking how embarrassed I was going to be when I got back to Washington to get off the airplane and go back to see my boss and say, "Well, look, I just made a mistake. I don't really, don't want to do this, you know. In the flesh he wasn't as good as the book." Nixon then came up to the front of the aircraft and started to do an off-the-record press conference. There was Herb [Herbert E.] Kaplow, who was then with NBC, Paul Newman, who's now dead, who was with CBS, and Bill [William H.] Lawrence, who was with the New York Times at the time. He did an interview on seismic testing and whether

Russian underground nuclear explosions could be verified.

Underground nuclear testing was a hot issue at the time. I had a fresh Ph.D. in geology, [Johns Hopkins, 1953] and I knew damn well I knew more about seismology than Richard Nixon did, even if he was Vice-President of the United States. He went on for one half hour. He never made a mistake, meaning, for example if I were to pretend that I was a medical doctor to you and you were in fact a doctor, then I would trip myself up, making some technical error. But Nixon never made a technical error. That impressed me. That really was the beginning of an intellectual love affair that still goes on. Kind of a long answer to your question, but that's how it started.

FJG: No, no. What, what was your place in your life that you felt the need to get involved in something like this? Were you bored with your career?

JCW: No. I can't say I was bored with my career. I had never had any political background; I may have had a latent interest in politics and didn't know it. For example, my father-in-law was quite active in the Democratic Party. Through my wife I'd hear about politics, but it was the farthest thing from my mind or my upbringing. It was literally like I said, St. Paul getting knocked off a horse reading Mazo's book about Nixon.

RHG: That book was so compelling?

JCW: Yes. It was so compelling to me that I decided to become an activist and get involved, and I did.

RHG: Do you remember what that first speech was about, or where it was, or anything like that?

JCW: Well, it was in Lincoln, Nebraska, and it was a standard Republican fund-raising dinner, you know. Nixon gave them one of these "tell 'em what they want to hear, applause-line speeches." It was rather banal I thought. I didn't think it was very good. [Laughter] So, I was prepared to get off the plane and forget Nixon. Then I realized there was a lot more depth to him after his little seismology lecture to the press.

RHG: Yes, and that seismology talk was about verification for arms treaties?

JCW: Verification. Yes--under what conditions you could detect nuclear explosions. In the various kinds of geologic formations (salt domes, volcanics, etc.) and the sensitivity of these detecting devices--all the kind of technology seismologists know about but the Vice Presidents of the United States aren't supposed to understand. [Laughter] And I was amazed Nixon understood it so well.

RHG: And, and, and you've had reason to feel ever since that time...

JCW: Yes.

RHG: ...that press conference example, that was the true Nixon, not the one that made that speech.

JCW: Right. Well, sort of. Both kinds of Nixons are necessary. When you are a political leader you have to know how to do those cheer-line speeches and all that. But, there was a fine mind behind it. That is all I'm trying to say.

RHG: So then you became involved in the 1960 campaign?

JCW: I was an advance man in 1960, and then he lost to [John F.] Kennedy and that was the end of that--or so I thought at the

time. I used to travel with him occasionally during the 60's. One or the other of the old 1960 advanceman team would go with him for a few days. He would try to schedule his politicking, his Party fund-raising chores and things like that--done say on Thursday through a Sunday night once a month. He was involved in a law firm, of course, in California and later in New York. We'd go with him, and you'd serve as kind of advance man, valet, press secretary, fender-off-er, answer the phone, everything you know, that's all. We were just traveling around, just the two of us. So that's when I got to know him well, really well after he'd lost to Kennedy in 1960.

EJG: Who were some of the other people who were doing that?

JCW: In those days, Haldeman did some--this is post-'60 after he [Nixon] lost. A man named John Nidecker. You probably don't know John. He was in the White House in some capacity for a while. He did a lot of it. A guy named Sherm [Sherman E.] Unger, U-n-g-e-r, later he was over at HUD [Housing and Urban Development], he did a lot of it. John Warner did some of it, now a senator. John was one of the original advance team back in 1960. We were the main ones who did it in that period. We didn't do a lot of it, maybe three or four times a year, I'd do a trip like that with him.

RHG: And where were you working at that time?

JCW: I was in the aerial surveying business back with the same company I'd worked for before the 1960 campaign.

RHG: Where were you physically living?

JCW: In Baltimore through 1960, then I moved to Washington.

RHG: So you would get a, a telephone call from...?

JCW: Rose, Rose Mary Woods, Nixon's secretary. Rose would say, "Can you go a couple of days with the boss? Try to advance this by phone so it's not too much of a mess and kinda take care of him?" I'd say, "Sure" and I'd go along.

FJG: Did you pay your own expenses on these?

JCW: No. Somebody else did, I don't know where the money came from, perhaps out of Nixon's own pocket. No, we didn't have any money. Well, later on there [were] some party funds available in the 1966 campaign. I really took a lot of time off in 1966. I scheduled him. 1966 was one of these off-year campaigns, no Presidential election but a lot of congressional seats. And that was the year he made his comeback really, because he was Dick Nixon, loser against Kennedy and "Pat" [Edmund G.] Brown, at that point. A nobody except a lawyer that was never expected to again run for President--and then he went out and he did all this campaigning. They picked up forty-seven congressional seats in 1966, and all of a sudden, the press couldn't exactly write that Nixon was a loser, you know. It was the beginning of his comeback.

RHG: Did you feel that during those years when there was mostly losses to remember? Did you feel that this man had a chance to come back?

JCW: I always felt he was going to give it a try, I don't know why exactly, but I did. I remember listening to him, listening on the radio the day of the last press conference, the day he lost to Pat Brown in 1962 for California governor. What a depressing

day! I wasn't involved when he was in the race in California. Although Haldeman called me up once in 1962 and asked me to get involved. I went out to California and looked it over, but in the end I never did. I remember thinking even then that he might give the Presidency another shot. About his come back--the day that Nixon was on the Senate floor--it was probably December of 1960, he presided over the electoral vote count which formally made Kennedy President. I believe I saw him later that day and that my mood, I mean was kind of a somber mood, you know, naturally and, I was kinda, conveying I felt sorry for him losing to Kennedy. I remember him very clearly saying, "Don't feel sorry for me. I've been privileged to do it. Public life is what I really want. I've had a good shot at it. I've had eight years and, if I never get any more, that's life." But you know, I, it was pretty clear that he wanted more of it.

FJG: Yeah.

JCW: He made the greatest comeback in political history.

RHG: There's certainly no bitterness in that remark that you heard.

JCW: No. That's right. And that was of course at the same time that, as Tom Wicker documented in that speech at Hofstra, he--well, I don't know how good a case legally there was for a vote recount in Texas and Illinois, but it certainly could have screwed things up and stalled the country. Who would be running the country for that period. He felt strongly about that. I remember our conversation. It was in that little office. He had a cubby-hole little office down at Capitol Hill. I mean it was about half as big as this room.

RHG: Nixon as President has been thought to have sometimes been considerably more bitter about things than that...

JCW: Yes.

RHG: ...personally.

JCW: Yes.

RHG: Did you sense that kind of a man in these earlier days, or not?

JCW: That's kinda hard to answer. He could be tough, very steel-edged. He could use some foul language, but I never had a sense of all the times that I was talking to him that he, that he used a lot of foul language, although it seems that way when you read transcripts of his Oval Office conversations.

RHG: Hm hrm.

JCW: I don't know where reality is on that. Because I had no sense of a particularly profane man, a little foul language, but not gutter talk, locker room talk, or anything like that. Yes, he could be hard-edged. He could also be very kind and gentle with people. He was very poor at firing people. He was very poor at giving bad news to people. One of the problems I had with him as Cabinet Secretary was that he worked through memos, he worked through option papers. He was very suspicious of getting kind of an editorial spin. He didn't want a sales job from his Cabinet officers. Instead, he wanted to see the pros and cons on paper, and I applaud that kind of decision making. Where it started not to work well was after the decision was made. He didn't want to see Cabinet officers with opposing views and tell them to their faces about his decision. Just said, tell his staffer, who in that case happened to be me many times, to call up the winner and

the loser and give them his decision. You know, if they weren't there to represent themselves, they had to put themselves in my hands writing the option papers. But Cabinet officers liked to have their shot at him. Well, there's where he'd come on a little hard. He'd basically say, "Well, damn it, these guys work for me; I don't work for them. They wouldn't be here unless I'd appointed them. That's the way it is, you know." He just would not spend a lot of time with them. He would not spend a lot of time on camaraderie. But he did an enormous amount of homework and had a discipline, an intellectual discipline and concentration that I have never seen in any other human being. If you ever noticed the average adult--what, ten maybe fifteen minutes they can look at a paper or read a book without looking up.

RHG: Hm hm.

JCW: A child, a matter of seconds right?

RHG: Yes.

JCW: I've been on airplanes with Nixon. He'd go hour after hour scribbling on yellow pads. And when he looked up he was thinking. He wasn't looking out the window relaxing like other people. It was just glassy-eyed thinking, you know. Tremendous powers that way. Terrific use of his time, but he did not use his time on collegial things at all. Consequently when the going got rough uh, a lot of collegial friendships that weren't there. I don't know that they would have made the difference when Watergate came along, but they might have.

RHG: Did you feel that in the uh, in the early days when you were

campaigning for him uh, both during the 1960 campaign and then later during the '68 campaign, that you were developing a friendly relationship with him, or was it just a perfunctory business sort of relationship?

JCW: Oh, I never had what you'd call a close personal relationship, I wasn't that close to the President in my functions. As far as direct access to him there was really just Haldeman, [John D.] Ehrlichman and [Henry A.] Kissinger. So there were many times that I would get Presidential decisions made, where I'd just get an option paper back with a check in one of the boxes with no conversation with him. Other times he'd call you and want to talk about it, but he rarely did that with Cabinet officers. He's not an easy man to get to know, yet he could be, he's not a, he's, very friendly.... Why, he still sends me a Christmas wreath, has for years, you know, things like that. He'll call you up once in a while if somebody's sick in the family. When I had had a heart bypass operation, he called me a couple times in the hospital. And you know that was long after I had a relationship with him. Post-Watergate, five years after he'd been out of the Presidency. He's very kind to a lot of people who can say that about him. But camaraderie? No.

RHG: Ehrlichman has written that you in fact had access to Nixon, in his view, if you had wanted it, really alone on the Domestic Council.

JCW: Well, RN [Richard Nixon] trusted me. He trusted my political judgement I think, pretty well, on substantive issues. I would vote myself on an option paper. Most of the Domestic Council

staff did that. We'd write, this Cabinet officer thinks that and that one thinks so and so and I think such and such. You know, most Presidential options papers are all the same: they have three options. Option number one is too expensive, option number two is political suicide, so the President checks the third option. [Laughter] I'm making it simpler than it is. But I was one of those people that sensed that he really didn't want to see a lot of people. I pressed very few times to see him unless I really felt I couldn't put it on paper. Incidentally, one of the things that Nixon did so beautifully is he decided what it was what he was going to decide.

I sound a little critical maybe of President [Jimmy] Carter here, but from a distance, I get the impression that he was a victim of his own in basket. He decided to deal with a lot of things. Nixon decided he wasn't going to deal with a lot of things, and privately we knew what those things were. There was a lot of smoke and mirrors there, because we couldn't tell the cabinet officers that something they thought was the most important damn thing in the world really wasn't getting to the President's attention. So, we'd just decide the issue ourselves. Ehrlichman would say, "He's not going to decide that; to hell with it." So we'd just decide it, and then we'd say, "The President said," which really wasn't so. Every White House staffer does some of that. I suspect that we may have done a little more than most, because he concentrated on a few things and did them well; he was an expert in those areas when he'd get into them, for example: welfare reform and foreign policy. The

environment he didn't get into deeply. That doesn't mean that I didn't have five or six or eight critical meetings when decisions needed to be made. But, once it got on flow, his attitude was kind of look, you know my marching orders. "I want environmental cleanup, but not at such a cost-benefit ratio that's going to hurt the economy. Don't try to 'out-clean' Mr. [Edmund S.] Muskie; there's no way you can do it." Beyond that, there's not a hell of a lot the President needs to say about it. From then on it's a bunch of arcane regulations and economic studies, and you really don't need a President. You kinda fly by your own seat of the pants, and I think that's good use of Presidential time. He was an excellent administrator I think.

RHG: Could you sense that there were some people like yourself who understood how to gain Nixon's trust and others who didn't? Could you see this happening?

JCW: Well, I'm not sure. I think it takes time to get his trust. You see, by the time he came to the White House, I'd been around him quite a while, at least almost eight years. He probably didn't even know who I was by the time he lost the 1960 election, although I'd probably seen him ten or fifteen times as a young advance man opening the door of a car for him. He probably had no idea who I was. As I said, I got to know him afterwards during the decade of the sixties. So I think it takes time to develop some trust. He started to depend on me when I scheduled him in '66. Then he knew a lot of political judgement was involved: not only what he did but where he went. Because, let's face it, we were trying to get congressmen elected. I

wasn't in the business of sending him just anywhere to help the Party, I wasn't going to send him anywhere that a candidate probably was not going to win whether Nixon went there or not. I needed a good batting average. [Laughter] He started to appreciate that. In that sense I developed his trust. Maybe more than some of the others when he didn't know until later. Remember, I was older than most of the others on the Domestic Council. Most of them were in their thirties, and I was in my early forties. So I'd been around the track a little longer with him.

RHG: I was thinking of one other man who, who seemed to gain Nixon's trust without trying at all, and that was Robert Finch.

JCW: Oh, but he goes back a long way.

RHG: Right, but it seems to have started from their first meeting almost.

JCW: It might've. They knew each other in the mid '50's, I guess.

RHG: Late '40's.

JCW: Oh really.

RHG: Yeah.

JCW: I didn't know they went back that far.

RHG: When Nixon was a Senator, I think was when they met.

JCW: Yes. Well Bob was on his staff for a little while when he was Vice President too. And he more or less ran his 1960 campaign. Although that was kind of a funny set up. His "old" campaign manager was Len [Leonard W.] Hall and the "young" campaign manager were Bob Finch, and Pat [L. Patrick] Gray was put in between them to report [laughter] what each were doing directly

back to Nixon. A zoo! [Laughter]

FJG: Was it a badly run campaign?

JCW: When you lose, it's always a badly run campaign, I don't know.

RHG: [Laughter]

JCW: We did alright. Well, hell, we only lost by a hundred and twelve thousand votes.

RHG: Well, now....

JCW: But he got a lot of criticism and of course Kennedy was an unknown. History is a bit rewritten; so many think that Nixon was a favorite to win. That was never much more than a fifty/fifty race one way or the other. But there's no doubt the debates made a difference. Another thing that made a big difference was high unemployment in the month of October just before the election.

RHG: Hm hhm.

JCW: But I don't think it was a badly run campaign. The historians have written it as a badly run campaign, yes. You had Finch on the plane, and Hall at home. But Finch didn't have the organizational ability that you had later in 1968 when you had Haldeman in charge on the road and [John N.] Mitchell at home. Haldeman was more nuts and bolts--let's get things organized and done in an orderly way. Nixon was more comfortable with that--delegating--than he was with Finch, who wasn't as good an organizer as Haldeman although politically Bob was very sharp. So, Nixon never found an organization man until he got Haldeman. And Nixon's trust of Haldeman didn't develop overnight. My God, Haldeman did a lot of advancing over the years, worked his way up

to be a good advance man, and then the head advance man. That trust didn't develop overnight.

RHG: And John Mitchell was an adviser in the sense that Len Hall had been?

JCW: Yes. Mitchell ran the political organization. He delivered the vote. He was an adviser in a political way but again not the sort of guy that is always saying, "Hey Dick, I got to see you about this," or, "I'll fly out there," demanding access. He was perfectly relaxed, comfortable to talk to him on the phone. Innately understood that Nixon was the guy who didn't want a lot of person to person contact; he wanted a lot of private time to think and lots of time to read. And just his way of preparing speeches: you know, this, you see it even now: Nixon will stand up and give a speech even with a lot of statistics and there's not a note in front of him. He did a lot of that. President [Ronald W.] Reagan is a great speech reader, that's what he is. Nixon was not a good reader and that's one of the reasons [why] he memorized his speeches.

RHG: Hm hnm.

JCW: But that took an enormous amount of time.

RHG: The, the staff uh, after the 1960 campaign the Nixon political staff changed, and by 1962 you had that some of the younger men were to run the '68 campaign.

JCW: Right.

RHG: And, and I know [Stephen E.] Ambrose in his biography [Nixon: The Education of a Politician, 1913-1962] presents it in that way. He says now you've got the new staff, and there they are: these

are the men who would be involved in Watergate many years later. Did you look at the situation as it was developing through the sixties and say, "Uh-oh. Now we've got the Watergate crew in place here, Haldeman and Ehrlichman and the others?" Was there any sense of that? Or just uh, a new, younger staff...?

JCW: Do you mean was there any sense of that pre-Watergate?

RHG: Well, yeah, this....

JCW: What Ambrose says is true. There were a lot of staff changes over the years; for example, John Ehrlichman was simply another advance man like I was in 1960.

RHG: Hm hmm.

JCW: John ended up being his scheduler in '62. The same thing I did in '66. So John naturally was much closer and knew the President a lot better than. Dwight Chapin first came on the scene then. Ron [Ronald L.] Ziegler, came out of Disneyland [laughter], and of course Haldeman brought them in. So that group all really started to blossom into their own, or started in '62. And those people all stayed on and grew in stature and position as they came to the White House.

RHG: Did you ever have any reason to reflect on the difference between the '60 group as compared to the '62 group? Saying well this one's better or worse or anything like that? Did it have a different tone to it or...?

JCW: A lot's been written that way: that somehow the roots of the Watergate syndrome came from the staff recruited in the early 1960's. I really can't say that. Our '60 advance man group was more just kind of pickup from business and industry: Tom [Thomas

G.] Pownall, who is now president of Martin-Marrietta, was an advance man. John Ehrlichman, myself, Sherm Unger and John Warner, both lawyers. A lot has been written that the Nixon staff came out of the advertising-public relations area. I really don't think that's right.

RHG: Can you tell me, the story that you told me earlier about Nixon in the taxi cab, campaigning for Lin [A. Linwood] Holton?

JCW: [Laughter] Yeah, we came home after a long day, and it was during that period with just one guy would travel with him all day, you know.

RHG: Do you remember the year?

JCW: Well, I think it was '67 Lin ran for governor and lost, because I know he won in '69, and Virginia's election is every two years. I remember him coming to the White House after he won in '69. Anyway I think it was '67. We banged all over Virginia, started the night before, did Norfolk, Harrisonburg, Lynchburg, Roanoke, a couple of other towns I can't even remember. Finally the Republican Party delivered us at National Airport in an airplane of uncertain vintage. I put a dime in the--yeah, it was a dime too, so maybe it was earlier than '67--in the phone meter and got a cab. And there was someone else with us. Can't remember who. But anyway, Nixon sat in the front of the cab. It was a little different, this other guy and myself were in the back of the cab. It was quite dark, about two o'clock in the morning. So the cab driver keeps looking over [laughter] at Nixon, Nixon's kinda sitting there like he's half asleep. And the guy says, "You look like," he says, "you look like that guy that lost to Jack

Kennedy. What was his name?" He says, "You look like Dick Nixon." Nixon turned to him deadpan, he says, "Yeah, a lot of people tell me that." [laughter] The guy never did figure out that he was really Nixon [laughter].

FJG: That's a sense of humor we don't often get a picture of.

JCW: That's right. He had a good sense of humor, as we were saying at lunch. A lot of it was making fun of other people, so you couldn't use it. He had a good sense of humor.

RHG: Do you remember any other incidents?

JCW: Well, [laughter] yes, but some of them I'm not sure, [laughter] because the ones that are funny are uh, that I'd just as soon not say them. Oh yeah, yeah. Oh we were at a Cabinet meeting one time and he's talking, what was the subject, oh yeah, the price of beef was getting too high. So [Earl L.] Butz or [Clifford M.] Hardin, I've forgotten who was Secretary of Agriculture, saying, "Well you know, that's good for the farmers, the politics [are] good." You know Nixon and all the rest were looking around the table saying, "The heck it is, you know, there's a lot more housewives than there are beef growers. And the price of hamburger goes up, that's bad news." Nixon says, "Well we've gotta get more, we gotta start eating lamb, we gotta get more lamb." He looked at all the Cabinet very seriously; he said, "I want you all to eat lamb." And he said, "My bomb shelter up at Camp David," he says, "I am going to restock it with lamb." [Laughter] He'd just come out with these things, you know. [Laughter].

RHG: Can you just give me portraits of Haldeman and Ehrlichman, just

impressionistic...?

JCW: Bob was an organizational genius; he was a political genius in the sense that he knew how to organize stories, to organize news events, to organize the President's time. Never violate the rule: that is, only two news leads in a day, because there's only two newspapers today. So don't have the President do more than two things a day, because he just runs over his own stories. That's quite common and understood by everybody but, in those days, that was kinda new thinking. He was very good that way. His shortcoming was that he was a bit of a martinet, you know. The German toughness--seemed to enjoy saying, "No." Every President has to have a son-of-a-bitch and Bob could be that son-of-a-bitch. John, who of course in the Watergate hearings came off with a sneer and as a kinda the bad guy, was, in my view, a much softer person. A very brilliant person, a beautiful referee of getting facts to the President with no spin on them. Really a renaissance man in the sense that he could damn near get into any field and, after a little briefing, glean the thing and come out with the big point. [He] didn't get overwhelmed talking to a Glenn Seaborg about fusion reactors or to Elliot Richardson, who would put anybody to sleep talking about anything, you know. Excuse me, I shouldn't have said that, but [laughter] Elliot can be so pedantic sometime that it's hard to stay awake, like Arthur Burns.

RHG: And uh, what about Kissinger?

JCW: Well, I didn't really know Henry that well. I worked with Henry when there'd be interface between a domestic and foreign policy

issue. But I went around the world twice in one month and set up a trip for the President around the world in July of '69. I spent, whatever, those ten or twelve days sitting right next to Henry all the way around the world. As I was saying, Ray, at lunch, I came away with the impression that it was definitely Nixon who was the foreign policy professor and Henry the student, and not vice versa, as Henry would have it be today. He was taking orders, not creating policy. He had a marvelous sense of humor though. I remember we were landing in I believe it was in New Delhi, and RN used to have this habit of working on drafts of his remarks, of his arrival remarks, which would always end up getting left on the table or something. What he planned to say was in his head from the time he stepped out the door of the plane. So, Henry and I were sitting at the first staff table, which is about, well it's quite a way from the President's, maybe a little more than the length of this room from the President's office on Air Force One. And the old man comes down the aisle and flings these three pages of typed arrival remarks at Henry and says, "God damn, Henry, too damn long. Cut these remarks down Henry, cut them down." Henry says, "Yes, Mr. President." And you know, the flaps were down at that point. So Henry's furiously scribbling trying to shorten his arrival remarks. Sally Dahler, his secretary, is behind him, poised waiting to type the briefer remarks with the idea we'd recycle this to Nixon once more before the plane landed. Because everybody knew he wasn't going to take the remarks out with him. So all of a sudden the plane bumps and we're on the ground and rolling.

Henry's scr--he's about to hand it back to Sally for typing and he sees the President standing at the door. The plane's still rolling maybe twenty miles an hour, and the President's already up at the door, hunched over, standing. Realizing the President would never see [this] latest draft, Henry says, "Sally, take these three pages of arrival remarks and retype them on one page quickly." [Laughter] He was quite a guy.

RHG: How did you, what sort of thing happened between the professor and the student during this trip?

JCW: Well, what I saw was order taking. I mean it wasn't even, you know, "Henry do this, do that; no, we're not going to do that; I think you ought to do that; no, I'm not going to do that; you gotta understand, Henry; let me explain." You know, it was like instructions to a child. That's why that impression is so strong with me. Of course, that was early in Henry's time; that trip was when he'd only been in that job for six months. And maybe he grew in comfort and stature with the President but he was definitely the student, not the designer of policy. I remember the night of the Guam doctrine. I remember Henry was frothing at the mouth over that thing because--well, my wife used to say that was my place in history, the Guam doctrine was. The astronauts were coming back from the Moon and Nixon was leaving Washington. So, Henry had a schedule we'd pick up the astronauts and go right to Manila. And I said, "Henry, this is crazy; this isn't the Eastern Shuttle those guys are coming back on." I said, "That thing could crash or get lost--you know, we're gonna have to row around the Pacific looking for them." I said, "Anything could go

wrong." I said, "So let's take a day off. Let's go to somewhere like Guam." So I just put, just took a day off and went to Guam. So, we got into Guam, and he decided to do this Guam doctrine. Now maybe he [Nixon] had decided; I didn't know anything about it, and the advance man didn't know anything about it. We just got about an hour's notice from Haldeman to set up a big briefing for the press, and he did the Guam doctrine. In effect, what worried Henry about the Guam doctrine was it was a, kind of the first statement that we'll send weapons but no more troops to Southeast Asia. Henry thought that would make some of the hawks in Asia that Nixon was about to see on this trip very unhappy. And Nixon just said that's just the way it's going to be. Because he knew he was going to see [Ferdinand] Marcos right after that and then go down to see Indonesia's Suharto then the leaders in Bangkok and India.

RHG: And Kissinger did not even know about this, the Nixon doctrine announcement?

JCW: Oh, I can't say that. I just remember Henry quarreling with RN when he came off the stage about it, being upset with what RN said. Perha--I don't know, I'm sure Henry was involved in the preparation of that, which I knew nothing about. Although it's strange I didn't know anything about it, I was sitting right there at the desk all afternoon on Air Force One flying from the Johnson Island with Henry up to Guam. I don't remember any last minute excitement. That's why I was so surprised we even had the press briefing. Why, I don't know how much of it he did out of his own head or not, but Henry was not happy with what RN said

and RN in effect said, you'll learn, relax. [Laughter] That was condescending almost. [Laughter]. Henry could probably tell you a lot more about that than I.

RHG: Now, you told me a couple of stories at lunch about Nixon's personal physical clumsiness.

JCW: Yes.

RHG: And can you describe to me the way he would hang up the telephone?

JCW: Well, he'd just drop it from maybe a foot, or he'd have it up to his ear and he'd just kind of stretch his arm out and, instead of putting down the receiver, he'd drop it [laughter]. And occasionally it would fall off the cradle and on the floor, and then you'd hear it beeping down there while you were having a, trying to have a conversation with him. He just wasn't mechanically very swift. And the incident with the Tylenol bottle, which is not my story but Steve [Stephen B.] Bull's about--he apparently had a headache and Steve got him some Tylenol and he didn't come out of the room. So the President was in the Oval Office all by himself sitting at his desk. And Steve opened a crack in the door, and there's the President chewing on this childproof Tylenol thing. [Laughter] Trying to get it open. That's when childproof Tylenol kind of things first came out, and nobody knew, mostly even mechanically adept people didn't know how to open the damn things in those days, but he sure didn't.

RHG: Well, the tape staff, I know, have heard some examples of Nixon trying to hang up the telephone [and] it will go on for five

minutes at a time. So now, at least, they can understand what was happening.

FJG: That's been a running joke with us for years.

JCW: Yeah. He, he really did do that. I know everybody writes about the coffee cups banging around on the tapes and I've never heard a tape so, I don't know, but he sure did he sure wasn't mechanically too swift.

RHG: Now, I want to talk to you about the, your work on the Domestic Council at a later date.

JCW: Right.

RHG: I haven't had time to go through your papers, but one thing I recall seeing is after the '72 election victory...

JCW: Yeah.

RHG: ...Haldeman sent around a memo to everybody saying....

JCW: [Laughter] You're fired, eh? [Laughter].

RHG: Your're fired, well, it may have been before that, but it said, what do you want to do in the next administration?

JCW: Yes.

RHG: And, as I remember, yours said, "Well the one thing I don't want to do is go to the Interior Department. I'd like to stay on the Domestic Council staff."

JCW: Did I write that? Did I write, did I respond to a memo like that, says "What do you want to do?"

RHG: Yes.

JCW: I wrote something.

RHG: Yes, I'm exaggerating,...

JCW: Yeah.

RHG: ...but what I remember....

JCW: That's correct, I really didn't want to leave, and I was told I had to.

RHG: Why?

JCW: By Ehrlichman. Well because that was Nixon's plan. He wanted to put his loyal boys in the White House out as Undersecretaries to run departments on a day-by-day basis. [Egil M.] Krogh went to DOT [Department of Transportation]; I went to Interior; a couple of other guys became assistant secretaries. And he just wanted that done, so I went. I'd had a long history of almost going; that was the third time I almost went to Interior. So that's, that's right: I didn't want to go. But I'm glad I did.

Because, God, the Watergate thing started descending on the White House right after that, and I was so glad to be out of there.

RHG: Did you get much sense of that in the agency?

JCW: In the agency?

RHG: I mean that the White House was in disarray and that the agency was running differently as a result?

JCW: Well, not as much as the press wrote, I mean, in our Department we happened to get quite a bit done during that period, but it just may have been an accident. I mean, legislation was coming out in a very haphazard way. I just felt the, it was just a horrible thing, because you know, I, it was a disillusioning thing, it was a horrible thing to go through. It damn near killed me is the way I felt about it personally.

RHG: In what sense?

JCW: Well, it's like seeing your own father get in all this trouble after all these years, you know. It was a very disillusioning thing.

RHG: Were you just learning by reading the newspapers as the thing went on?

JCW: Yes. I had no information. I didn't know anything about it. And there but for the grace of God go I, you know. If I had not, if I, instead of going into a more substantive area, had stayed in [as] the Cabinet Secretary, first of all I'd have ended up doing what Alex [Alexander P.] Butterfield did: I'd have been running the tape system.

RHG: Hm hm.

JCW: God knows what involvement I might have gotten into. So I was lucky. I mean, the wings of death brush close. You don't know what your reaction might have been at the time.

FJG: Are you saying you might have gotten involved in some of the more nefarious activities in the White House?

JCW: Well, I'm not gonna say here, sit here and say that I would be simon pure; I just don't know.

FJG: Was the atmosphere...?

JCW: But who knows what, how that was presented. I mean I, I remember one time being in the convention down in '72 and I'm sitting by a pool. It was really nothing to do, it was like a coronation. At the '68 convention I'd go for days without even getting anything to eat; it was desperate. This time it was a coronation. There was nothing to do. And I was sitting by the pool with my wife and John Dean. I said, "John, what's this...?" This is what,

July or August of...

FJG: '72.

JCW: ...'72. I said, "Yeah, what's this Watergate all about?"

Because it was, John Dean had been assigned to take care of Watergate.

FJG: Right.

JCW: "Oh, no problem, no sweat. [I'll] take care of it," Dean said.

RHG: And at that time he was....

JCW: That shows you how naive I was, yeah. Of course, the whole thing really didn't break until the next spring.

RHG: Right. But at that time in the summer of '72, Dean was passing hush money to the burglars and...

JCW: Yes.

RHG: ...and that was his response to you: "It's nothing."

JCW: "Ah, no problem. We'll [get it] worked out," he said.

RHG: Well, how did you feel as you were opening up the newspaper in the morning, after April '73?

JCW: Terrible, just horrible, I mean, every day another bomb would go off. It just went on, an endless procession of horror stories. It was like "Iran-gate" magnified twenty times.

RHG: Hm hhm. Did you,...

JCW: It was just awful.

RHG: ...did you feel...?

JCW: Well you were around then, you remember that.

RHG: Oh yes, I can remember....

JCW: But you weren't part of it like we were.

RHG: No, I was a little too young, and I didn't understand what was

going on.

JCW: Yeah. It's hard for me to reconstruct it. I think, I guess in the end that Haldeman and Ehrlichman and Nixon, all three of them were not quite leveling with each other. I, I mean, I really don't really know what happened; even to this day I don't know what happened.

RHG: Could you sense from the Interior Department that the White House was a different place under Alexander Haig than had been under Haldeman? That it was run any differently?

JCW: Not really because I wasn't there then, in that period, I was you see I had, I left in December '72. Haldeman, Ehrlichman were fired in April of '73. So I was already over at Interior. What I did sense was different was that it was harder to do, harder for me, to do business with the White House. I used to do my business directly with Ehrlichman. When I was, that's why we first term White House staffers were sent to these Departments: so we could get things done, and on fairly short circuits. If something's going over there and I thought we needed some money and I wanted to roll OMB [Office of Management and Budget] on something, or I, or even if I thought my own Cabinet officer was wrong on something, [I'd] call Ehrlichman. I'd say, "What do you want to do about it? What does the President really want on this one? Put it on your list and find out." It'd take usually not more than forty-eight hours to get an answer. Or, tilt any way, one way or the other, how the President felt about something.

RHG: And you couldn't do that with Ken [Kenneth R.] Cole?

JCW: Yes, but Ken didn't have the access that John had. So that kind

of the system dried up. After Ehrlichman resigned it just became just another Undersecretary out there with no connections with the boys back home, except via Ken Cole with less access. And of course, after Nixon left, then [Gerald R.] Ford was in, I stayed there for awhile. I was there for, well I don't know, Nixon went in August and I had a heart attack in January so I was there that long, but I was going to get out anyway. When I had the heart attack that made the decision for me [laughter]. And I said, "The heck with it."

RHG: Did you...?

JCW: Plus, let's face it, Interior's not a place where you're worried about Presidential-like decisions every day.

RHG: Hm hhm.

JCW: The only real big decisions that involve the President over there are if you get into some real big money over there on projects.

RHG: We have a difficult time here understanding the way the White House ran under Haig. Because the Haldeman White House in our record has quite a definite identity. And, and at the very least....

JCW: Oh, it was powerful and it ran--well, as I was joking, the trains were always on time. Sometimes maybe the cars were empty, but we did have a system and there was a way of making decisions and they generally got made in an orderly fashion. I can't really comment on what Al, I mean, I don't know any more about the Nixon White House under Al Haig than I know about the Reagan White House. I just wasn't really part of it.

FJG: [Jeb S.] Magruder describes Haldeman's White House as Haldeman

demanding a hundred things by five o'clock, knowing he might get twenty-five of them.

JCW: Oh, I think there was some of that, yes. But things did get done. Haig, I had a lot of dealings with him when he was in the National Security Council, Henry's assistant. When I was in the Domestic Council we used to back and forth. I remember one time [laughter] we needed a lead for a farm speech and we didn't have one. All of a sudden, I've forgotten if Butz or Hardin was in, but one of them called me up and said he was sending in a boatload of corn to China. I said, "Great, we'll put that in the lead." So, in fact [Raymond K.] Price wrote the speech. And the President gave the speech. So I recognized that this went across the line of domestic policy. I've, I got a phone call out to Henry and I got a phone call out to Haig. Nobody called me back. So I sent the speech that Price has written, with my approval on it, to the staff secretary with a memo to the President that says that Kissinger has not seen this. I have not been able to clear it. I figured the President could get hold of Henry or Haig if I can't. The President gives the speech the next day, just the same way it had been written. Al calls me up and he was really pissed, and he says, "God damn it," he says, "for a lousy boat load of corn to China," he said, "you really screwed up foreign policy. Because we're in this delicate negotiation with the Chinese." We had just bombed the French Embassy [in Hanoi], I guess a couple of weeks before, by mistake. So I got mad at him, I said, "Al, when you stop bombing the French Embassy, I'll stop sending [laughter] corn to China" and put down the phone.

[Laughter]

[End Side One]

[Begin Side Two]

RHG: Mr. Whitaker, what about the Ehrlichman-George Shultz relationship?

JCW: Well, when John took over the Domestic Council, we really got into a position where the Cabinet government started to be more diluted and White House staff became stronger. We finally got organized. Before that we just had the Cabinet Secretary function and I was getting calls from all the Cabinet. We had no issue-solving organization, only this [Arthur] Burns vs. [Daniel Patrick] Moynihan thing you've all heard about. And Bob [Robert P.] Mayo was the budget man. Now, for reasons that I never understood, Bob never had the clout, the relationship with the President that Shultz later developed in the OMB [Office of Management and Budget] job. And Shultz became so strong and so respected by the President that the Ehrlichman staff began to wonder: is this going to be a problem or is this going to help the President? It turned out it helped the President. The two men got along. In our meetings, it used to be just with John, you know, on the Domestic Council--then the seven-fifteen or the seven-thirty meetings used to be John at one end of the table, George at the other and the OMB guys and the Domestic Council staff. And it worked. But it was clear that John had to share his power in a way he never had to share it before. But it was done with grace and, as far as I can tell, without a lot of fights between the two men. That's all. Somebody else may have

other impressions of that.

RHG: It does look to me that there's a potential for conflict between OMB and the Domestic Council.

JCW: Well, yes there is. Actually I think it worked very well. I mean it probably worked better in our time than any time since, from what I hear. Although I really can't be that objective about it. I can only speak about the natural resources part of it. For example, I used OMB, whose staff could give you all kinds of facts. They were very poor at boiling it down and they gave you no politics. No political guidance, or no warnings for the President. Not that they didn't understand them, because they had the institutional memory. But they just didn't feel that was their job. So, we would jointly write memos to the President. Don [Donald B.] Rice for example, the assistant director of the budget--he'd handle the natural resources as did Jim [James R.] Schlesinger before him--and I would write memos. We would jointly write them. Well, OMB had more of the substantive parts and I had more of the politics. That's the way it was. In that way, that marriage worked real well to produce a better product for the President. That's all. This President, my President, just could've never read those OMB memos. I mean, they just didn't have any zip in them. [Laughter] They didn't get to the point quickly.

FJG: What was striking to me and Ray is that we conceived of OMB as the old Bureau of the Budget, which was just a money-crunching,...

JCW: Hm hmm.

FJG: ...figures-crunching agency, and yet we're getting the impression from talking to you and talking to John Ehrlichman that there was even more substance there than we had thought.

JCW: Oh, the OMB is terrific. It's the only agency in town that cares about the President of the United States. Everybody else thinks about their constituency. Thank God for them. Without them, I mean they can give you all, they've got all kinds of substantive ability there. I think they're just one of the sharpest agencies in town--without them the President's just kinda naked. All he's got is his political cronies that have come to town with him, many of whom don't know the first damn thing about government. That's the nature of campaigns, they just come that way. If you don't rely on the OMB staff for substance, you're really lost, because then all you have is advocacy substance thrown at you by one of the departments.

RHG: You mean the departments take the point of view, points of view of their constituents.

JCW: Yes. Yes.

RHG: I guess it didn't start out to be that way. Presumably the Cabinet meetings were to be the President dealing with his advisors and....

JCW: Yes, but I just say flatly Cabinet government doesn't work. And it doesn't work because, first of all, the Cabinet officer hasn't got time to contribute a lot: he has too many other demands on him. Secondly, his staff has such limited information. They don't have any idea of what other agencies are thinking. And so many of the decisions are broader than one agency. So when the

Cabinet officers come to the table.... It works in this sense: you can get a small Cabinet committee together, you can take a couple of staffers if you can get them away from their Cabinet officers, and get them over in the White House for a couple of weeks (to change the environment, get them weened away) you can get something that's a little broader than what's going on in their own agency. Then you can get the two Cabinet officers together and present them the facts in a private meeting without the President there and often get one or the other to back off or to work out some compromise. So the President never sees it. And it's probably a pretty good product. [It] works that way. But most of the staff work gets done, unfortunately, in the White House. If they had bigger Departments and broader constituencies--which of course, was the intent of the Nixon reorganization plan--then it would work.

RHG: Right.

JCW: I think we would've had a chance for better Cabinet government-- that "Super Cabinet" idea really would have worked. Although it happened in the Watergate days, toward the end, so it never really had a chance.

RHG: Earl Butz and....

JCW: Well I used to see it working. For example, I'd come over to meetings with [Rogers C. B.] Morton. I was Rogers Morton's Undersecretary. But I'd go over [to] meetings that Dick [Richard M.] Fairbanks had set up (Dick replaced me on the Domestic Council) with Butz and Morton, and I'd be there as would Butz's Undersecretary. We'd work something out between us. The problem

never went to the President.

RHG: Hm hmm.

JCW: It was working pretty good.

RHG: Well now....

JCW: See Butz physically had an office over at EOB. He had my old office over in the Executive Office Building.

RHG: Well he was one of the counselors.

FJG: Right.

JCW: He was one of the "Super Cabinet".

RHG: Right.

JCW: Yes.

RHG: Who were the others to be? I don't know of any others....

JCW: [Caspar W.] Weinberger was one.

RHG: And he never got there. Oh, yes he did.

JCW: Yeah, he was there.

RHG: At one point, he was at the same time head of OMB and an Assistant to the President. I didn't realize that; I just found that out the other day.

JCW: Well....

RHG: He was still head of OMB though. He never left that position.

JCW: Yeah, but that's not the capacity I'm talking about. When Nixon reorganized the government, for example, he visualized the Department of Natural Resources that had a lot of things from Agriculture and Interior in it. So he acted like the Department existed...

RHG: Hm hmm.

JCW: ...by deciding that one of the two Cabinet officers would be

boss. He selected Butz, which made Morton unhappy. But anyway, he did it. So that, and he gave Butz an office over in the White House. And Morton would have to come over to see him.

[Laughter] See. And it really worked. And that was done with Weinberger, was given a....

FJG: HEW [Department of Health, Education and Welfare].

JCW: There was a "money Department," the Department of Economic Affairs. Who had that, Pete [Peter G.] Peterson? It was a lot more than just the Department of Commerce. It had pieces of HUD [Department of Housing and Urban Development] in it, it had a whole lot of grant programs.

RHG: And this was in that "Super Cabinet", in the White House?

JCW: Yeah.

RHG: Just one last question.

JCW: Yeah.

RHG: In retrospect, it looks like your appointment to the Interior Department and the "Super Cabinet" plan and something called approximately, the new Presidential initiative in OMB...

JCW: Yeah.

RHG: ...were all part of the same attempt to create something between the White House and the Cabinet. Something that was essentially functionally operated rather than operated by the constituency...

JCW: Right.

RHG: ...type of government.

JCW: Right, right. Exactly. Well now, there wasn't a willful intent to squeeze the Cabinet out, it's just they didn't, they didn't arrive at the table with the horsepower. They didn't have the

facts. Their Departments institutionally were framed, so that they couldn't have the facts.

RHG: Hm hm.

JCW: I recognized that as soon as I got on the other side of the table over at Interior. I get a call at seven o'clock at night from OMB saying, "We refuse to clear this one. Somebody's got to testify at ten o'clock in the morning." So all the staff from my office'd come running up and they'd give me all the reasons why OMB was wrong, but they didn't know any [of] the reasons why we might be wrong. So by then it would be eight o'clock before I could get the guy from OMB over there. And damn, he oftentimes had some pretty good arguments, things that no one ever told me about on their side on the case. Issues and facts our own people didn't know about. It's really frustrating how little you know because you get boxed in by your own people, who don't do it in an intentional way; it's just their universe. Just like you've got a constituency here which is liberal academia. It's life.

RHG: Well, conservative academia.... [Laughter]

JCW: Conservative academia too. [Laughter] There just aren't many conservatives in academia. [Laughter]

RHG: Actually you look at our regulations, and we provide our materials to anybody who's over sixteen years old.

JCW: [Laughter].

RHG: By themselves, so that's our constituency. Thank you very much, Mr. Whitaker.

JCW: O.K. Thank you.

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 conducted by Frederick J. Graboske and Raymond H. Geselbracht
 at the Nixon Presidential Materials Staff in Alexandria, Virginia
 on December 30, 1987

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