

**Timothy Naftali**

I'm Tim Naftali. I'm Director of the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum. I'm in Washington, D.C., it's March 27, 2008, and I have the honor and privilege to be interviewing Bill Safire for the Richard Nixon Oral History Program. Mr. Safire, thank you for participating.

**Bill Safire**

Glad to.

**Timothy Naftali**

You were a witness to the Kitchen Debate. Please tell us what you remember of the Kitchen Debate and why were you there in Moscow?

**Bill Safire**

It was my kitchen in a sense. I was the press agent. I was working for Tex McCrary, Inc., a PR firm in New York, and one of our clients, All State Properties, was a homebuilder. We had the idea of presenting at the U.S. Exhibition in Moscow, the typical American home, which was an \$11,000 house, similar to what you would find in Levittown in the very beginning. And so we built the house and by we, the builder built the house and I was the press agent, went along. We went to Moscow and Vice President Nixon opened the U.S. exhibit. And I was walking along with Premier Khrushchev and they went into the RCA Exhibit and had a debate. And Khrushchev wiped up the floor with him, I mean because Nixon was trying to be Mr. Nice Guy, and he was getting clobbered. And as he came out of that session in the television studio, he realized that that's what's going to be shown back home and showed him being pushed around trying to be Mr. Nice Guy.

And so I signaled to Major Don Hughes, who was leading them through the U.S. Exhibition to come to the American exhibit, the housing exhibit. And there was a fence in between where he was walking and the typical American house, and so I got a Jeep and we pulled up the fence and Nixon was signaled to come on in here. He immediately saw the opportunity and went into the kitchen with Khrushchev and engaged in a debate. That debate in the kitchen, I was a press agent and I thought to myself, here is Harrison Salisbury sitting outside, for the "New York Times," and who's going to believe me that -- what happened in that kitchen. But he was a great reporter and so I said to the Russian guards, "I want him in." And they said, "What is he?" And I said, "He's the refrigerator demonstrator." So we slipped him in. And then the AP photographer wanted to come in and I said, "He's the garbage disposal unit man," and there was no garbage disposal unit in the kitchen and so they wouldn't let him in. So he lobbed the expensive Linhoff camera, he just lobbed it into the kitchen. And I got the picture of Nixon arguing with Khrushchev and there was a pushy Russian trying to get into the middle of the picture. And I kept trying to get him out, but I couldn't get him out, so he's in the picture. That was Brezhnev, and he came by later.

So at the end of the session, everybody pulled out and Nixon said to me, "We really put your kitchen on the map, didn't we?" showing a certain understanding of public relations. And I said, "You bet." And Harrison Salisbury said, "We're going to call it the Sokolniki Summit." Sokolniki Park was the

name of the place where in Moscow the U.S. Exhibition was being held. Well nobody elected Sukolniki so I said, "You mean the kitchen conference," which had the benefit of alliteration. And he paid me back for letting me in by calling it then the Kitchen Conference. And so our kitchen became famous. And on the way out, Nixon said, "Come on over to Spaso House, let's talk," because he figured I was a good flack. And so that night we talked and that next year, 1960, I went to work for his campaign.

### Timothy Naftali

Tell us about your recollections of the election night 1960. Where were you?

### Bill Safire

I was upstairs, I remember, and I didn't get invited in. And that was a long night that Kennedy said, "No class," because Nixon didn't volunteer his concession. I felt left out. I'd been working there, you know, right from the start, but I was not invited in to the quiet little room where the insiders were. So I was miffed about that, but everybody was quite unhappy the next morning because we all hoped that California, when finally the returns would come in would turn the thing around. And I remember talking to Len Hall, who was the campaign chairman, and he said, "We're going to protest this thing," that what they were doing in Cook County and in Texas, we could turn the whole thing around. And I waited for him, you know he came out and said, "Nixon's not going to go for it. He's going to concede the election." So that was a disappointment.

### Timothy Naftali

Seven years later, you are in with the inner circle in Suite 31A, the Waldorf Towers, January '67; important, seems to me, to the discussion. Tell us a little bit about what you remember of that and why were you there? At that point you'd made it into the inner circle -- it seemed that you had.

### Bill Safire

Yes, that was Herbert Hoover's suite at the Waldorf Towers, which Nixon particularly chose because he had been in that suite, meeting with Hoover. And you know, Hoover's not recommended as a great campaigner, but Nixon had that sense of history. And so when he had Bob Finch and Bob Ellsworth and Len Garment and a few of the others at that meeting, I remember I walked in and he said, "This is Safire, he was with us in '60, completely trustworthy, but watch what you say, he's a writer." And everybody smiled, but nobody watched what they said because I was an old-timer. You know I'd been there back in '60 so I had earned my spurs with Nixon.

However, as the campaign developed, hierarchies were built in and fences were put in, as they had to be. I found myself assigned to the black vote. How do you get African-Americans to vote Republican and for Nixon, because they certainly weren't, but there were African-American -- well, they were called Negroes then, with a capital N. There were black Republicans, that's a phrase that goes back to the Civil War, black Republican. And so I was asked to help contact the various church groups and did so. That was one of my assignments. And I later found out why I was picked for that. "Amos 'n' Andy" was a famous radio program and there was somebody called the Kingfish in that, one of the characters, and he was married to a woman named Sapphire. And one of the famous lines of "Amos 'n' Andy" was, "Hello there, Sapphire." And so I would get the calls from all over the country that always

began, "Hello there, Safire," and that was considered an advantage in dealing with the black Republican groups. But that was not my main job. My main job was, essentially, speech writing.

**Timothy Naftali**

Before we talk about your main job, can I ask you about Jackie Robinson?

**Bill Safire**

Yeah, my brother Len went to UCLA with Jackie Robinson, and he was nine years older than me, and so I met him a few times when he was a football star at UCLA. And then during the campaign, I would -- he was pro-Nixon and would speak up for Nixon and was an important voice for him in a community that wasn't for Nixon and that was gravitating toward Kennedy rapidly. And it was, I think, at a dial Dick Nixon event in Detroit or Cleveland or some Midwestern city, when -- it was a call-in show. And Peter Flanigan and David Mahoney and I were there and putting on this question and answer thing with Bud Wilkinson, and in the hotel I saw Jackie Robinson come in, rather tense because Martin Luther King was jailed and the question was, "What should the Nixon campaign do to establish some kind of rapport with Martin Luther King, Jr.?" And I argued strongly for, "Send Jackie in to see Nixon and let him make the case because he is persuasive, he's a friend, and he's an important supporter and nobody could make it better."

So he went in. I gave him a good luck sign and 20 minutes later he came out with tears in his eyes and said, "He just won't do it," and he left. And I asked, you know, "He's got to do something," because Kennedy -- I'm sure Kennedy's doing something. And I think he said something like, "I'll appear at one of the functions, but I won't join the march," or "I won't make a call." "I won't join the march" was later about Coretta King. But on this one he thought it would be, and I'll never forget the word he used "grandstanding" to call on him in jail the way Kennedy was. And now that was a mistake politically, and of course, any mistake you made in the course of that campaign you say, "Well if only he had done this, then he would have been President." And Watergate would've happened eight years earlier.

So it wasn't the thing that changed the campaign, but it was one of those mistakes that he made. I think he recognized that later on and both Len Garment and Ray Price were able to get him to go along with a really good speech called "Bridges to Human Dignity" that Ray drafted and Len had a lot to do with it, that also with Pat Moynihan that laid out an approach to bringing together the country. Now "bring us together" is another story, but you'll get to that.

**Timothy Naftali**

In '68, Robinson didn't support -- he was supporting Nelson Rockefeller, I think. Did you have any interaction with Jackie Robinson [inaudible]?

**Bill Safire**

That was, let's see, he had worked with Rockefeller in the, throughout the '60s because he was a New Yorker, and I handled the Rockefeller -- I did a lot of public relations for the Rockefeller Campaign for reelection as governor. I had worked for him in 1964 against Goldwater, but Jackie was pretty clearly pro-Rockefeller and not pro-Nixon.

**Timothy Naftali**

Did you participate at all in the decision that Nixon made to go to Atlanta for Martin Luther King's funeral?

**Bill Safire**

No.

**Timothy Naftali**

So let's talk about your main responsibility in the '68 campaign, which was speech writing. Tell us a bit about the stable of writers that they had. You were not alone as a speech writer.

**Bill Safire**

Absolutely. There were essentially three leading speech writers: Ray Price, who had been the Chief Editorial Writer of the "New York Herald Tribune" and who had, was on the liberal side of the Republican party; and Pat Buchanan, who I met in the Nixon law offices, the Nixon Mudge, and Pat Nixon, was there as a receptionist, telephone operator and she would take calls and identify herself as Pat Ryan, her maiden name. And I remember one time when somebody said, "Look, I've got to speak to somebody close to the candidate." And she said, "I can take the message and I'll get it to him," but she never said who she was. And Pat was there, and he was hired from the "St. Louis Globe Democrat" where he was writing a tough, good right wing editorials. And I had arranged for Nixon to do a series of columns for the North American Newspaper Alliance, and it was a good outlet for a lot of papers and Pat Buchanan took the job of writing those as well as contributing to speeches.

Nixon could write his own speech so there was never a problem of handing him a speech and having him read it. He was right in there in the beginning saying this is what I want to say and this is how I want to say it. So in the beginning, the three of us, Ray, and Pat, and I were the, what later became the three thorns in the Rose Garden, and Len Garment had a lot to do with speeches, and then he brought, then Nixon had these three guys who were -- came at things somewhat differently and were not good administrators. We were, you know, writers. So he brought on Jim Keogh, who had been the managing editor of "Time" magazine and was a great editor. And it was not a problem with any of us because he was a generation older and he was an editor, he wasn't competing. So he would then hand out the assignments and we would write them and he would make whatever minor changes that he made, and leave it to Nixon to either make a lot of changes and work with the assigned writer or say, "I want a different approach on this one. "I'm dealing with a liberal audience so I don't want to deal with a liberal speech writer on this one. "I want to deal with a rightist or a centrist," or as I identified myself, as "an opportunist." And so he would cast it as a casting director saying, "I know where he stands, but I don't want that, I want this." Or I would submit a speech on Vietnam or whatever and he'd want it toughened up and so he would go to Pat Buchanan.

**Timothy Naftali**

How did you -- so he was the one that was deciding, obviously, the message, because the three of you would've approached an issue differently.

**Bill Safire**

Not that -- maybe I accentuated that too much. We were all Nixon people, and we knew how he thought. So it wasn't a liberal, a conservative, and a centrist. But I just, that's the general leaning and it's a question of gradation.

**Timothy Naftali**

I ask that because there was a tremendous intellectual debate in the first year of the administration personified by Moynihan and Burns, and it's phenomenally interesting to talk to people who were on both sides of this. Where did the three of you or where were the three of you in that debate?

**Bill Safire**

Well I don't know about the other two, but I remember I liked both Moynihan and Burns and worked with them. And it was George Shultz who came up with the answer for the working poor that appealed to both Moynihan and Burns. He was -- he synthesized the difference of opinion and changed [unintelligible] and because I had worked with Shultz on a couple of speeches, he pulled me in and Nixon said, "So I worked on the Welfare Reform, and I thought I came up with the Work Fare," a great idea. But it turned out -- years later I found out that Walter Reuther's brother Roy had coined that term six months before. I missed that. But the wonderful thing about Shultz was he could synthesize these brilliant ideas of two brilliant men who disagreed. And instead of the clash happening, and you just choose one or the other, he came up with something that both could live with.

**Timothy Naftali**

What role did you play in crafting the Inaugural Address in 1969?

**Bill Safire**

I think I was not the primary speech writer on that, that was, I think, Ray. In a case like that, we all were asked by Keogh, submit passages of what do you think would go in. And I believe I was the one, it's coming back to me now, the "I see" construction. I remembered FDR had done a speech, the One-Third of the Nation speech, and I read that because Nixon told all of us, "Read all the Inaugural Addresses." And the three of us came in with Keogh and the first question, I think Nixon asked was, "Did you read Polk's Inaugural?" And it was either Pat or I said, "I was absent the day we had Polk's Inaugural." And Nixon said, "Well read it because he talks about President of all the people." Interesting, okay, and I submitted the "I see an America where." Now, I'm not sure if he did in the Inaugural, but he did it in one of his major speeches and I took it from an FDR speech, "I see an America where an ill-clothed one-third of a nation," and so I wrote my "Vision of America." And he took it and kept the construction and then put his own vision, which is the perfect way to do a speech.

You use a speech writer for a construction or a device and then make it your own. And after the speech was given, and again I don't remember if it's the Inaugural, but it was some big, visionary speech, I remember Sam Rosenman, who I had interviewed once when I was a "New York Herald Tribune" reporter, and I invited him down to the White House. And I had read his book "Working with Roosevelt." And he came and looked around the White House mess and said, "I remember the

White House mess when it was one Filipino waiter and a little hot plate." And here was this fancy mess that Haldeman had built. And he told us all, "Remember, you're knocking yourselves out -- but remember, this is the high point of your life, and it'll never be more than this. And savor it while you're doing it and you're knocking yourselves out," good point. So I called him up after the speech and I said, "Hey, I stole your construction, the 'I see America where.'" And he said, "Oh, don't feel bad about that." "Look up a speech by Robert Ingersoll in 1864 or 5 and you'll see a similar." And there it was, "I see an America," and then I found Kennedy later, "I look forward to an American where," it's been done dozens of times. It's not plagiarism; it's the echoes of history.

**Timothy Naftali**

That's wonderful. Before we leave the '68 campaign, tell me about, you show particular interest in your book about the Chennault Case. What do you remember of that really tense period near the end of the campaign and the role that Vietnam was playing?

**Bill Safire**

Well, the Dragon Lady --

**Timothy Naftali**

Yes.

**Bill Safire**

-- Mrs. Chennault, Anna Chennault was a go-between, there's no doubt about it. And John Mitchell, the campaign Manager, was using her. I'm a little fuzzy about the details here. But I remember she and "Tommy the Cork," Thomas Corcoran, were great friends and so she had contacts on all sides of political Washington and I did a statement, the "ducks in a row" statement, criticizing Lyndon Johnson for not having his ducks in a row and Finch took it and he went out and used it rather than give it to Nixon to use it because it would've been too excessively partisan. Foreign policy thing -- very sensitive at the time. Now did -- was there an attempt to say, "Do not make peace until after Nixon gets in?" I never saw anything that would suggest that. I'm sure you could make a case for it by just saying they didn't do this and they did this later and --

**Timothy Naftali**

We're talking about Thieu. We're talking about the South Vietnamese Government.

**Bill Safire**

Yeah.

**Timothy Naftali**

Tell us about Election Night 1968. Were you confident this time?

**Bill Safire**

The Election Night I particularly remember was '66 when we were all in a hotel suite together, and Nixon had been reborn thanks to the "chronic campaigner" crack by Lyndon Johnson, which I had a hand in provoking. When Johnson came back with the Manila communiqué and everyone was, you know praising him for it. And Nixon needed an opening and I saw somewhere in the communiqué a mistake, a misconception, or a blunder of some kind, which I have forgotten at the moment. So I wrote a statement for Nixon analyzing the Manila communiqué. He then rewrote it, you know, and gave it more punch and said, "See if you can get it in the 'New York Times.'" And I was a press agent then and so I took it -- funny I told you about the Harrison Salisbury and the Kitchen Debate. I took it to Harrison Salisbury because he was one of the editors of the "New York Times" then and said, "Here's a statement by Nixon critiquing the Manila communiqué. And he read it and said, "This is substantive."

Now was he doing me a favor to return the favor for letting him in the kitchen? Who knows, but at any rate he not only did a story on it, but ran the text. Now when he ran the text in the "New York Times," that was saying something. This was important stuff. And when Lyndon Johnson saw it, the text of Nixon's thing printed, he went through the rough and denounced Nixon as a chronic campaigner. Nice alliteration, headline, and suddenly Nixon was lifted into a mano a mano against Lyndon Johnson. This was in 1966. Well, that was important. And that did me a lot of good with Nixon that I was not just an economics writer or an American vision dream writer, but I could do some work in the foreign affairs.

**Timothy Naftali**

I'm going to ask you about a few speeches from the Presidential period. Tell us the story of the Apollo, a speech that he never had to give regarding Apollo 11.

**Bill Safire**

The speech that never was. That was a moving night. Before that, Peter Flanigan was given the job of pulling together the group to deal with the moon shot and the astronaut Frank Borman was involved. He was our liaison with NASA. And we were all asked to contribute ideas for the -- first the plaque that goes on the moon, a big argument about that. I said we have to have some kind of religious thing involved. And so we managed to get A.D. put in: Anno Domini. It wasn't overtly religious, but it had Domini in there, God. And then I said, you know someone of the astronauts got to take a Bible with them and Frank Borman said, "Absolutely, don't worry. We'll get one of them to do that." And then, so then the big moment came.

We all submitted suggested remarks for the talk between Nixon and Tranquility Base. And I said, "Hey, they're calling it Tranquility Base, there's your angle." So he immediately picked up on it and used that. But beforehand I said, well as the planning was still going on before the actual shot, I said to Frank Borman -- no, Frank Borman said, "What about in the event that this doesn't work out well." I don't know how he put it. I think I wrote down how he put it. And I said, "What do you mean?" And he said, "Well what do we say to the widows?" All of a sudden we all look at each other and, my God, if this thing ends with them not being able to get off the moon back into the module, what happens to them? They'll starve to death, or they'll have to commit suicide or whatever. And you're not going to stay focused on them while they starve to death so you have to close it off. And I had written, no, I

hadn't written a concession speech. No, I never wrote concession speeches beforehand, but I thought - this was in the event of a disaster, you couldn't suddenly say, what do we do now?

So I remembered a poetic line or two, and so I wrote a statement and gave it to Haldeman and he put it in his pocket, and didn't show it to anybody. And thank God it wasn't necessary. And years later, 20 years later, I got a call from the National Archives saying, "We're having an exhibit, and we've got your draft of a statement in case of moon disaster." And I went down to the National Archives, and there was the Emancipation Proclamation and John Wayne's application to the CIA to be a spy, and right in the middle was my little one-page draft statement, which all of a sudden became part of history. So certainly nothing I ever wrote that was spoken was as important as what was never spoken.

### Timothy Naftali

That's a very moving statement, and I'm glad it never had to be used. Let's -- I'm going to ask you about a few slogans. Tell me where they came from. "Peace with honor," where did that come from?

### Bill Safire

I think that was Disraeli. I've just done my revision of my "Safire's Political Dictionary," a book whose title I really like and I've got peace with honor there going back through British history and the attacks on peace with honor as being a cover up for excessive concessions. I think Woodrow Wilson picked it up too and used it.

### Timothy Naftali

Who brought it into the Nixon lexicon?

### Bill Safire

I probably did, because it was a phrase that I'd been working on for my dictionary.

### Timothy Naftali

Let's talk about silent center and how it becomes silent majority.

### Bill Safire

That one I would have to tell you to go take a look at my dictionary too, because I really did a careful job of seeing how that came about. The silent majority is an old phrase meaning dead people. You know the great -- to join the silent majority means to die and go on and become part of a cemetery. But that was not the meaning we had in mind at all. And I think Agnew had used it, I didn't write it, in passing in a speech and nobody ever caught it and it wasn't important. But it shows that a phrase can be around, can be perking along, and suddenly when a President uses it at a propitious moment, it's striking a match in a gas filled room and suddenly the silent majority became the moniker for the people who were following Nixon who were not necessarily politically involved, not Republican, but underestimated and inarticulate and not covered by the media, the evil media. When we use the word press, that's good because the press is in the Constitution, the media is manipulative and lefty.

**Timothy Naftali**

You did not write the Cambodia speech, I know, but you did participate in an interesting discussion in 1970 about Cambodia, actually, a very heated discussion.

**Bill Safire**

Yeah, we were called into the Roosevelt Room and Henry Kissinger was there, he was the central person and Don Rumsfeld, who I think was then the war on poverty and a few others and Herb Klein and discussing how to get the word out and to support the President's speech, but surrogates and public opinion following the incursion. I was particularly interested in the word "incursion," but that we wouldn't talk about invasion. And there's a difference between invasion and incursion. Essentially, an incursion being temporary, and yet it wasn't a raid. So that was my, I don't know a reason for being there, but I was there. Then Rumsfeld had the temerity to challenge Kissinger and say, "But this -- doesn't this fly in the face of the Nixon Doctrine?" And Henry, fists like that said, "We wrote the goddamned doctrine, we can change it." And that shut everybody up.

**Timothy Naftali**

Why were you not selected to write the Cambodia speech? Pat Buchanan, I believe wrote that speech.

**Bill Safire**

I'm not sure about that, but if you research it, I believe it. It could have been the luck of the draw, it could have been that he saw me, the President saw me as somewhat brittle. He used that word brittle once, and maybe not the believer that Pat was in the wisdom of that move.

**Timothy Naftali**

Did you have any -- did you have any bull sessions with the President? I mean how did -- it's important for a speechwriter to interact with the candidate and President. How did that work? Did he call you in on occasion to sit with him and --

**Bill Safire**

Once in a great while, he would always, almost always after a major speech that you worked on, call you afterwards and tell you, you know, this worked and that didn't work, and it'd give you a wonderful feeling to be acknowledged after the speech. And I remember I went down in Stone Mountain with Agnew or somebody and he had given a speech that I worked on in Washington. And he called me to discuss it and that was a good feeling, you know, you don't just get your stuff forgotten quickly that you had anything to do with it. So he would analyze a speech, what worked and what didn't work, which is very helpful. Once in a blue moon, I guess in '68, I remember he had nobody to talk to. Manolo had gone to sleep and it was around midnight or 12:30 and he felt like talking, and I was there. And Haldeman or somebody said, "Hey, we're all shot, you know, go talk to the old man. He can't get to sleep." So I went. He had a drink in his hand and he would nurse a drink, clink the ice in it until there was no clinking, till it all melted. So he was not a fast drinker. But two drinks and he -- his voice would become slurred and he was quite relaxed. And then he would reminisce, or he would open himself up. And naturally, afterwards I went down and wrote down everything I could remember

because some day, you know as he said, "Watch what you say, he's a writer." And those episodes I recorded in my book, and I think I showed him as a relaxed and sometimes easygoing man, and sometimes introspective.

### Timothy Naftali

You recount in the book about a similar discussion with him in 1970, where he's almost plaintive. He's talking about how he will be remembered, and he's thinking about Kennedy.

### Bill Safire

Yes, I was a little cruel there. And he said, "How do you think I'll be remembered? Gee, what did I say, "competent," or "managerial," or something like that. I don't remember the actual thing, and then he didn't like that at all and he went down the list of Presidents and how they are remembered. You know Truman, a fighter, and on down the list. I don't want to rely on my recollection. I wrote it down, and I kept it there. And boy am I glad I wrote that book before the fall. I wrote it right after I left. I had been hired by the "Times," so I was writing three columns a week, and at night I would be taking all my notes and I'd put down, I crumpled up papers all the time whenever anything happened like that, I would write something like that and throw it in the lower right-hand drawer. And then when I left, I smoothed out all of those crumpled notes and was able to reconstitute a lot of the things. I did not know that it was being recorded while I was there, and fortunately, I'd learned some brief forms and shorthand in school and so I was able to get a lot of the things down cold, particularly the meeting at Camp David about the suspension, convertibility of the dollar into gold and wage and price controls and all that.

So I got all that down and later on when you compared my notes to the tape, pretty good. I mean I got most of the important things. And so I wrote the book right then when it was hot in my mind, and that's the time to do it, because six months or a year later, it fuzzes over and you don't remember that vividly what was going on. So ever since then I would tell speech writers, "Write it down, all the poignant things and the stuff that you can't reconstruct, and the funny things, the footnotes, because that's what historians are fascinated by." And the -- the grand stuff you can get from all the papers and you reconstruct it. The question then they say, "Well what if you take notes, and make a diary and then something comes up, and there's an investigation and all of a sudden you've got to spill everything." And the answer is, you don't say, "Now let's sit down and do a cover up." You take down what will jog your memory.

### Timothy Naftali

You have a chapter in the book, "Seeds of Watergate," and it's a discussion of Thomas Charles Huston. Tell us why he matters to understanding Watergate.

### Bill Safire

Well he, a very bright young man, was the head of Young Americans for Freedom, I think, and were brought in by Pat Buchanan. And he came up with the Huston Plan, which sort of went down the line with the FBI for a vigorous, I would say abuse of privacy on a lot of people's part. But he and I tangled intellectually on the New Federalism. I wrote a paper at Haldeman's invitation. He said, "Hey, we're not getting enough philosophical depth to this administration." So I said, "All right, I'll -- I remember

Publius was a great Greek or Latin pseudonym. So I wrote a Publius paper saying essentially that our philosophy of government was to establish great goals, national goals, and try to get them administered by localities and provide the revenue through revenue sharing so that the Localities could do it, which is a centrist idea, a combination of national thinking and local administration. And Huston, quite legitimately said, "This is not our philosophy at all. We're not going to dictate to the localities, they should bubble up from underneath." And this is democratic thinking on it. And so he wrote, he called himself Cato and wrote a refutation of that. Well that was terrific, you know here were two guys playing with the great philosophy and I think that mine better reflected Nixon, and then Nixon's approach to governing. But then later, the Huston plan became circulated as evidence of nefarious thinking in the White House and he was, I think, unduly zapped by people who were out to get Nixon.

### Timothy Naftali

Tell us about the layer cake metaphor. Is that something that you conceived early in your acquaintanceship with Nixon, or is it something that you thought about afterwards while you were pulling all your notes together and writing the book?

### Bill Safire

I thought about it early and I used it with my mother once, but just in its metaphoric gestation, and then laded it. The idea was this, you would always hear, "What's he really like?" You know, "What's Nixon like?" We see these terrible things about him and yet you say he's nice to -- and you work with him. And so I said, "He's like a layer cake and the top layer is patriot, and beneath that there's mild paranoia, and beneath that there's very good to people who work with him and thoughtful and not at all abusive, and underneath that the hard liner." So in terms of personal relationships and family relationships, and official family relationships, you had this different kind of guy. And in terms of willingness to go along with break-ins and things like that, somebody else. But the trouble is you cannot separate these things out. And I said, "If you want to say what was he really like?" You've got to take your fork and cut down, right down the seven or eight layers and then take a spoonful or whatever it is and you see the confluence of flavors. And that, of course, is why Nixon is still the subject of plays, and movies, and dramas, and controversy. And biographers go back and, of course, he did make possible more biographical information than anybody ever wanted to, and so why 50 years from now, somebody looking over what you're doing is going to be able to say, "On this one we really have a chance to look inside and see the complexities of this man."

### Timothy Naftali

You'd said something earlier, if he had been elected in '60, do you think Watergate would have happened in the late '60s?

### Bill Safire

That was there, yeah. And he did have that "us against Them" philosophy, and it was ingrained in him because them was indeed against us. And he'd had that rough treatment and gave it back. And so coming out of that, I think the last line in my book written back in '73 was a line that I didn't write, no speech writer wrote for him, but what he said on the way out to the staff, I'm paraphrasing now that, "If you hate the people who hate you, then you destroy yourself." And that was a great lesson that he learned and internalized. And that, I think, sums up after Watergate, after reaching the heights and then

hitting the depths. He took that out and if there's a lesson to be made about today in 2008, you cannot react with hatred against the people who hate you, you've got to understand them and deal with it.

**Timothy Naftali**

Do you think the Clintons learned that?

**Bill Safire**

No, it's -- well, I shouldn't say that because I don't know the Clintons. I called her a congenial liar. And now that I look back and she immediately seized on congenial and said that it was an insult to her mother that she received it through the genes. And I then took a line from Mark Russell, the comedian and said, "I had never called her a congenial liar. I called her a congenial lawyer." And then when I said that at a function that she and I were both on, some Epilepsy Foundation thing, a roast, and she laughed at that and came up and with no benefit of speech writer, said that, "You know, everybody's reported that President Nixon had said that if I weren't President, I would punch Safire in the nose." And she said, "Similarly, that was a mistake because what he said was, 'Safire writes pitiful prose.'" And we all laughed and buried the hatchet on that. So I'm of -- I was about to say I'm of two minds about the Clintons, but I'm of two minds about the word ambivalent and I think that he conned a lot of people of a lot and it's best exemplified in the meaning of "is." And I write about that in my dictionary, the derivation of the meaning of is is.

**Timothy Naftali**

Back to '73 --

**Bill Safire**

Mm-hmm.

**Timothy Naftali**

You write this book in '73. In '74, the smoking gun tape comes out. You couldn't have known about it in '73, obviously. Did it surprise you? Were you surprised by the end game? What happened in '74, the things you've learned that --

**Bill Safire**

Yeah, yeah, no doubt about it. There I was, writing in the "New York Times," this was all going to blow over, and that he would come through. That was in April and May of '73, because I just didn't see the potential for stupidity. And, you know it was a stupid thing that was being done, and I guess it's a combination of stupidity and venality, but I think and most people attribute most of it to venality. But I think that this was just a blind spot, and it came from that background of no real concern for privacy, which was surprising because he represented the Hills, the case against "Life" magazine on invasion of privacy. But it was in privacy from the press, not privacy from the government. And my view has always been privacy period.

**Timothy Naftali**

In your book, you say that you only learned later the extent to which Nixon detested the press, that this was, you didn't really understand.

**Bill Safire**

Well, I did -- no, I think in my chapter on "The Press is the Enemy," I make it pretty clear that he had a real feeling about it, and Herb Klein and I didn't know he [unintelligible] [Do you hear "he's a bigot" or "he'd obey it"?] You know, and Haldeman also would occasionally listen to a tirade and say, "That's a tirade." You know, I'll pass the word on to Bill or to Herb Klein, and it won't happen. And so you can be misled by the tapes themselves, unless you're listening to what he was thinking instead of what he was saying. I'm not ameliorating what was said. The same thing came up with the anti-Semitic cracks that astounded Garment and Herb Stein and Arthur Burns and all of us who were Jewish, you know with him and given great authority and opportunity by him, and we never heard him say that kind of stuff. But he would say it in the room with Haldeman, Ehrlichman, or others, and then when it came to Israel, he was a strong supporter because he felt the Israelis had moxie, using an old-fashioned word about a drink, a soft drink. And so when you asked, "How can you -- didn't it really affect your opinion of Nixon?" Some, yeah, and it was disappointing, but he wasn't anti-Semitic. To be anti-Semitic, it means to hate Jews, and he certainly didn't. Now what was -- going back to your question?

**Timothy Naftali**

But help us, how would you explain these -- these discussions with Haldeman and the concern about Jews and the Bureau of Labor statistics? Where does that come from? How do you explain it?

**Bill Safire**

He saw Jews as liberals, as New Yorkers, as people who have been against him from the start. And he would look at Garment and Herb Stein and me as exceptions, but it was liberals that he hated. You shouldn't hate, but it was liberals and Jews in Hollywood and New York were part of the target. But I don't go for this, "Some of my best friends are Jews," argument, but in this case I think it was the towel snapping, locker room kind of anti-Semitism, and not the something he thought of or something he carried out on.

**Timothy Naftali**

Do you recall a conversation, I know it's a long time ago, but you may, with Magruder. You and Buchanan talked to Magruder, it's October '72, where Magruder tries to spin Watergate.

**Bill Safire**

Gee, I don't recall that.

**Timothy Naftali**

If you don't, it's okay. Do you recall --

**Bill Safire**

I do recall -- I ran into Larry Higby in a restaurant here in Washington last week, and I suddenly thought of a memo I got from Higby about a speech, saying the speech had been made and what -- "Can you give me a list of six superlatives to describe the speech that we can pass on to people." So I sent him back a memo saying, "Somebody has used your name to write a parody of a memo from Higby. And I just thought I should call it to your attention because obviously you couldn't have written this kind of stuff." And then I got a call back from Haldeman saying, "Come on now. Of course he sent it and don't be a wise guy and give us what we need to have." So I sent him back a thing saying, "Great speech." But I recalled that to Higby and he said, "You know who wrote those memos?" I presume he felt that they were dictated to Haldeman from R.N. himself.

**Timothy Naftali**

Do you recall a conversation you had with Mitchell in 1973? Mitchell, you saw him as a bit of a tragic figure.

**Bill Safire**

A telephone conversation?

**Timothy Naftali**

I think -- I think you saw him. You talked to him about Watergate and --

**Bill Safire**

I'd left and I'd worked for the "Times," and I called him up. Or he called me, and alerted me to what he said were the White House horrors. And I hadn't heard that expression before. That troubled me, you know, what were the White House horrors he was talking about, beyond what Woodward and Bernstein had written in the "Post." And then when he went to jail, I think I wrote a letter to his warden, urging his early release. Because I knew some of the things that his family were involved with. And then after he got out, we had lunch, the day before he died. And he was grateful for the way I stuck by him and for what I'd written about him in my book. I had an interesting chapter about him, that he was a romantic figure nobody would have thought of. But he was a romantic figure in the -- in a meaning of the word. And he was a good man who made some big mistakes and got bitten badly as a result.

**Timothy Naftali**

We haven't mentioned much about Henry Kissinger. And in Kissinger's memoirs, "Sea of Words," he's angry at you. It's the summer of 1974, he's just been to Salzburg. You write a piece in the "Times" criticizing detente. And he thinks that Nixon has put you up to this, because at the time there's a lot of tension -- there's always tension between these two, but especially in the summer of '74. The Presidency is coming apart. Do you remember this at all?

**Bill Safire**

Well, I remember my relationship there was -- we really liked each other when we were working in the White House. And I remember a walk we took in Prague together. And we said his relationship with Bill Rogers were -- "It's like Israel," he said. "I can, you know, win all these wars, but all he has to win is one. And I've had it." And so we were fairly close. And then when I left the White House, we had a big altercation over the Kurds. He felt that he had to support the Shah, who had just double-crossed the Kurds with Saddam Hussein. And lots of them were killed. And I had some Kurdish friends and they came to me and they showed me what was going on. And I blamed Henry for making that deal with the Shah. And he felt that I was doing that because he thought I thought that he was responsible for my wiretap. Well, he was partly responsible for my wiretap. But -- and I didn't like that wiretap at all. But that wasn't the basic impetus for my criticism of his abandonment of the Kurdish people.

We disagreed about that for a long time. And he, I think, wrote a letter demanding I be fired to Clifton Daniel, or a memo or something, or said it to him and Daniel passed it on to Punch Sulzberger. And I didn't hear about that for a year, two years. Then finally I heard about it. And I went to Punch and said, "I hear that the Secretary of State wanted me canned." And he said, "You know, you got good sources." And I said, "Well, why didn't you tell me about it." And he said, "You don't seem to understand. My job is to absorb that and not pass it on," which raised me high -- which raised him high in my estimation as a great publisher. And as the years went by, Henry and I buried the hatchet, and we're good friends now.

**Timothy Naftali**

Where were you the day the President resigned?

**Bill Safire**

I was in the city room of "The New York Times," August ninth. And the flash came across, and everybody got up and cheered. And I just stood there looking at the ticker. And Abe Rosenthal came over, he was the executive editor, and put his arm around me and said, "This must be a tough moment for you." That's all he said. And -- but I remember that moment.

**Timothy Naftali**

And how did you feel? Was it a tough moment?

**Bill Safire**

You bet, because, you know, you don't just remember that moment, you remember it in the light of the kitchen conference and the good times and the opportunities and the defenses that you put up against attacks -- hateful attacks. And he did a lot for me in opening up doors for my life, and so I felt down. That was a down moment.

**Timothy Naftali**

Three more questions, then I'll let you go. When did you find out that he was going to go to China? How did you find out?

**Bill Safire**

I wasn't in that one. I found out like most everybody else found out. It was a tightly held secret. And I think he always felt a little guilty that he didn't take me along. He took Buchanan along to show the right wing that, by God, he wasn't going to give up anything. And then afterwards when I went to China, he sent a nice letter to the Chinese government and made it easy for me.

**Timothy Naftali**

Well, isn't that in the air though? Wasn't he sending signals in the late '60s?

**Bill Safire**

Oh yeah --

**Timothy Naftali**

I mean, it wouldn't have surprised you?

**Bill Safire**

No, the piece he wrote in "Foreign Affairs" with, I think, Ellsworth and Ray Price augured that.

**Timothy Naftali**

In 1968, you were asked to write a piece about his political philosophy. Help us, what was his political philosophy?

**Bill Safire**

Well, that's what I was taking to you about the Publius.

**Timothy Naftali**

Yes.

**Bill Safire**

The New Federalist.

**Timothy Naftali**

Yeah, the New Federalism.

**Bill Safire**

And in my dictionary there's a good example of how that came about and what it stood for. So I won't go into it --

**Timothy Naftali**

No, no, no, okay.

**Bill Safire**

It's all there.

**Timothy Naftali**

Now, his comeback after the Presidency, to what extent did you play a role? Did you talk to him?

**Bill Safire**

Oh, sure.

**Timothy Naftali**

Tell us about that.

**Bill Safire**

Marvin Kalb did a book on the Nixon memo. So after it was all over, I visited him in San Clemente. And there I was on the outside writing columns. And I didn't hate Nixon like most people who I dealt with in the media did. And I defended him. Then I would have a session with him at least once a year; a long session, two or three hours, just going over how he felt about pro football, because he saw it as a combination of strategy and power, and how he applied it later. He was able to pick the winner of the Super Bowl fantastically. And China, and where that was going -- and he and I disagreed about that, and he knew it. Because he felt that if you opened up China and you let the natural entrepreneurial drive of the Chinese free, that would ultimately lead to capitalism, and capitalism toward freedom and democracy. And I just didn't see that at all. You know, they've got a long history and it's always been autocratic. And, you know, it's a great dream, and maybe it'll work, but it hasn't worked so far. So we disagreed about that. And then we agreed to disagree about Israel and the Palestinians. And he pointed that out to me a little bit. He'd always say, "Look, you and I disagree about this, Bill, but for God's sake, you got to do this and you got to make a deal." And I was a starker -- I was a hard liner, and more hard line than he was. So we disagreed about that.

But generally speaking, aside from those two rather important parts of foreign policy, he would explain what was going on in the world and I would then write a column and say, you know, I'd talked to him. And then when he wrote a memo and circulated it to a bunch of friends, I knew that that meant he would like to see it get widely circulated. And I sent it to the -- I gave it to the "Times" and whoever else wanted it, and was glad to because it was clear thinking. Whether you agreed with everything or not, it was clear -- you know, he had a strategic vision. And what a waste it was to not take advantage

of that. And he would then see Reagan and others and he would work very hard on preparing his ad-lib speech at a luncheon or whatever it was. And we'd come down here to Washington and a bunch of people would come and he would get up and without notes talk for an hour, brilliantly. You know, he staggered them. And I asked him, you know, "How do you do that?" And he said, "Well, DeGaulle used to do the same thing. He would practice it." And, "Of course," he said, "he would plant questions too. I don't do that." And then after he died, I continued to interview him. I would ask myself, you know, what is Nixon thinking about this given political situation. And so I'd get inside his mind, and ask questions and then answer them. And those columns were looked forward to by a lot of people. And E.J. Dionne, one of my favorite liberal columnists sent me a little note saying, "I read that column and I got a creepy feeling he's still alive."

### Timothy Naftali

What -- when you look at the administration, its domestic policy seems to shift. What unfinished business do you think he left by leaving in '74? What did he -- where was he going? Where was he moving in domestic policy? It seems very progressive in that first year, EPA, you name it. Then from Haldeman's notes it looks like he's turning against that, turns against the Family Assistance Program. Where was Nixon? Was he evolving? Or was it just another part of the layer cake?

### Bill Safire

That's a big question. I hadn't thought about it. He saw certain failures, like the Family Assistance Plan -- it was called -- I think Jules Witcover called it "Nixon's good deed." And it was shot down by the Senate. And so he was somewhat bitter about that. He saw himself as somebody who tried, and I think would've continued to try, on the domestic side to work the middle, fairly progressive. He was tugged in the direction of the arts -- support for the arts by Len Garment and -- what was her name -- Nancy Hanks, and did more for the arts than anybody, knowing full well that it would do him no good whatever with the liberal community or the artistic community. And the EPA, and what is now the green movement, he gave a big impetus to. Because he was in the -- that was in the air and he liked the idea of being ahead of things. So I think that would have continued, not apace, but it would have continued. But his conception of himself in history was predominately in foreign affairs, where the use of the Sino-Soviet split, to play them off against each other and to stop the spread of communism and to allow capitalism to grow in China. That was his grand vision.

### Timothy Naftali

Do you think he invested too much in detente with the Soviets?

### Bill Safire

Yeah, I was critical of Henry and detente, and Reagan came along and I think was the right answer to that.

### Timothy Naftali

Who do you blame for the wiretapping of yourself?

**Bill Safire**

I don't blame anybody anymore. I'm 78 now, and I remember Meg Greenfield called one day. She was the editor of the editorial page of "The Washington Post." And there was a big story about a bhagwan, a minister of some kind of India or Pakistan, who had made some terrible mistakes and was being kicked out of the country. And she said, "I'm going to write an editorial suggesting that people let him go. What do you think of the headline, 'Let Bhagwans Be Bhagwans?'" And I said, "Go ahead, do it." And she said, "I can't do that." But I've adopted it, and it's part of my philosophy now. I let bhagwans be bhagwans.

**Timothy Naftali**

How do you explain it happening though?

**Bill Safire**

You're a good reporter. You hang right in there, and I respect that. And I gave the answer I wanted to give.

**Timothy Naftali**

You have to be a good person to respond. Did Nixon ever talk to you about the Hiss case and how it had shaped --

**Bill Safire**

Gee whiz, let me think. Yeah, he would occasionally talk about that as one of the six crises. And then he would say, "Nobody's reading good "Six Crises" around here, and they ought to. Because they got a good idea of how I think from that book. Have you read it lately?" And I would say, "I sometimes dip into it, Mr. President, for useful anecdotes."

**Timothy Naftali**

So, well, I was going to ask you, is there an anecdote that I have left out that you would like to put on the record just for future scholars, that I haven't somehow jiggled free in our conversation?

**Bill Safire**

No, if I think of any I'll save them and the next time I'm in California I'll --

**Timothy Naftali**

Well, thank you.

**Bill Safire**

-- I'll give you a holler.

**Timothy Naftali**

You weren't there the day that Jackie Kennedy and the kids came in, were you?

**Bill Safire**

No, and I wasn't there when Elvis Presley showed up either.

**Timothy Naftali**

No, that I -- I think we may -- we've talked to everybody who was there at the time. I guess the last one I have to then ask is about, how did you -- why were you asked to write speeches for Spiro Agnew?

**Bill Safire**

Because that was a midterm election, 1970. And the use of a Vice President to crack them hard was something that Nixon really knew. That was his role with Eisenhower. And that's why he hired Agnew. And he didn't want to do it himself because he recognized he was the President now and that's a Vice Presidential job to go out and zap the opposition and try to help elect a few senators and beat Al Gore in Tennessee -- the senior Al Gore. And so he got Bryce Harlow, who was a wonderful, sweet gentleman, the last courtly man in Washington, who had been a speechwriter for Eisenhower. And Bryce recommended Buchanan and me. And so the three of us went out there. And I was delighted with Agnew's interest in the language. He loved alliteration and he loved big words. And so I conceived the idea of bringing along a "Webster's New International Dictionary" on the plane in a prominent place, which threw the traveling press corps. I mean, that was an intellectual thing and, you know, that didn't fit in with the red meat Agnew. So that gave a nice feeling to it. And they would listen to his speeches. And so, I went along with the alliteration stuff and came up with the "hopeless historical hypochondriacs of history," the 4-H Clubs. Well, we couldn't use that because we didn't want to get the 4-H Club excited. They were generally for us.

So he used it, but he didn't use it -- and I came up with the "nattering nabobs of negativism." And I asked Stewart Alsop, who was traveling, "What does nattering mean?" And he says, "I guess it's chattering with a negative connotation." And so I put it into a speech he made, not the great speech that Buchanan wrote, blasting the media in the Midwest, but later on in San Diego, his speech about defeatism and prophets of gloom and doom. And so I took that Eisenhower usage, and made it the nattering nabobs of negativism. But coming back to what you said originally about how speechwriters work, I would never take credit for a phrase, nor did Pat, you know, who came up with "pusillanimous pussyfooters." That belongs to the speaker that you're working for. But one day he said, "It was Safire who cooked up the nattering nabobs of negativism," which suddenly was his gift to me as a speechwriter.

**Timothy Naftali**

Was Rosenman right --

**Male Speaker**

Two minutes.

**Timothy Naftali**

Two minutes?

**Male Speaker**

[unintelligible] 30 seconds maybe.

**Timothy Naftali**

What was your -- was Rosenman right about the time as a speechwriter being the height of one's career?

**Bill Safire**

Oh, sure, and it gives you a launching pad for everything. And I owe Nixon a great deal for giving me that opportunity.

**Timothy Naftali**

What was your best speech? What was your favorite speech in that period?

**Bill Safire**

The American dream speech in the campaign. And then the new isolationists -- that's a tough speech to the -- I guess to the Air Force Academy.

**Timothy Naftali**

We'll look those up. Thank you very much, Mr. Safire.

**Bill Safire**

Pleasure.