
Interview with Marlin Fitzwater

The interview was conducted by David Welborn in Alexandria, Virginia on March 14, 1996

Audio cassette 59a
DW: We appreciate the opportunity to visit with you this morning and talk a little bit about Senator Howard Baker. You came to Washington in 1965, which was the year before Senator Baker was first elected to the United States Senate; he took office in 1967. What were your first associates with and impressions of Baker? Do they go back to the time you were at the Appalachian Regional Commission, or were they later than that?

MF: They were much later than that. I came here right out of college, so at that point I was 21, 22 years old. I took a job as a bureaucrat, a civil servant, GS5, so that was pretty far removed from anybody of prominence, including a member of Congress. In truth, I didn’t meet Howard Baker until the first day he walked into the White House in 1987. The first time I talked to him was that day he walked in when I called him to say, “We just named you Chief of Staff. Things are in disarray, you might want to come on over here and see what you can do.”

DW: I could be slightly off on this, but I think that perhaps it was Ron McMahan who went to ARC as a press officer and succeeded you when you went to the Air Force?

MF: Oh really? I didn’t even know that.

DW: Baker wanted to get Ron to Washington because he knew that he was going to be in need of a press secretary in the relatively near future. There was a position there, and he had some clout with the ARC, so I think that’s when Ron came up.

MF: I met Ron many years later but never even knew he was at the ARC.

DW: That’s where he got his Washington start as well. In regard to the time you were at Treasury and even when you were deputy press secretary at the White House and then press secretary to Vice President Bush, you really weren’t in a position to observe Senator Baker at work directly.

MF: Not really, no. I just knew him as the majority leader, but just through the newspaper or talk around the White House. There was no direct contact that I recall at all.

DW: During the time Baker was leader, which would have been 1981 to 1985 including approximately two years that you were deputy press secretary, would the press secretary sit in on the congressional leadership meetings? Was that a part of the routine?

MF: Yes. At all the President’s congressional leadership meetings, the press secretary sat in. During that period, of course, I was deputy press secretary, so I only sat in when Larry Speakes wasn’t available or if the subject was maybe the budget or something that I was directly involved with. My participation in those meetings was sporadic until 1987 as well.

DW: Do you have any recollection of Baker at those meetings when he was at the table and you and the rest of the staff were around?
MF: I really don’t. When we first met in 1987, he was a blank slate to me. I don’t know why, but somehow the impression had just never been made.

DW: Had you had any prior association with any of his staff that he brought in? Did you know Tommy Griscom at that time?

MF: No, only by reputation, but I never met him either. Duberstein I knew from his previous service in the White House on the legislative affairs staff. Duberstein is probably the only person I knew.

DW: What are you recollections of the transition from Regan to Baker?

MF: Of course, they were very difficult on several different levels. The highest level was that President Reagan was under siege by Iran-Contra, which was the genesis for all the turmoil at that time really. Senator Baker’s first and biggest job was stabilizing the presidency in face of the Iran-Contra investigations, which were just getting cranked up. Secondly, he was there to manage the internal response to those investigations. The third level was the problem caused by Don Regan’s departure, which was widely perceived to be, and in fact was to a degree, a problem with the first lady and a temperament problem more than a substantive one. So that also caused considerable turmoil within the White House staff and made it pretty clear that everybody who had been there with Don Regan was leaving. Baker not only had to rebuild the presidency, he also had to rebuild the White House organization. And at the same time, the National Security Council stuff was being rebuilt by Colin Powell and Frank Colucci. It just turned out that for awhile there, I was the only person in the White House that Ronald Reagan knew. There were so many new people coming and going—and he had only known me as deputy press secretary, and I had only been on the job two weeks! Actually, Nancy Risque and I were in a similar situations, we had just both been hired by Don Regan a couple of weeks before his departure. But in any case, that’s the turmoil that Howard Baker walked into.

DW: I’ve read that in regard to your first level of challenge that one aspect of that was the President’s state of mind, his proclivity to focus on the Iran-Contra business and something of a disinclination to attend to other matters and in his self-confidence.

MF: On the first score, I didn’t see that so much. As press secretary in the beginning of 1987, I attended every meeting Reagan had. One of the advantages of being the only person there that the President knew was that I took certain liberties, among them being that I went to every meeting he had and never asked anybody whether I should go or be there or whatever. That was great from the standpoint of our relationship and my ability to do my job. But in all those meetings, I didn’t see the preoccupation with Iran-Contra by Reagan that others describe. He didn’t turn every meeting into an Iran-Contra discussion, he didn’t divert interest into Iran-Contra discussions, and so forth. On the second part of that question, however, I do think that the biggest impact was that it did shake his confidence in himself. I
go into that in great detail in my book, and I think that where Howard Baker was an amazing and major asset in terms of getting that all straightened out.

DW:  How did Senator Baker go about renewing the President’s confidence in himself?

MF:  Initially, just by virtue of the strength of his own personality. Baker is a reassuring fellow. His career and his personality all are based upon a quiet strength, if you will, a dignity of confidence where people trust him, believe in him, follow him. The most common trait among younger people who work for Baker is that they work for Baker all their lives. I only met him in 1987, and I’m sure I’ll be working for him when I’m 102.

DW:  What does he call on you today for?

MF:  He called up a year ago and said, “I’ve taken over a contract for a client with a long-distance telephone coalition. We’re lobbying for a telecommunications bill that’s going to last eight or nines months, can you help?” I said, “No, I’ve just finished a book and I’m doing other things. I don’t want to get involved.” He said, “Well, how is the book?” I said, “It’s done.” He said, “When’s it going to be published?” I said, “In six or seven months.” He said, “Well, how about giving me four months?” I said, “OK. Just for you, Howard.” But that’s the only reason I did it; I didn’t want the job, I didn’t care about the long-distance telephone companies. I would never have been there if it had been anybody else, but, on the other hand, I owed Howard. Maybe not really owed him, but I felt I did. He had those wonderful qualities on everybody who knew him, whether it was President Reagan or the rest of us. President Reagan needed someone at that point who he could trust and who was trustworthy and who was sensitive to the first lady and presidential kinds of problems. Baker has to be one of only a few people in the world who could have filled the bill at that point. Anybody who would have been abrasive or demanding or arrogant or combative would have led the White House right into disaster. But Howard, in my judgment at least, was the perfect one to take Ronald Reagan by the hand and say, “I have run for President, I have been through this before. I’ve been leader of the Senate, and we’ve worked together. You’re a good man, and this is all going to work out.”

DW:  This is a terribly broad question, but how would you describe Baker’s approach to doing his job, to managing the White House and managing presidential decision making?

MF:  When Baker first came, the few of us who were there were all nervous, what’s this guy like and how does he manage? Everybody said, “Well, he’s a pretty weak manager.” I don’t know where they got that from. I found him to be a very strong manager. His style was to approach a subject, ask everybody he could about it privately in one way or another, and then he would have a meeting. He would say, “OK, what do you think about this?” It would go around the table, and everybody got the chance to give their views and talk about it. There would be some discussion about it, and he would argue back and forth with it. At the end of the session he would say, “OK, boys, this is what we are going to do.” And that was it. He made the decision right there, everybody knew what it was, everybody knew from that
I always found that to be one of the most direct and strongest decision-making processes that I had ever worked under. I worked for seven chiefs of staff, and to get a guy to make a decision at a table is not always easy to do. Then to back it up was often even more difficult. And Baker always did those two things. If he decided something, he told you what it was and you knew it was going to stick. I found that style to be a very strong one. He never shouted at people—he only screamed at me once—he did not usually raise his voice. I found him to be a strong manager.

DW: What did he scream at you about?

MF: It was about the second week, and he didn’t know me either, Tommy Griscom had been his press secretary. We were feeling each other out, and everybody was examining their relationships and their roles. This was an accident. The one thing Howard was not prepared for was the level of public scrutiny and the level of press intensity. In spite of being majority leader, it’s not the same on the Hill as it is in the White House. So about the second week there, he’s walking along the colonnade, out near the rose garden, and I’m walking with him, as luck would have it. Some press, a whole group of press who had been covering the President in the rose garden saw us and suddenly swooped down on Howard and me. There were cameras all around us and they were demanding an answer. Howard realized that the minute those cameras get on you, you’re trapped. You’ve got to either say something, look reasonable, or you look foolish, scared, frightened, whatever. I’m sure the questions were something like “Can Ronald Reagan survive? Is he going to jail?” Something like that. We got back in the White House; Howard walked all the way back to his office and I walked with him, he didn’t say a word. I could see he was seething. When he got back to his office, he turned on me and said, “I don’t ever want that to happen again!” I said, “Yes, sir!” Of course, in my own mind I knew the difference was that he thought that meant I would keep the press away from him like that forever. What I knew would happen is that he would have to stay away from the press in order to make that happen forever. So I knew there was going to be some education taking place. Anyway, that’s the only time he ever yelled at me.

DW: My impression of Senator Baker as Republican leader in the Senate was that when there were differences among people, in that case among Senators, sometimes even intense differences on important things, he was somewhat selective in when he would personally get involved as a conciliator or as a decision maker. Was that true in the White House?

MF: Yes. He liked to have people try to work these things out without his becoming an arbitrator. He was strong about always making the decision, but he liked to have a kind of consensus lead up to it. One of the problems with the White House, and one of the differences, is that so many decisions come at you so fast. You never have more than a day to decide anything in the White House. That congressional collegial process that might be spread over a number of days is usually compacted down to about two hours in the White House, and it usually always involves the same six or eight people. But even around the table, Howard would have that style. He would draw people out on a subject, try to bring them as close together as they could be before he finally weighed in and made the decision. He never embarrassed people
for being wrong or for arguing a case, which is another tribute to his management style I always thought. You never lost a debate and left the table thinking, “I’ll never play again,” which was an asset.

DW: What was his approach to the management of access to the President? Of course, because of your position, you probably had as much direct access to President Reagan as anyone? The big fights in the White House are always about access.

MF: I had a unique position, but really because of circumstances as much as anything else. But again, having worked for seven chiefs of staff, I would say that Howard was not a fanatic about access. He had enough self-confidence about himself that he didn’t seem to have a lot of distrust about others going into the Oval Office and trying to circumvent him or stab him in the back or anything like that. So that if you had to rank him, Don Regan was adamant about limiting access, he wanted virtually no one telling the President anything that might be at variance with what he wanted to tell the President. Jim Baker was pretty tough on access, mainly because in the early four or five years of the administration you had these competing factions. You had the Meese faction from California, the Deaver faction from California, and the Baker faction which came in later. They were all trying to get to the President, and then the President had all his old buddies like Bill Casey at CIA and folks around who could get in at any time. So Jim Baker had a pretty heavy hand in the first term. Compared to those two, who were Reagan’s first two chiefs of staff, Howard was much more reasonable from my point of view, maybe relaxed from another point of view. He had procedures; he wanted people to be in the Oval Office who had a reason to be there, and the picked people to come to meetings who were germane to a decision. He didn’t like extraneous people around, but he was never a tyrant about keeping people out.

DW: My impression is that during the time we are talking about—and this is an oversimplification—there were three basic streams of activity in the White House. There was the national security foreign policy stream, Carlucci and then Powell. You had the domestic policy stream, which Nancy Risque as cabinet secretary coordinated. And then there was what I’ll call the political stream, having to do with communications strategy, discussions about how are we going to respond to this question and that question, and all those other things that affect the President’s political fortunes and standing. I assume that Baker was heavily involved in the last. Would you say he was as involved in all three, or were there different levels of involvement, depending upon what the issue was?

MF: Different levels, not always reflective of Howard so much as other factors. For example, on the NSC side, he probably was not involved in a very detailed way because there is a kind of traditional wall between the chief of staff and the national security adviser. Just because historically there has always been some rivalry and jealousy between the two and there has always been this kind of national security fear that the domestic policy, i.e., political people, were influencing their work and there was resentment over that. So Carlucci was pretty much left alone to organize the national security office with state and defense. On the other hand, Colin Powell came in as deputy national security adviser and he worked I would say
more closely with Howard Baker as chief of staff than almost any previous national security adviser chief of staff’s office, at least as I had experienced it. In that sense, Howard’s involvement was closer than normal. Part of that was because (1) so much of the NSC operation at that time was still related to Iran-Contra, and that was all being played out on the Hill and Howard, of course, was the world’s number one expert on congressional matters. So they wanted his advice on that aspect of material. They also wanted his help on rebuilding the stature of the NSC with regard to the intelligence and the foreign policy oversight committees on the Hill. So I think there was more involvement there than normal. The domestic policy council, and this is nothing against Nancy Risque, it virtually came to a halt, in my view. When Iran-Contra broke in November of 1986 and certainly by this time period of February of 1987, there was no domestic policy. We weren’t doing anything, we weren’t trying to do anything, we just wanted to survive Iran-Contra. That was our domestic policy. Howard had some involvement there, we had some pieces of legislation on the Hill, but there just wasn’t anything going on, at least that I recall. On the third side of it, the communications side, it was interesting. It seemed like Howard left the press response on Iran-Contra almost entirely to me. I hope this doesn’t sound egotistical, but I think he decided that it had gone OK just before he got there and I hadn’t screwed up at any point, so there was no real reason to get involved. I had forged a really good relationship with A. B. Culvahouse, who was his general counsel. A.B. was a daily advisor to me on what to say and what not to say on Iran-Contra.

DW: You found A.B. very helpful?

MF: Absolutely the best. Absolutely the best. But Howard himself never really got involved in that kind of discussion, very seldom did we ever go to Howard for advice on what to say to the press on Iran-Contra. On the other hand, he was very involved with Tommy Griscom and others on the communications side, again on how to build up the President’s stature, how to focus the public on things other than Iran-Contra. Of course, that really mushroomed when we got into the arms control summitS of late 1987 and 1988. But in that first six month period, Howard seemed to me to be pretty much focused on getting A.B. and his legal staff in place to deal with the Iran-Contra legal side and then stabilizing and reinvigorating the presidency on the domestic side.

DW: In the President’s meetings, how would you describe the role that Baker typically played?

MF: He was always deferential. I would say he was a guide. I don’t know what words to use...he was a guru, an elder statesman, a tour guide. He would lead the President into meetings, the material would be prepared for the President in terms of briefing memos and talking points and outlines. The President would go through it all and then afterwards Howard would follow it up. In the meetings themselves, he was deferential, but there was always a point—and it the way he conducted himself at all meetings—there was always a point near the end usually where people would say, “Howard, what do you think?” And he would offer his advice. He was very clever at reaching a conclusion about things and putting it in a way that the President could adopt it as his own.
DW: Could you elaborate on that just a little?

MF: It’s hard to describe. There would be a lot of opposing viewpoints, and Howard would say, “It seems to me, boys, that we’ve got to work this problem out with this side coming to this position. We’ve got to make a commitment to do this, and the President knows that can be done.” He would just state it in a way that would allow the President to always pick up on it. To follow up then by saying, “Let’s do this. Let’s do this.” It would often be what Howard had just suggested was a reasonable course. They were very good partners in that sense.

DW: Again, this is an academic kind of question, perhaps, but what do you think President Reagan basically expected of Howard Baker? What did the President want Baker to do for him?

MF: That is a terrific question. I’m not sure I know. I’m not sure the President wanted him—I shouldn’t say he didn’t want him to do anything—but I’m not so sure he knew what he wanted him to do, other than run the staff. Reagan had an amazing kind of independence about him. It’s often said by scholars as well as those of us who worked for him that Reagan didn’t need anyone, in his own mind. Not out of arrogance or authority or anything like that, but he was just a self-contained kind of individual. Who, after all, had gone though many staffs. As Screen Actors Guild president, as governor for eight years, as president. He probably had had six or eight complete staff and had been served reasonably well by all of them. Even today, if people look back and compare White Houses, he probably had the best and the brightest people we’ve had there in the last fifteen years. Better than the Bush administration or certainly the Clinton administration. But it’s hard for me to think of Ronald Reagan thinking, “I’m going to bring somebody in here who is really going to shape this problem up.” I can imagine him more thinking, “Well, that guy’s a good person and qualified, let’s bring him in here.” I don’t think he thought in those kind of terms, in problem-solving terms, of example. There’s a lot of uncertainty—you may have already sorted this out, but in my mind at least there’s a lot of uncertainty about exactly how Howard got the job. In my judgment, correct me if I’m wrong, a big factor was Paul Laxalt. What Laxalt told the President Howard could do for him was help him with Congress at a time when he was going through the Iran-Contra investigation and also contribute to his stature and the stature of the presidency at a time when it was in low repute. My guess is that’s what Paul was pushing to get him hired. But I don’t think President Reagan would have seen it in those kinds of terms. Reagan would have thought, “I worked with him, he was majority leader, I trust him.”

DW: I think you are right about Laxalt as being perhaps the most important player in that particular game. Just to pursue that a little bit, when thinking about Presidents and chiefs of staff, or people who were effectively chiefs of staff, I can pretty well imagine the circumstances in which Nixon might call Haldeman and say, “Bob, come in, I need to talk to you,” and the kinds of things they might talk about. The same for Carter, etc., but when I try to think about what might cause Reagan to pick up the telephone and call and ask Baker to come down, “There’s something I need to talk to you about,” what that might be. Because
apparently Baker went back and forth between his office and the Oval Office frequently during the day.

MF: On the other hand, my guess is that there would be less of that in comparing presidents, comparing Reagan to almost any other president. For example, President Reagan seldom called me. You could name the number on one hand probably in two years. But then he saw me every hour, so he would say something to me after every meeting. But he seldom called up and said to do this or do that. Sometimes his secretary would call and say, “He needs us,” something like that. My guess with Howard would be more that Reagan would call him for answers to questions that came up in the course of his business somehow. When I was in Howard’s office when the President would ring, he’d say, “Can we talk about this?” on something that had come up in the course of business. I compare it with President Bush, for example, who would call me ten times a day to say, “Did you see the news?” or “What’s this story all about?” or “What are we going to say about this?” or “What’s going on in the Rose Garden?” or “Why is this so-and-so coming in?” or “What’s the politics of this?” Ronald Reagan never asked those kinds of questions. It was always if he wanted me to do something for him. Reagan’s assumption was that I would give him whatever advice I wanted to give him and I’d find a way to do it, so he didn’t ask me for my advice on things. He just asked me if he wanted something done, if he wanted to talk to a reporter, if he wanted to meet with someone, something like that. I think it was that way with Howard and with everybody. I could see him calling Howard and saying “I need this,” or “I want to do this,” or “Why don’t we say something like this,” but I can’t imagine him calling up anybody and saying, “What do you think?” He did not ruminate over issues or events. Howard was down there all the time also, because, again, it goes back to this access business. Reagan’s executive assistant was Jim Koone, and his secretary was Kathy Osburn, and if anybody got close to the Oval Office, they would call Howard. Probably seven out of ten calls for Howard to go to the Oval Office were not really from the President but were from Koone or Kathy saying, “Can you come down here? There is someone trying to get into see the President,” or “The President just picked up the phone to talk to Mao-Tse-Tung,” something like that. That accounts for a big part of the traffic. That’s interesting that you bring that up, because Howard always used to complain about it. He didn’t really complain about it verbally, but he did with his body English. He was always overweight, just like me, so I always had this great appreciation for it as he would have to climb out of his chair, put on his coat, and walk down the hallway. You could always see he couldn’t see why he had to do it. But I think a lot of it was that those calls didn’t come from the President.

DW: A related question but a general question: have you read anything that seems to you to fairly accurately describe how President Reagan handled his office on a day-to-day basis? I have not encountered anything that seems to me to be a realistic description. All the discussions are so general, aloof, removed.

MF: That is one of the great mysteries. Not so much how he handled his office, because in many ways he was a very disciplined, organized office manager. In other words, I would say he was characterized by two things: (1) he had a tight schedule, and (2) he kept to it. He came
in at 9:00 and, by golly, he was there not minute before or after. He left at 6:00 and it was not one minute before or after. Similarly, if he was meeting with Gorbachev and the meeting was going to end at 2:00, world affairs had better be settled by 2:00 because, by God, the meeting was over! If it was time for him to have lunch, lunch was it. I write about this in my book too, the Gorbachev meeting. They were working on a communique and President Reagan said, “I’m sorry, it’s 4:00. This is over.” Howard Baker called Schultz and said, “You’ve got ten minutes to solve this problem or forget it.” You knew that once Ronald Reagan set that schedule, it did not change. Now he was pretty accepting of a schedule. If you gave him a schedule in the morning that was reasonable, in the sense of 9:00 to 6:00 or whatever it was, he would follow it, even if you had it in ten-minute increments. I never heard him complain about that, I never heard him say it was too much or too many meetings or whatever, and sometimes it would get a little heavy. Now, Nancy would follow up in those areas, but nevertheless... So the President had a very organized thing in that. Similarly with decision making; if an hour was allocated to discuss the problem, he would talk about it for that hour and at the end of it, he would say, “OK, I’ve got the flavor. Now give me a memo on the options, pros and cons.” There would be a memo that would go into him that would say, “This is the issue. These are the pros, these are the cons; here are the options: 1, 2, 3, 4.” Next morning he would bring it in, option 3 was checked, and that was it. It was great for me as press secretary, because I got the same decision documents as he got. I knew what he decided, why he decided it, what he chose; it was all right there and it was going to be that way for the rest of time. It was great for a spokesman as opposed to Bush, who made decisions at the table. Reagan seldom ever made a decision at the table or in the room. The other interesting thing about Reagan, and this I have never seen a good description of, Lou Cannon tried a little bit in his book. I thought about trying and gave up. Edmund Morris, I think that’s why he’s been working ten years on his memoirs, he can’t figure it out. What it is, this ability that Reagan had to have a meeting with people where an issue would come up that he didn’t like or wanted to disagree with, he would tell a couple of stories that at first glance you weren’t quite sure what in the world they had to do with the subject. We would go outside—and everybody knew what Reagan wanted to do—it was the most amazing thing. I remember we would walk out into the hallway with Jim Baker after the meeting, and we would all look around and say, “Well, the President clearly wasn’t happy with that one! Back to the drawing board.” And yet, he never said that in the meeting, he never said, “Do it over.” He never said, “I don’t like this.” He never said, “No,” but he had this amazing ability to let you know exactly how he felt. You could not ascribe any process to it or you never recite the words. To me, that’s always been the most mystical part of the Reagan ability.

DW: That’s fascinating. Describe for me the roles that Ken Duberstein and Tommy Griscom came to play after things settled down.

MF: Duberstein came in as deputy chief of staff. He had a background in legislative affairs, and I think that’s basically what Howard saw him as running, legislative kinds of problems. He also was a fairly precise kind of fellow and was the enforcer, if you will, which is a common role for a deputy chief of staff anyway.
DW: “You were supposed to have done this by ten o’clock this morning. It’s not done, why not?” That kind of thing?

MF: Yes. “Howard wants a memo, where is it?” That kind of thing, which is all fairly traditional. I would say that Duberstein’s other great asset that he brought, in addition to those kind of traditional things, was that he could get along with Mrs. Reagan, which was tough. In my book there is a memo that I wrote to Don Regan, at his request, before he took over as chief of staff when he asked what he needed to know. One of the things I said was that he had to find a way to deal Mrs. Reagan. She doesn’t try to run policy, she doesn’t try to run the government, she’s not Hillary Rodham Clinton, but she is always involved. She’s always on the phone, “Why this? Why are you doing that? What’s the schedule? Where are we going? What is this all about?” She will drive you crazy, frankly, if you don’t find some way to deal with it. Ken was very good at dealing with that; Don Regan, unfortunately, was not nor did he have anybody on his staff who was. They tried Dennis Thomas, but it didn’t work. So that was a great asset to Ken and probably the best service he did for Howard Baker. He wouldn’t like me saying that, I’m sure!

DW: Well, we won’t tell him.

MF: Now, Griscom . . . again, this is in my book also, I think he’s the best communications director the White House has ever had. There’s a very colorful history to that whole role in the sense that the job was essentially created in the Nixon administration for Herb Klein because they didn’t know what else to do with him. It seemed like forever after it has always gone to somebody they didn’t know what to do with. Sometimes they made something out of it, sometimes they didn’t. But Tommy had not only a great ability to communicate and to see things symbolically and to design strategies to do it, but he had the relationship with Howard that Howard trusted him on public policy matters. So Tommy developed the role more so than anyone I ever saw before, actually meshing the President’s public activities and his communication—planning his speeches, his meetings, his events and so forth—meshing them with the policy objectives of the presidency, domestic as well as national security. Tommy’s greatest contribution, the highlight of his stay, was Reagan’s trip to Moscow in 1988. He virtually designed that entire trip with Colin Powell; Colin did the substance at the table stuff and Tommy did everything else. Essentially he went to a church to talk about religious freedom, and he went to Moscow State University to talk about academic freedom; he went for a walk on the Arbat to talk about commercialism and capitalism. All the speeches were meshed, the themes all fit together; the symbolism of the walk in Red Square was tied in to all the others. It was a masterpiece of communications planning from my point of view. That’s the role that Tommy filled. The other great example was that Tommy designed this economic bill of rights scam, which really took us out of Iran Contra and allowed us to transition into more substantive things. It also went a long way towards restoring Reagan’s confidence. It got him to talk again about the themes he cared the most about and that had been the hallmark of his career over the years. It got the rest of us back on track. It was a brilliant piece of work that has since been copied by Bill Clinton and now
even Bob Dole wants to talk about the economic bill of rights. It may be there forever. So that was a major kind of role.

DW: Talk a little bit if you would about the rivalry between Duberstein and Griscom and how Baker managed that.

MF: There was a rivalry there. It was strong, and everybody knew about it. They were pretty good about keeping it between them. I never really knew what was involved there, and I tried desperately to stay out of it and away from it. It just looked like one of those rivalries that you did not want to take sides on and you definitely didn’t want to get in the middle of it. I assume it was like all other things, it was power and access to Howard Baker, but Duberstein was destined to lose that from the beginning because he didn’t have the relationship that Tommy had. Also, Tommy saw his future in Howard Baker; Duberstein saw his future in Ronald Reagan. Duberstein should have realized that that doomed him for any power struggle with Tommy Griscom as it relates to Howard Baker. It became very clear to me from the very beginning that the key to my success would be to demonstrate to Howard Baker that I was just as loyal and interested in him as I was in Ronald Reagan. I don’t say that in any kind of mean or malicious way, because every chief of staff that I’ve ever worked for has that demand for loyalty himself and sees himself as a separate power entity from the President. It just goes with the territory. I don’t know the specific sources of it, but they were always at loggerheads. Duberstein gave an interview for *The Washington Post* once. He was a great masseur of the press, if you will, and still is now that he’s doing it with Colin Powell! But the paper, to his discredit unfortunately, gave him credit for running the White House and said that Duberstein was running the show and Howard was the political figurehead there. It just drove them crazy, and I don’t think their relationship was ever the same after that.

DW: I think it was Alan Cranowitz that told the story of one of Baker’s meetings when he was running the legislative office in which Baker looked at Duberstein and Griscom and said, “You guys are pissing on one another, but I’m the one who’s getting wet, so cut it out!” Do you recall that?

MF: That certainly sounds like Howard! I don’t recall that incident, but I can certainly imagine that, yes.

DW: Talk about your working relationship with Baker and his people.

MF: I do think there was a point at which Howard was ready to get rid of Duberstein. I don’t know if any of your sources can turn that up or not. It was about the time of this newspaper article where he asked a couple of people if he should fire Duberstein. So it was getting pretty tense there.

DW: What you say is exactly right. Based on my understanding, I don’t think there has ever been a person outside his family as close to Baker as Tommy Griscom was and has been. It was a really special relationship.
DW: Describe for me your day-to-day working relationship with Senator Baker and his people as you went about fulfilling your responsibilities.

MF: On day one I didn’t know any of them, so it was a clean slate both ways. They were, as I understand it anyway, essentially told to live with me, that Ronald Reagan had just hired me two weeks before on Donald Regan’s recommendation, but he and Mrs. Reagan had known me as deputy press secretary in 1983 and 1984 and then when I was with Bush in 1984 and 1985, so I was not a strange commodity and I was a compromise choice in the first place. So as I understand the story, Howard Baker said, “I want to come and I want to bring Tommy Griscom, my press secretary.” The President said, “Fine, bring whomever you want, but I already have a press secretary, Marlin.” So Tommy became communications director, and they built around that. So there was a lot of apprehension at first, because I didn’t know what my relationship with any of these people was. I knew vaguely that Tommy had always been the press secretary and that there had to be some special relationship problem there that I would have to deal with. I took the position initially that I would just do my job, he’s the chief of staff and will tell me when I’m doing wrong or how he wants it done or what’s different. If I get fired one of these days, that goes with the territory too. When you are in the White House, it can all be over in ten minutes, you never know. And so everything worked fine. The relationship was very formal, to answer your question, for the first two or three months as we all felt things out. Howard was probably looking at me to see if I had good sense. That’s kind of a prerequisite of a press secretary, you’re going to say something stupid once in a while. I was looking at him to see where he was getting his advice and where the power centers were and all that. Basically what he did was to bring in his own people and create a kind of shadow White House staff. Then there were people around that like myself who were there who didn’t know how we related to him—Nancy Risque, myself, and a few others.

DW: Let me break in and ask you this question. Am I correct then to say that during this early period in your preparation for your daily briefings, for example, that Baker and his people were not a part of that action?

MF: No, they set up a kind of duplicate system. Howard would have his staff meeting in his office with his people at 7:30 in the morning and then at 8:00 they would come into the Roosevelt Room and have a staff meeting with everybody else on the staff. It all became a little superficial because basically it soon became clear that they had already decided everything in the first meeting and this one was really just to give orders and get everybody on the same schedule for the day.

DW: Would they advise you, as it were, in the second meeting about how this question that might come up should be answered or the tack that should be taken on this issue, that kind of thing?

MF: Not very directly. Sometimes in that meeting I would bring up an issue. I would say, “The press was all over us today on urban riots in Detroit” or something like that, or housing
policy or something. If any of them had any advice they would give it there, but there wasn’t a daily advice on what to say on various issues. I discouraged that anyway; I never tried to raise issues at staff meetings—I guess because everybody tries to play that game—just because I didn’t want 17 people weighing in and trying to tell me what to say. Every time someone tries to tell me what to say, then if I don’t say it I have to explain to them why. I just preferred to raise issues, let them think about it, and then I could tell if anyone had any good sense about it and I would go back to them later one of one and ask, “What do you think I ought to say?” or “What’s the issue on this?” That’s an interesting White House dynamic—and it’s true in all meetings—how a chief of staff handles that. Nobody in the White House really likes to raise issues in a collegial fashion, because you don’t want to share power. Sharing information is sharing power. So staff meetings will almost immediately degenerate into shallow emptiness if a chief of staff doesn’t want them to be otherwise. Then he’s got to force substance into the meeting. The other interesting thing about this, when you have the 7:30 meeting of the shadow staff, neither side wants to talk about it. If you’re not in the meeting, you don’t want anybody to know that you’re not on the inside deal, and if you’re on the inside deal, you don’t want to get kicked out. You don’t want to look like a snob, so you don’t say anything either. The result is that everyone walks around each other, no one ever says, “We decided that at 7:30.” or “Howard, you told us a half hour ago to do this.” Rather, there’s always this kind of uneasy moment where the Baker people would say, “Well, let’s talk about that later.” You know that means it’s already been talked about, or it will be later, but you aren’t going to be part of it! It was almost seven months after Baker came when Tommy leaned over to me one morning and said, “You know, you should be at the 7:30 meeting.” I just went the next morning; nobody ever said a word, nobody said, “Nice to have you.” There were no initiation rites or anything, you just took a seat and were part of the discussions. And that was it from then on. It was an amazing thing.

DW: Who else were the regular participants in that meeting?

MF: Culvahouse and Tommy; Duberstein; Cranowitz was the legislative director; Colin Powell or Carlucci, one or the other. I’m trying to think if there were other personal staff . . . Jim Cannon was only there for a month or two, he didn’t count.

DW: Rhett Dawson?

MF: Rhett Dawson was there, Will Ball. Actually, Will Ball was the other guy like me, he was a holdover. He had a little more advantage than I did, because he knew Howard on the Hill, but he was hired by Don Regan too.

DW: Dan Crippen?

MF: Yes, Dan Crippen.

DW: Pat Butler, was he there?
MF: Not really. He was a floater. I don’t know to this day what Pat Butler did.

DW: Pat Butler’s job for Baker was as a writer.

MF: Yes, he wrote speeches and stuff.

DW: Still does, by the way.

MF: I never saw a text, but I’m sure there was one. Still does, yes. The only other thing I might mention is that when Howard first came in, about the first or second week, I said, “Senator, you need to go down and talk to the press, just to let them know who you are, what you’re like, how you’re organizing. My personal advice is do it early, because they won’t expect you to have done much and you can talk to them on a personality basis. If you wait a month or two, then they will expect you to have done something.

End of side a