
Interview with Alton Frye

The interview was conducted by David Welborn in Washington DC on October 27, 1995

Audio cassette 74a
DW: We’re glad to be able to visit with you again about Senator Howard Baker. We have talked about your involvement with Senator Baker last in regard to the SALT II Treaty during the time he was minority leader. In November of 1979, he announced his candidacy for the presidency and began a campaign that lasted several months before he withdrew fairly early in 1980. To what extent, if any, were you involved, directly or indirectly, in his presidential campaign effort?

AF: In that campaign I had been involved in discussion of the general idea that there would be a campaign, mainly with Jim Cannon and Cran Montgomery, people in that staff role for the Senator. I did not actually do any direct work in the campaign; I was already at the Council on Foreign Relations, so my work was neutral turf maintenance more than anything else. But I did favor the effort and made it clear that if he was going to sustain the run that I hoped he would go forward. However, early in the year, 1980 [not] 1979, as the complexion of the Republican nominating process became clearer, I made a commitment to John Anderson, so my involvement began early in 1980 to move in another direction. I will confide to you and the tape that before I made that commitment to John Anderson, I did talk with Senator Baker, told him that I found myself in a personal dilemma because I had worked with John Anderson mainly in connection with the kinds of things that I had been involved with in the Senate. Anderson was the instrumental figure in passing the 1968 civil rights legislation in the House, he was the man who provided the decisive vote on the Rules Commitment. I’ve forgotten if we touched on this in the previous interview—did we go over this at all? The fact of Anderson being a factor in my role at all with the Baker activities?

DW: No.

AF: Anderson had not been someone I knew until after 1968, but in the 1968 role that he played and subsequently in his picking up on leads that we had in the Senate on attempts to restrain multiple warhead deployment in the 1969-1970 period, I had a lot to do with John Anderson and also on issues of war powers. So in those years, that relationship and regard had developed in such a way that I often found myself saying to people that if any member of the House ever ran for the presidency and deserved to get elected, it was John Anderson. So when 1980 started coming along, I found myself somewhat awkwardly deployed, not unique for people who have more than one friend in public life. I discussed it directly with Senator Baker, and he not only understood the dilemma but from his calculus, he thought it probably was helpful to have John Anderson in the competition for the Republican nomination. He was a very vivid way of putting it, this is a close paraphrase. I think Howard said, “I don’t think I ought to be perceived as the Bolshevik in this field.” The complexion of the race, being the moderate that he is, though a genuine conservative, I think he felt he was vulnerable to attacks within the party competition, in part, as I know we did talk about, on account of his leadership on the Panama Canal treaty. So there was a logic to it, and I think he probably did not feel deep pain that John Anderson was in the race. I liked to think he might have felt a minor degree of distress that I was going to work with John Anderson, but he understood. I said to him just what I’ve said to you, “I’ve worked with the Congressman and see these qualities in him,” and I think the Senator also respected John Anderson very
much. So that was the way that issue was resolved in my personal role, therefore I did very little after the very early stages of the Baker campaign. I showed up at the early rallies and was a vocal booster in private conversations, but I really didn’t work in his campaign. Let me add one last footnote to that—the upshot of all of that was that when the Senator’s campaign did not take hold, because even though I was helpful to John Anderson, I thought that Howard Baker had a much more realistic chance to get the Republican nomination, when his campaign didn’t take hold and he dropped out of the race after a very expensive surge, the fact that he didn’t get the nomination and that the drift in the competition had been so strongly toward Governor Reagan did decide me to take leave from the Council on Foreign Relations. So I left the Council for the rest of that year and was the Director of Policy Planning for the Anderson independent presidential campaign. So all of these things flowed together. If Howard Baker had received the nomination, he knew and John Anderson knew that I would have supported Senator Baker as the Republican nominee.

DW: It’s curious to me that, to my knowledge, Senator Baker did not put together a set of outside advisors to help him in his campaign in either the domestic policy or foreign policy area. He relied, to the extent that he relied on any individuals in these areas, I suppose on Cran Montgomery in the foreign policy realm and Pat Butler. Senator Danforth was designated to be the issues chairman of the campaign, but I’m not sure what was involved. He did not go out and recruit his Alton Frye or his Henry Kissinger or people of that sort to be identified with the campaign. Is that impression, at least as far as the foreign policy realm is concerned? Did he have people involved in the campaign as you might otherwise have been in helping him in this area?

AF: To the extent that I have a recollection, it matches your own. An understandable reason for that was that he had in Cran someone he had come to feel was very capable of spanning most of the international issues that he was going to be addressing. He had a track record from within the Senate that he felt was the basis for whatever he was going to say about, certainly, foreign policy. Of course, he did have the book in that period, No Margin for Error, if I remember, built around his major pronouncements, which had drawn on some of the things that a number of us had done. Pat Butler, of course, was an extremely skillful draftsman on a lot of things for the Senator, not just foreign policy. He felt that he already had a record that would be his basic fodder, his raw material. I was a little surprised that he didn’t move more in the direction of expanding staff on policy issues, but I explain that only because he had a Senate staff and felt he had the basis for dealing with the policy issues already in place.

DW: Did you join the Anderson campaign, after taking leave from the Council, after Baker dropped out of the race?

AF: Yes, I left the Council in June.

DW: From your vantage point as the campaign was going to the time Baker dropped out, do you recall what your perceptions of his campaign were, what your thoughts were as you saw it develop?
AF: My perception was that he felt he had to reassure those who controlled the nominating process. Those were people who took a pretty strong cold warrior approach to a lot of issues. He had taken a sterner stance, as you know, on the SALT treaty, not an unreasonable stance but a sterner stance, partly, I infer, to position himself more palatably to those who had questioned his patriotism and wisdom after the Panama Canal treaty. I don’t want to suggest this was a devious expression on his part, but the harder edge expression on some of the Soviet issues and the nuclear issues that showed up in that book, it was not out of keeping with his genuine views. He is a staunch national security conservative, so there’s nothing that unrepresentative there, but the tone of it had more of a campaign edge to it than I would have expected from him in his statecraft in the Senate. So my perception was that there was some attempt to reassure those who were questioning his soundness on national security and foreign policy. I thought it was unnecessary because I thought he was so demonstrably sound, cautious, prudent across the entire range of foreign policy and national security issues. But he was the candidate, he was running, and it was his judgment and the judgment of his other political advisors that it was necessary for him to make that accommodation.

DW: Skipping ahead to 1981, Ronald Reagan is in the White House, Howard Baker is, somewhat to his surprise, majority leader of the United States Senate. During those four years, Reagan’s first term when Baker remained as majority leader, under what circumstances would your path cross with his?

AF: We continued to talk about foreign policy and national security issues generally; quite specifically we had a series of encounters dealing with Soviet-American relations. Forgive me for asking again, I feel like I’ve told you this already.

DW: No, we haven’t talked about anything post 1981.

AF: OK, I don’t want to bore you. Then I will tell you some of the stories from that period in which Howard Baker played a very important role and one that I believe deserves recording. It’s a complicated role, I think I would highlight two or three things. You know, of course, of his role as a leader in trying to rally the troops for the Reagan initiatives, including some of the international issues like the AWACs to Saudi Arabia kinds of issues where he was indispensable. In that period Pat Butler and I were drafting things for him on things like the Saudi AWACs transition, and I thought I remembered that you knew of his daughter sending him that remarkable airplane shaped flower arrangement.

DW: No, we’ve not heard about that.

AF: The day of the big vote, I was there having drafted something for the Senator to make the final appeal for support of the Reagan proposal on the Saudi AWACs transfer. I can’t date that for you, I’d say it’s 1982.

DW: It would have been the fall of 1981.
AF: I lose track of the exact sequence. Howard had already done a very good job but expected that he was going to have to go to the floor in a final appeal as leader, because the vote was absolutely in doubt. I was in his office, Jim Baker was working hard for the administration and was in and out of the office with us. Pat and I had written, not contending, but parallel speeches for his grand finale, and we heard over the intercom Bill Cohen reaching his decision. Bill had not prior to that day made a commitment for or against AWACs. When he came down in favor of the transaction, in a very heartfelt, very thoughtful line of argument, Senator Baker knew that he had won the vote; therefore, instead of going to the floor with a final full-rounded recapitulation and argument, he did as he does so gracefully a softer, gentler landing without the full recapitulation of the case, because the argument had by then been won. In celebration of that, the Senator’s daughter sent him—I remember seeing it—I think it was an arrangement of chrysanthemums in the shape of an AWACs including the ray dome on top. It was a very vivid memory in the leader’s office that day that brought some cheer, and that was sent before it was clear what was going to happen in that vote. So we were doing things of that sort, but that’s all prelude to what I think is a very important set of activities by Howard Baker. I was very concerned about the unrelenting tone that the administration was bringing on the anti-Soviet hostility that was radiating, at a time when there were so many important issues still to be done. SALT II was in limbo, but the basis had been set; even if you didn’t like the agreement as brought home, the basis had been set for some agreement restraining offensive weapons beyond the 1972 SALT agreements, which, you have to realize, had run out. Technically, the first agreement on offensive arms was an interim agreement that only was to run five years. We were already, in the early Reagan years, living well beyond that because in the Carter period there had been a pronouncement that we would not undercut the agreement while we continued to negotiate. So the original SALT restraints were being more or less respected, but they were quite modest in their effect. In fact, they permitted the multiplication of warheads, all they did was place some limits on delivery vehicles. But you could still carve up the payload more and more, so more and more warheads were headed into the arsenals in that period. Similarly, early in the Reagan period, there was a question—pretty early, by 1983 I guess is when it really got to be warm—what would be done about defenses. The ABM treaty issue was coming back. I can’t date this for you from memory, but in the course of 1983 I had a series of discussions with Senator Baker in which he certainly didn’t endorse my views, let me not mislead you, but we shared concerns that there was a need to encourage the President to take a wider range of counsel. Frankly, I had a conversation at lunch with some people who had, from quite [disparate] views and without hearing what was on my mind, said exactly what was on my mind. Namely, I thought it would be very useful for President Reagan to hear from Richard Nixon on how to deal with the Soviets. So I went in sequence to Senator Baker and to Senator Muskie, former Secretary of State, and basically asked if they would be willing to join in a bipartisan initiative enlisting President Nixon to express some views to President Reagan. I did that in the anticipation and understanding that Reagan would be more likely to listen to Nixon than anybody else. That was confirmed by conversations I had with Bob McFarland and others who were working for Reagan. Without saying exactly what
was on my mind, I confirmed that Nixon had a unique weight in Reagan’s world outlook. From those in a position to speak to him as a peer, there wasn’t anybody else. The luncheon conversation that triggered it was one in which people from both parties were saying, “Boy, this deteriorating relationship with Moscow wouldn’t be headed this way if Richard Nixon were doing the job.” That was coming from extraordinary and diverse people, ranging from people like Dimitri Simes to Paul Warnke. Dimitri only later became actually close to Nixon, he became quite close to Nixon in the latter part. To make a long story short, Senator Baker encouraged me to have the conversation with Senator Muskie. Senator Muskie was the really courageous act, having the history that you know of his competition for the nomination and all the things associated with the 1972 Nixon camp efforts against Ed Muskie. Muskie felt it was a sufficiently dire set of circumstances in the Soviet-American relationship that if it would be useful, he would be willing to be party. So during 1983 and 1984, that became a full blown and quite important private collaboration of a bipartisan trio, involving some direct meetings with Reagan—those took a long time to arrange—a number of direct consultations between the three of them, and a fair amount of written communication. It led later to Nixon accepting the suggestion that he go see Gorbachev, which was a sort of sequel to this activity. When I went to see him with that idea, it was based on the fact that we had been working together in this Baker-Muskie-Nixon collaboration. There are documents on that; I don’t think I have full control of them or a right to share them, but my guess would be that the Nixon Library will have an archive on this. And you might query John Taylor who, among other things, if they are prepared to release them, would have some of the private communications that Nixon gave to Reagan. The highlight of this episode—this is all very complicated, so it may not help you by muddying the waters, because it’s a very human situation. Let me tell you of a couple of human vignettes. When we had the first conversations among the three, some of which took place at the Dolley Madison Hotel, not the Madison Hotel, but Dolley Madison was an older one, cater-cornered across from the Madison. It’s now been replaced by an office building. We were there, and at home I have a picture of the meeting, expecting to see President Reagan on a Saturday. All of this was being done quietly, both—

AF: A couple of vignettes. First of all, to make the Baker-Muskie-Nixon trio come together, Howard Baker called Nixon and asked what he thought about the idea. Nixon probably was a little suspicious at the beginning, a little wary of what this was all about. He and I did not know each other well enough to have had any close working relationship, though we had an acquaintance from his presidential period. In the years with Brooke I had been around the White House some, and he associated me with the effort which he and Kissinger had not entirely welcomed to press the issue of restraining multiple warheads. So he had Haynesorth and Carswell, and a lot of other things that were unhappy in his recollection were in there. But he agreed to talk it through, so I took Ed Muskie up to New York to see Nixon in a meeting that was held at Ed and Tricia Cox’s apartment on about East 70th, roughly, there’s an apartment just off Madison Avenue. It was an interesting encounter: I brought them together and then left so they had a private conversation, just the two of them, just Ed and Nixon. From that came this series of other discussions, including some very gracious efforts
by Nixon to host the exercise. We had a marvelous evening at Nixon’s home in New Jersey, in fact, flying back on Howard Baker’s plane; Howard Baker’s pilot flew us up and back.

DW: Lonnie? Was it Lonnie?

AF: Yes, Lonnie. Lonnie really is quite a personality. He got us back, and we arrived very late. The evening was productive, focused, a gracious dinner, a serious coming together on the need to basically counsel some firm but tempered approaches rather than an unrelieved, ideological, evil empire posture. The notion was there is real business to be done here, and we should not squander it out of any rhetorical posture. Having established the line, the argument, in broad terms, was that President Reagan had made clear he was not to be trifled with, he had built up the defense budget, he had done all the things that were necessary for a serious negotiation, and now was the time to move ahead on it rather than let it be squandered as an opportunity. An opportunity based both on his firm defense posture, it was argued, and on the fact that there was a base on which to build out of the prior negotiations, not just Nixon’s but very much what was in the Carter agreement was quite important. And the arguments over what more should be done were, of course, within the range of reason, but they were marginal compared to what was in the basic agreement. Therefore, the argument was, “Let’s not stop this process on the grounds that you can’t do business with the Soviets, let’s see what can be extracted from what was negotiated before and from what leverage may exist now that we have Reagan in the White House.” All that was the thrust of it. Coming back from New Jersey that late evening, Ed Muskie came down with excruciating pain. I ended up taking him to the hospital for what turned out to be a very painful period of gallstone distress, from which he recovered. Anyway, I’m meandering, I suspect that’s not unique in your tapes.

DW: That’s the fun part!

AF: We assembled at that Dolley Madison room in anticipation of a meeting with Reagan. This would have been in 1984, I can’t give you the exact date.

DW: This would have been the first meeting of this group with Reagan?

AF: Yes; in fact, I’ve jumped out of order. I’ll come back to the strategic build-down initiative in a minute, which is a part of the Baker story as well. In the course of the 1984 workup on this bipartisan exercise, it was important to keep it quite both at that time because President Nixon was not yet perceived sympathetically in very many quarters. It was clear whether a notion that Reagan was taking counsel from Nixon would be politically constructive or destructive. It was an unknown; in substance, those of us involved felt it was wise to have an experienced hand like Nixon involved, but it was not politically clear how it would be perceived. So that was one reason, but there was another reason, which you immediately will run to. The only person outside that small circle who knew that this was taking place, later in the year, was Walter Mondale because there was an obvious awkwardness in having a former Democratic presidential contender and a former Democratic Secretary of State in a role of
advising an incumbent Republican President on Soviet-American relations. Had it been advertised by the Reagan camp, that could have been an additional blow to the Mondale presidential candidacy. So Ed explained to him that this was taking place and explained to him that the ground rule was that neither the Reagan people nor we would make any public reference to it. It was strictly a private venue for counsel that would not become a factor in the presidential competition. I have to say that the Democratic contenders were exceedingly anxious about this, because it could have been a situation had it been exploited whereby Ed Muskie’s participation would have seemed to legitimize the Reagan foreign policy. That’s why I say he was the courageous figure in this; more than anybody, he was taking a degree of risk, which he did with thought but no hesitancy. The day of that meeting at the Dolley Madison where we were scheduled to go over to the White House, somehow or other word got around town that this was about to happen and so we scrubbed it. So the major meeting then took place only in September, 1984, at the Waldorf Astoria when Reagan came to address the U.N. on the day that Gromeko came to address the U.N. There had been some private Nixon et al. communications with Reagan. In my memory there are some phone conversations between Nixon and Reagan, but there had been no trilateral assembly with Reagan until that meeting. It had a certain awkwardness to it, not between the principals but one that history would be mildly interested in, having to do with others in and around the President. In arranging that meeting I had asked Jim Baker to see if the President would see the three people and explain what the subject was. I also indicated that we didn’t want anybody else in the administration to know about, one reason being we could not afford to have it publicized that Ed Muskie was doing this during a presidential campaign with his close friend Walter Mondale running. Jim Baker respected that and did not consult widely; he was then Chief of Staff in the White House. He did not consult widely, and indeed when we were in the ante-room at the Waldorf Astoria when they went in to lunch with Reagan, Secretary Schultz came in and George, who is a pretty controlled personality, was perplexed, to put it mildly. What in the world is going on here? Who are these guys? What are they doing here? He didn’t say anything, he was very gracious and received them, but I think he was very much caught off guard. I don’t know when or how you are going to talk to Howard Baker about these kinds of details, his memory will be quite good about it, but I think he felt that George Schultz felt less kindly toward him for a period, because he felt he had been blind sided. I also feel it had something to do with a cooling in the relationship between Schultz and Baker, for which there were later consequences I regret. But we had to do what we had to do, keeping it private. I offer that just as a vignette, yet you can imagine the encounter. The only reason we can even talk about that later was an inadvertent act, as often happens. The fact that this consultation was going on, none of the details of it, none of the text of it—although I think Strobe Talbot did eventually see some of Nixon’s private memoranda, I think Strobe did see it, I don’t know anybody else who did.

DW: Nixon’s private memoranda to Reagan.

AF: Yes, growing out of this. He at least saw the memorandum reporting his meeting with Gorbachev. This is collateral to Baker, but I’ll give you a paragraph on that in just a few moments. Nixon did have a particular bearing, but the fact that the three of them were
working together was a reinforcing factor in helping Reagan do what he may have already planned to do. Let’s entertain the hypothesis that he felt he would take a first term, chapter one, stand-tall-and-tough-as-a-basis-for-a-second-term, get the deal. There may have been that psychology at work in the President’s mind, but he certainly was helped along. The meeting with Gromeko in the fall of 1984, reinforced by the kind of collateral conversations with Nixon and Muskie and Baker, did mark a turning point, and by late 1984, things in the Reagan posture on negotiating with the Soviets began to move. He would later say, and it’s fair for him to have said, that he shouldn’t be held too sternly to account for not having gotten progress in the Soviet relationship in the first term, because the Soviet leaders kept dying on him! He used that phrase, and it’s a great Reaganesque touch, and it has a degree of truth to it, and it is certainly the case that the transforming event was the arrival of Gorbachev. But the movement toward a more open-minded, balanced posture, which I think it’s fair to say marked the second Reagan administration, was at least encouraged by the kind of private senior counsel that came out of this not very well known bipartisan exercise. It became known as a fact, as I say, only because of an inadvertent development, namely at the end of the year, after the campaign was over when Life magazine was publishing its year in review, somebody in the White House press office gave Life a photograph of this extraordinary encounter—Muskie, Nixon, Baker, and Reagan at the Waldorf Astoria. So I started getting booked calls. They were calling Nixon and Muskie and Baker, and they kept saying, “Call Alton.” And I had very little to say in the circumstances, because we were still in consultation and trying to be helpful. Let’s a long-winded recitation.

DW: Let me ask you two or three things following from that. I assume the luncheon was just the four.

AF: Yes, I was not in the room.

DW: What do you recall their saying, that is to say Baker, Muskie, Nixon, after the luncheon about what went on there?

AF: They found Reagan sensible and responsive to the general theme that there was business to be done. That’s my perception. If they had been stiffed by Reagan or felt that he was disingenuous in expressing a positive view, if they felt he was just giving them a proforma hearing, I think they would have said that. These are pros, they can recognize a brush-off pretty easily. I don’t think any of them came out of the room feeling that way. The later evolution of the activity did very much center more and more on Nixon personally in a bilateral relationship with Reagan.

DW: In a way, that was the basic purpose.

AF: That was the objective. None of that would have happened if Howard Baker hadn’t seen the possibility. First of all, I could not have gotten to Nixon on my own. I say that with some confidence; it’s conceivable, but I might not even have been able to persuade Secretary Muskie. Ed and Baker, that’s the reason I chose the pair, they had a very special relationship
in the Senate; that was the basis for thinking that maybe we could put together Baker and Muskie—candidly, Muskie to legitimize Nixon. Baker and Nixon could have gone to Reagan, but in terms of structuring something that would have had bipartisan, broad spectrum standing and legitimacy, Ed Muskie was indispensable to it, and nothing would have happened except for the special Baker-Muskie working relationship on the basis of which we made the approach to Nixon. There was a prior element in this process, which did not mature in the way in which it was originally conceived. But what’s of interest to you, it goes to Howard Baker searching for ways to be constructive. I never heard him condemn, I never heard him condemn the Reagan foreign policy or defense budget. I’ve never heard him speak negatively about what was happening in the early Reagan years. But I did hear him early on express the desire to figure out ways to do it better, to prevent it from becoming a more dangerous deadlock with Moscow. One example of that was when I went to him with an idea, which he actually intended to present to Reagan. It was an idea that was conceived in the nuclear freeze period. The nuclear freeze concept, which you will remember was very prominent in the 1981-1982 period, was really beginning to peak with votes. I can’t date it for you, but I would say the spring of 1983 is what I remember. There are books on this, some of which misrepresent some details, be that as it may. Many people, and I’m one of them, broadly embraced the idea of a nuclear freeze as a way of getting the urgency back into play publicly. Not because one expected it to be the comprehensive final solution for arms negotiations, there were problems associated with it. But as a principle, a kind of “man’s reach must exceed his grasp” kind of principle to tilt the arms control discussion back into an affirmative direction after it had gotten so sour in the early months of the Reagan presidency.

As a realist, however, I thought it was going to be a pro forma success at best; if it got voted on, it would be oratory rather than something that had real consequences. So along with a lot of other people, I was wrestling with the problem of what you might do that would produce real policy results, either as a basis for negotiation or as a factor in dealing with the strategic choices we were going to have to face on big weapons systems—for example, the MX. I discussed with Senator Baker initially an idea that I shortly published, originally in the LA Times for a very simple rule that would be the basis for negotiations with the Soviets. Namely, we have so many of these weapons now, there is a professed willingness to reduce the number, how do you get there while maintaining the survivability and reliability of a strategic force? The idea was that you could modernize but you could not expand. If you modernized, you had to pay a price by reducing the number of weapons. So to get a new one, you had to get rid of more than the same number of old ones. There are various ways you can say it, but that was the essence of what became known as the strategic build-down concept. In discussions with Senator Baker, he saw some promise in that and was going to discuss it with President Reagan as a way of getting the administration onto an affirmative arms negotiating posture when Reagan came to spend that visit with the Bakers in Tennessee, I can’t date that for you but you would have that date. Remember Reagan’s visit to Tennessee?

DW: It was 1983, something like that.
It was in 1983. As it happened, Howard never had the opportunity to do it, but he had expressed broad interest in the idea. In the meantime, since it didn’t get to the presidential level on the Baker channel, Senator Cohen had come to see me and had read this LA Times article and saw some promise in it. He and I worked together, along with Sam Nunn and Chuck Percy and others, to refine it into a formulation that we felt was a sound basis for a negotiating position. The strategic build-down proposition did become embodied in the American negotiating position in the fall of 1983; in October Reagan endorsed it publicly as the basis for the negotiating position. It was essentially a reductions oriented approach that said yes to cuts but did not rule out modernization. That’s a very important element, because if you simply reduce, there are certain circumstances in which you make yourself more vulnerable and therefore the situation less stable if you do not do the things in modernization that are required to protect the force, make it mobile. A lot of things happened from that with Bill Cohen leading the way; Nunn and Percy in the Senate; Aspin, Gore, Norm Dix, and others in the House were party to a gang of six bargain with the administration which basically said the administration could not have the MX unless it agreed to change its negotiating position. Again, through these same months, the Scowcroft Commission was meeting and gave a broad blessing to this principle of linking modernization and reductions. That’s the key connection, and that’s the key idea that Howard Baker had been interested in. I think if he had had a chance to talk it through with Reagan, it could have become a Reagan initiative. As it was, it became a proposal the administration accepted only reluctantly under the pressure of the gang of six saying, “You don’t get the MX unless you change your negotiating position.” On balance, I don’t think it was bad the way it played out, because if it had been an idea that originated—in fact, when it didn’t originate within the administration—there were tremendous resentments from people in the freeze movement. The fact that all of us associated with the strategic build-down were trying to simply gut the freeze, that it was a ploy by the Reagan administration manipulating us to undercut the freeze. That was not true, but that perception was out there. If you are at all interested in some of this, it’s probably not too germane, but there is a foreign affairs article you can have on the strategic build-down that rehearses a good deal of this history.

What was the nature of the chemistry between Baker and Nixon in the situations in which you saw them together?

One thing about Howard Baker, he is invariably courteous, and he has an immense, I would say reverence for the office of the presidency. So even though I don’t have to rehearse the ways in which Nixon would have reasons to be distressed with Howard Baker, even though that was in there, I never detected anything other than mutual professional regard. Howard had no sense of hesitancy or grudging response when I raised the idea that we could get Nixon constructively into this play. He thought about it really professionally, and his emotions about Nixon were always mixed. Few people would have felt more aggrieved than he at what happened in the Nixon presidency, so I think he always had mixed emotions, felt that what happened was necessary but still would have felt a considerable sadness that it went as badly as it did. There was nothing in our discussions that suggested to me that he was looking for an opportunity to help Richard Nixon redeem himself, it didn’t have that
flavor. It had a more detached, “Yeah, there’s an advantage there that could be very helpful in the present situation to enable President Reagan to see things in a more experienced context.” Nixon? I had a lot of time with Nixon in those later years, and my attitude changed completely. I had been one of those who felt thoroughly betrayed by the Watergate episode; I had never had any personal affection for Nixon in his years in public life. But I have to admit that I developed a much greater sympathy for him and a much greater appreciation for the human evolution that occurred after he left the presidency. He was simply a much nicer man to deal with; he was considerate, gracious, intellectually very vibrant, you could really see what a loss the country suffered when the good qualities got washed out by the dark side. This man did have a wonderful capacity for genuinely dispassionate assessment of great strategic issues. Once he came back into serious encounters with people like Baker and senators and others who were beginning to receive him, sort of not because of the episodes I’ve reported to you but in the years after the Nixon-Baker-Muskie cooperation, he came more and more to be a person that the Senators of both parties looked to and the President certainly looked to and, as you know, even Bill Clinton looked to. Clinton paid Nixon a tremendous tribute at the inaugural conference of the Nixon Center.

There’s a passage in his speech that amounts to saying how his staff had been very upset for him to say it, but he said that in his first deep conversation with Nixon he got the best ten minutes of foreign policy advice he had ever had from anybody. So there was just something there. Mostly, I would say that in the Nixon-Baker-Muskie dynamic, they quickly moved beyond any reticence or any sense of any veneer of superficial courtesy to a model of professional, political/policy discourse. It was marvelous to behold; I was relatively silent, I was a brief on a few points, but I was basically the fourth man, the fly on the wall kind of circumstance. It was marvelous to behold how people with some scar tissue got beyond that without a moment’s hesitation and started dealing constructively on large and important questions. They were listening to each other respectfully and appreciatively.

DW: Was it your impression that this was the first time Baker and Nixon had done business since Watergate and Nixon’s departure from the presidency

AF: It’s my impression that it was the first time they had done any serious business. I don’t know that I could say it was the first time they had contact. That I don’t know. I’m inclined to think they had some casual or light contact. These relationships are deep and wide, and it’s conceivable that my window was too limited to know. There may have been more than I am aware of, but it’s the only serious business I know of.

DW: There was no indication when you saw them together that Nixon had bitter feelings toward Baker?

AF: No. The first meeting with Nixon, as I said, did not involve Howard Baker; Howard Baker had been on the phone, but he was not present. He was involved in helping set it up, but Ed Muskie and I went to New York as a twosome for that first encounter. Howard was the intermediary who did the call. I only saw them together later. I don’t know what transpired on the phone, but I think an important element among all three was curiosity. How are the
other guys going to react to this? It was a fascinating construct, if you think about it. I think each of them had a degree of pleasurable anticipation, wondering how it was going to work out. I certainly did!

DW: Was Cran in on this?

AF: Cran was aware of this, yes, and was helpful. I can’t recall the details, but he was privy to just about everything that passed through the Baker circuit on this.

DW: You mentioned Secretary Schultz a moment ago and intimated something about his relationship with Senator Baker. Could you elaborate on that just a little bit?

AF: It had always been a good one, and it ended up being a good one later as well, but there was a period after that Waldorf Astoria episode when Senator Baker would occasionally say to me that he was not quite sure George had forgiven him. I think he felt that Schultz really was offended that he had been clued in. I should tell you about that, because it was explicit, certainly in my thinking, and I believe in the Senator’s, though I cannot say that we actually discussed it this way. I always considered George Schultz a constructive voice within the Reagan community. Having been through somewhat parallel attempts in the Nixon administration to bring constructive, independent advice to bear—in that case from the Senate side—I fairly early on learned it was important not to contaminate potential allies inside by premature contact with them or association with them. By that I mean, back in the early MERV era, it did not seem helpful to have explicit contact with people like Elliot Richardson, because that only served to weaken their position in the administration if they were perceived as the agents of the Senators. Similarly, I did not want George Schultz to be misperceived as having concocted this arrangement for the trio to get in touch with the President. I thought it was very dangerous for the exercise if the word got around that somehow Schultz had brought this together, because I thought already that he was sympathetic to the general notion of a reasonable negotiation on the strategic arms issues and saw only risk if he became the intermediary. It could have appeared to Reagan’s people that he was manipulating these outsiders for his own inside bureaucratic purpose, so I didn’t tell him about it, kept our distance from it. He was surprised because we deliberately did not go beyond Jim Baker as the White House contact to arrange it. I saw Secretary Schultz about a week ago and was reminded that I had never quite explained this history to him. Actually, I think I’m going to call him and go over it, just to clear the air.

DW: Did he remind you?

AF: No, we talked about other things; he spoke at a Council board meeting in New York. It’s a difficult period for him, he’s just lost his wife.

DW: I’m sorry to hear that.
AF: This was his first visit to speak on anything, so I didn’t get into it with him then, but I have the feeling that somewhere in there this very reserved, taciturn man may still have some misperceptions that have kept some lingering suspicious about both Howard Baker and Jim Baker, and they are not warranted in this case. He should understand that it was a deliberate decision that would not have helped him and would not have helped the cause for him to have been plugged into this. But I do think he felt badly toward both Bakers.

DW: I assume that he did, not too long after that luncheon, learn the nature of the luncheon.

AF: I’m certain he did; I’m pretty sure he would have gotten a full briefing from Reagan himself, to the extent that the President did such things. I’m rusty on one point—I don’t think Jim Baker was present for the lunch, but I could be mistaken on that. My memory is that it was just the four of them, so I don’t think Jim Baker could have briefed Schultz.

Audio becomes unclear on Side A.