

Exit Interview  
With  
JOHN C. WHITAKER  
On  
May 4, 1973



Nixon Presidential Materials Staff  
National Archives And Records Administration

Exit interview with John C. Whitaker  
conducted by Susan Yowell  
in the Department of Interior  
on May 4, 1973

SY: So that right now we're just trying to get the background material together on it.

JW: Sure, okay. Well ask me anything you want then and I'll....

SY: OK. The other thing I should tell you, we are taping these...

JW: Yeah.

SY: ...and, at this point, we are just keeping the tapes. We don't have the staff, the clerical staff to do the transcribing which should be done now. And....

JW: You've got to get the people while they're alive and well [laughter].

SY: Right. We were trying for a while to write narrative summaries of the conversations and found that was almost more difficult than doing a transcript, because we were finding, having to interpret someone else and probably in some cases wrongfully so. So, what we will do is eventually, hopefully before the President leaves office, we will do complete transcripts and then send you a copy of the draft so that you could edit it. Anything which you would want to put restrictions on access to, you could do that, and of course they would be maintained.

JW: All right.

SY: Other than that, if there are no specific restrictions,

they will be handled just as any other presidential paper and would be screened in the normal screening process before it would be given to a researcher at the [Nixon] Library. So what we are trying to do then is to define basic staff responsibilities and functional roles within a staff.

JW: Right.

SY: You first were, I think, associated with the President during the 1960 campaign. Is that correct?

JW: Yes. I was first associated with the President in the 1960 campaign.

SY: How were you introduced to the President or how did this come about? Were you...?

JW: It's a funny story but it takes a while. Do you really want it?

SY: Well, I've....

JW: Well, I....

SY: No, other than...

JW: OK.

SY: ...if you would like to. This....

JW: I had absolutely no connection with him or with politics in my entire life. I went to the beach in Ocean City [Maryland] in 1959 and read a book about him. I hate the beach, and my wife loves it, so I took a book along. The book was by Earl Mazo and that was kind of like St. Paul being knocked off the horse. I decided I wanted to get involved in some way. I met a girl who worked, I knew a

girl who worked in the [Dwight D.] Eisenhower administration by the name of Anne Devereux, who worked for Jerry [Gerald D.] Morgan. She introduced me to Ed [Edward A.] McCabe, who introduced me to Bob [H.R.] Haldeman. I eventually became an advance man and was an advance man for him in 1960. I was associated with him all the years he wasn't President in one way or another, going on trips with him, helping him out. I scheduled him in 1966, part time, in addition to my regular job. I quit my job the day he announced for President and went full time on his staff and went through the entire campaign in 1968 managing [the] schedule[s] of him, Mrs. Nixon, Mr. [Spiro T.] Agnew, their children, a group of governors and surrogate candidates. In the transition, [I] worked on personnel and people, and then became Cabinet Secretary the day he became President.

SY: Hm hhm. Since the main object of this project is to focus on the White House...

JW: Yes.

SY: ...itself, you were, I think, appointed in the Summer of 1969...

JW: No.

SY: ...to the Defense Department.

JW: I was appointed on,...

SY: [Unintelligible], I, I....

JW: ...in December I was nominated. No, I was appointed as Cabinet Secretary in December, I believe it was December

17th 1969 in the transition period. Then I was Cabinet Secretary from January 20, Inauguration Day, on, until sometime in August of 1969, when I ceased doing that and went on the Domestic Council staff as an--what were we called?--assistant directors of the Domestic Council. I handled a policy area from then on until I came here to Interior.

SY: Could we then focus on that time...

JW: Yes.

SY: ...when you were with the Domestic Council, actually in the White House? Could you attempt again to describe your responsibilities in...? At this time the Domestic Council was really just developing.

JW: That's correct.

SY: Yes.

JW: As the Cabinet Secretary or the Domestic Council?

SY: Domestic Council.

JW: Domestic Council? Yes, I forget the dates that it was formed. The first responsibility I was given was the area of natural resources. My ultimate responsibilities included the field[s] of natural resources, the environment, agricultural policy, and energy policy. Those were the main functions that I handled the entire time I was on the Domestic Council until I became Undersecretary of Interior.

SY: What did your staff consist of under each of these areas, or [unintelligible]...?

JW: Very limited. The whole idea of the Domestic Council was not to create a large staff, but to make the agencies and the Office of Management and Budget work for you so you could move forward to the President through, in my case, John Ehrlichman decision papers that needed to be made. These were decisions of really two types. One of rather very broad policy at one extreme, and on the other a sometimes, a nitty-gritty, frankly very small matter where we had two Cabinet officers at logger-heads with each other and there was no way [for] protocol to resolve it without either a meeting with the President or a[n] option paper to the President.

A little more focus: The responsibilities of, well, my responsibilities anyway on the Domestic Council were to get out the environment messages of 1970, 1971, 1972. I did those. I was in charge of those for Ehrlichman. The energy message of June 1971, and a whole host of smaller messages to Congress, or events where the President met with a Cabinet officer or a group, from which would come either the beginning of a substance study or the end of one. In other words, it would culminate in a public event which would involve a briefing before [Ronald L.] Ziegler and the press, and some message of some type, or some type of legislation, or some administrative action would take place.

SY: Hm hrm.

JW: Is this what you want, Miss [unintelligible]?

SY: Fine. Yes.

JW: OK.

SY: In the staff organization of the Domestic Council, did you always work through John Ehrlichman?

JW: I did until about the Summer of 1972, last summer. At that time John's responsibilities shifted from the day-to-day management of the Domestic Council to more just selecting a few of the projects, then running with them. At that point, Ken [Kenneth R.] Cole took over as my direct boss, to run the everyday business of the Domestic Council. What I mean, for example, John would have been virtually in every one of the packages that I was involved in. After Ken Cole took over his responsibility, John was involved--in other words, the circuit was from Ken to the President rather than Ken to John to the President. John wasn't involved in any of my packages. He was involved in things like tax reform, a very large study going on at the time, and things of that sort. John also had, you might say, public responsibilities at that point, because we were starting to get into a campaign at that time, the campaign of 1972, last year. He did a lot of, did more public appearances, where before that time all of us were, did our best to avoid publicity because our job was to get our job done rather than go out and make speeches about doing it [laughter]. You know.

SY: Well, then what you are saying is you were the, somewhat

a project manager for certain...

JW: Yes.

SY: ...special....

JW: I handled virtually every project within the policy areas I've defined: environment, energy, natural resources (under environment I include pollution). There were subsets to that. For example, we had to develop a national growth policy. This was in response to a statute. I ran that study. We also had to put together a fairly extensive rural development package in legislation. I ran that package.

SY: When you first came to the Domestic Council staff, how did your areas of responsibility either conflict or overlap with those of Pat [Daniel P.] Moynihan before he left? Or did you...

JW: They really didn't.

SY: ...coordinate with him on any...?

JW: They really didn't. There was a possibility of over--no, there was no overlap. There would have been, for example, had Pat stayed on at the period when we were focusing on national growth policy. But, in fact, there wasn't. Pat's role toward the end, although he first chaired the Urban Policy Subcommittee of the Cabinet. This was before the Domestic Council. There was an Urban and Rural Committee, see. I worked on the rural part of it. I wasn't the executive director, but I still worked at it. Pat did the city side, which later would be

called, became known as the National Growth Policy. But as things progressed, Pat became so involved with the Family Assistance Plan [that] he virtually became a one-man, one-mission operation toward the end of his tenure at the White House. At least, you'll have to ask Pat, but that was my interpretation of it. So there was almost no overlap between Pat's....

SY: Although....

JW: There was none between Pat's job and mine.

SY: At some point then some of the areas which he had maintained responsibility in were turned over to the...

JW: Domestic Council?

SY: ...the assistant directors of the Domestic Council?

JW: Yeah. You're really asking a question that gets at the question of how we started and where we ended up in the first four years. We started with a system that, I buy the conventional theory that it didn't have an honest broker. It had two basic points of view led by two strong men of great leadership. Moynihan, the liberal, and Arthur Burns, the conservative. There was no way of doing an honest broker job of getting opinions in to the President. One would come in and sell their point of view and another theirs. When people sell in conversation, it tends to be slanted. That is why the President pushed so much for the option paper.

We then went through a process of breaking the Cabinet up into smaller Cabinet groups. You'll find out

in a Cabinet meeting that there is very little that is in common in a Cabinet meeting, like there is in any large meeting. What's in common obviously, for example, in a Cabinet meeting is budget and politics. If the Secretary of Interior talks about what has happened to some buffalo that got sick, the Secretary of HEW [Health, Education and Welfare] goes to sleep. And when the Secretary of HEW is talking about Social Security, the Secretary of Interior tends to go to sleep. That's life. So in my opinion, a Cabinet set-up in that sense, of a body that deliberately makes policy, is almost a facade, always has been, and I think the President recognized that a long time ago. Therefore, he broke up into sub-Cabinet groups, that was stage two. What was wrong with the sub-Cabinet grouping was there was no staff to make the things happen after these busy men broke up from the meeting. And we were in a period of government when we fell heir to all the myriad of categorical grant programs of the [Lyndon B.] Johnson administration that required inter-agency coordination that wasn't possible in the bounds of the bureaucratic system.

That's what lead to the coordination and the strengthening of the White House staff through the Domestic Council. Historians will argue about whether that was good or bad. The President's ultimate intention, though, is to reorganize, so he went the Domestic Council route, but his ultimate intention is to

make fewer larger Departments so you can be centralized. But when you make the larger Departments, they coordinate enough of the action in town so that you can get a decision out of them that is not a pure advocate decision. That's the problem. Do I,...

SY: Yes.

JW: ...do I explain the philosophy of why we were going through those three steps?

SY: How did you, while you were in the Domestic Council, how did you go about coordinating through the Departments or agencies involved in a particular issue in presenting your statement or...

JW: Option paper to the President?

SY: ...option paper to the President?

JW: Well, take, can I use an example?

SY: [Unintelligible].

JW: Take the first environment message. At that time, that was a very important subject. It had come up very strongly in the polls. It was obvious that the President had become President just at the time when this had become a great issue, and the government was totally unorganized to deal with it. When Ehrlichman gave me the mission in August to put together the first environment message, the first thing I did was call virtually all the Cabinet officers and say, "Will you lend me somebody? We've got to somehow get this thing organized." Generally, the Cabinet officers did what any human being

[would do]: they sent me a turkey. Right?

SY: Yes [laughter].

JW: That's human nature, right? They're not going to give up their best man. Through a winnowing process, I got a group of about ten guys together who were good.

Incidentally, what was interesting about it, the average age of that group was something like twenty-eight; in other words, it was a very young group. OK, so then you have your group to work with and a task force that really works.

SY: And these were all still drawn from the Departments?

JW: Yeah. They were detailed to the White House. Now I don't mean they lived at the White House; they lived back in their agencies, but those fellows were working full time for me. O.K.?

We were then able to come up intellectually with a package we liked. We sent that to the President, it was very rough. He spent a couple of weekends looking at it, made comments on it and all that about what.... You kind of got a feeling [for] what he liked and what he didn't like. He studied those over several weekends and things like that. Then I had several conversations with him, etc., etc., and we'd go on. Now you get down to the question of, then there were ultimate conflicts built-in. The classic conflict is the Secretary of Commerce is always for, basically oriented toward a pro-business; the Secretary of Interior would be pro-environment. So

you've got a built-in fight. It's just there. Those were all resolved, the main ones were resolved in option papers that were sent to the President. He made the decision. Then that was it. That's a level of policy decisions. Then, there's always that last, then, you have to clear the legislation that accompanies the policy. You have the same series of fights show up again in more detail. By that time, except if a Cabinet officer feels very strongly about it, you're beyond the point where you are worrying the President about it. However, if the Cabinet officer feels strongly enough about it that he wants to worry the President, then in a White House capacity that's where you've got to make sure you do, because, that to me, is the sacredness of the system. The White House guy has got to be a facilitator, not a blocker, of getting information to the President. I kind of made a little speech there. I am sorry, maybe I took too long...

SY: No.

JW: ...in answering your question.

SY: Not at all. Do you think that in that case, were you acting as kind of the conduit of the information from the Departments to the President or did you...

JW: Yes.

SY: ...act as the director of the information? In other words, were you actually conveying the information yourself to...

JW: To the President?

SY: ...to the President, or...

JW: No. Here's where you get down....

SY: ...just making sure that it got to him...

JW: No.

SY: ...from...?

JW: You've got an issue to describe, we'll say. He doesn't prefer to have the two Cabinet officers if they disagree, we'll say, come in and fight in front of him about the issue. What he would prefer is that a staff man like myself write an option paper that says we can do option one through four or five, and the pros and cons or such and such, that Secretary So-and-so recommends this, the other Cabinet [member] that. Check the right box. Now in writing that paper I used to always call the Secretaries back and read it to them to make sure that their point of view was being represented. Because it's very hard to, because you start to get personally involved. You decide yourself what you think the right decision is. That's when you've got to watch yourself, and you've got to make sure that you don't, you're not voting, so to speak. You're pushing a, that when you write your paper you write it factually instead of slanted. It's the same old problem we all have as human beings. Do you want a cigarette?

SY: No, thank you. How much of a selection process was there on your part, which would have been a policy decision in

this case of, how many options should be sent to the President? Obviously, some you are going to want to throw out from practically the beginning.

JW: That tends to get confused. When you first started doing it, you used to write a lot of options. And then, the more you studied it the more you became familiar with the problem. In very few cases did the real options come down to more than four or five or six usually. And Henry, you know it's, sometimes it's bad enough to get your facts wrong, but the real embarrassment is to have totally missed a possible option form that nobody thought of. It happens occasionally, we're all human. But, it's the old story: do you have time to write a short letter? And, the same is true of option papers: usually, you get so embroiled in it that you're looking at hairs on a dog's back, and you forget that Presidents don't look at hairs on a dog's back.

SY: Hm hhm.

JW: Even as close as you are to the system in the White House, the more you do it the better you get at it.

SY: Well, was it your job to then go out and in addition to going to the Department heads or...

JW: Hm hhm.

SY: ...the Departments themselves, to go to the agencies, or how often did you work with people in the private sector? What position did they take?

JW: In addition to that, getting policy that way, you had,

the President's attitude always has been basically two things: don't get all your answers from government, and don't get all your answers from the top of government. In other words, we learned to operate in these Departments. We generally found out where the bright fellows were. What good does it do to call an undersecretary of Interior like me for a decision on something when I really don't know too much about it? There is a GS-14 somewhere underneath here that really understands it. The President wanted us to talk to those people directly. That's fine, that made, that ruffled feathers. But it's the right way to do it. I mean, find out the guy that knows the facts. There was many a Cabinet meeting I attended where the guy who did the briefing was less than a GS-16 that was sitting there talking to the President of the United States for an hour because he was the one smart cat in town who really knew what it was all about. So there was that level. Then, a more difficult thing to, that takes time to accomplish because there is no magic system where you find the smart people in a Department. That's one of the values, incidentally of the National Security Council: it's been institutionalized [unintelligible] longer. Therefore, it has learned where the smart people are, back in the agencies. Its weakness is it's become such an institution that it doesn't necessarily respond to what the President, the new President would want. But anyway

I'm digressing.

The other thing is much harder to do. It's hardest of all to get academic information, because there is no institution built-in to find out where the smart people [are] out there. There is an institution to find out where it is from industry, because the lobbyists are in town. They're always ping-pong on you and trying to sell you their stricter special interests, the same people who operate on the subcommittee on the Hill operate at the White House. That kind of input is easily attainable; you don't have to build an institution, it's americana. Very difficult though to get good input through a university, I found. The science fraternity is pretty well organized through the National Science Foundation and that the, formerly the Office of Science and Technology. It's an on-going thing. Professors come to town, and they're on committees and research and development. But pure, new, good ideas that aren't necessarily related to money or things, it's the simple idea sometimes that's the hardest thing in the world for them. Still is, and I don't know how you conquer that.

One time the President sent us all out, he sent five of us out, ten of us out to do five stops apiece. I guess we did about fifty stops. We called a man in a town who had gotten to be a friend, and we said, "Get us together for dinner; don't just get Republicans. I want you to get people that are against the President, I want

labor, try to get a cross-section." You never get a perfect one. We'd go into the room, we'd just say, "If you were President, what would you do?" And have a two-hour bull session. We came back with hundreds of ideas. Probably only two or three of them turned out to be useful in the long run, but it was an exercise. Joe [Joseph A.] Califano tried the same thing with [Lyndon B.] Johnson. We found it a useful exercise. You're always looking for that jewel, that's worth the effort if you find that one jewel, you know.

SY: Right.

JW: [Laughter].

SY: You were talking about the second stage of actually getting these options, then, through in the form of legislation.

JW: Yes.

SY: Did you follow through in that area, and did you work directly with, well, did you work through the congressional liaison staff at the White House, or did you work more directly with the Congress?

JW: We did it all three ways. We sometimes worked directly with the Congress. Yeah.

[Unidentified woman entered room]: Can you take Bob

[unintelligible] urgent on Wounded Knee?

JW: On what?

[Unidentified woman]: Wounded Knee.

JW: Yeah, [unintelligible] Bob.

[The tape recorder was turned off] [The recording resumed]

SY: [Blip] emergency and you had, and he had, none of these came up yet. I was surprised at that. It seems that Interior [unintelligible] its fair share of emergencies.

JW: Yeah. Excuse me, I lost the train of thought of your question with that telephone call.

SY: You were talking about the implementation of legislation.

JW: Oh yes. Primarily the load was so heavy that you-- rule one was, once a presidential message goes to Congress, the selling of it, the passing of the legislation, the responsibility goes back to the Department. O.K.?

SY: Hm hnm.

JW: At the second level, we would occasionally, through Bill [William E.] Timmons, make direct contact. That generally, usually came down through the end of the congressional session, when you were down to horse trading.

SY: Hm hnm.

JW: More on that might...?

SY: Yes.

JW: Because the Departments had a hard time having any knowledge of what priorities are: when they've all got priorities; when you're down to the end of a session and you want to get certain bills through, you have to be for one and not for another; where you have to modify one that might be for or against the interests of the

Cabinet, of each Department. So it's impossible sometimes for them to do it. You get very much involved therefore at the end of the process, just before the season closes. We refer to it as the silly season.

And, a third way of getting involved is when the President wants to, in effect, have meetings that involve pushing the legislation further, through publicity or something. Like, he'll set up a meeting. You send an Indian legislation package down. It goes to sleep on the Hill, and nothing happens, let's say. All right, he has a meeting, and he does something with the Indians, and he pushes again for the legislation. You are involved in setting up that meeting for the President.

SY: Something that occurred to me which is kind of changing the subject, going backwards. Since you had been with the administration before the Domestic Council was formed,...

JW: Yes.

SY: ...did you, were you involved in the reorganization, which did result in the formation of the Domestic Council, in work beginning with the Ash Council or in even the...

JW: No, not....

SY: ...initial suggestions...?

JW: Suggestions to form the Domestic Council?

SY: Right.

JW: No, I was not.

SY: Or once the idea, the broad idea had been outlined, in working out the details of how the Domestic Council would be organized?

JW: No. I was simply told it was going to happen and I was going to have a certain responsibility. To my knowledge, Ken Cole, John Ehrlichman, and, I presume, Haldeman--but I don't know that because I worked for John more than I did for Haldeman--and the Ash Commission did that. I was very deeply involved in the government reorganization plan of the Departments that came later and was sent to Congress. In other words, the whole natural thing.... I was the project manager to get the Environmental Protection Agency reorganization plan and the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Agency (NOAA) reorganization plans put together, broker it with the Cabinet, sent to the Hill, and sold and passed. And the implementation in the White House of getting these new agencies as infant agencies started.

SY: And that was after you had been on the Domestic Council?

JW: Yes. Both of those.

SY: That was after the Domestic Council staff was established.

JW: Yes, right. And also the Council of Environmental Quality, I even worked on that, too, but that was an executive office. We didn't create that, that was created through legislation. But we had to implement it, pick the people to run it, figure out the staff

structure, and I was involved in that. Not pick the people, but recommend to the President the presidential appointees for those jobs.

SY: Hm hm. Did you do this in connection with Fred [Frederic V.] Malek's staff?

JW: Fred wasn't there at that time, but the equivalent of him was Harry Fleming at the time. Yeah. I was involved in recommending what became the ultimate appointments like Russ [Russell E.] Train, Bob [Robert] Cahn and Gordon MacDonald to the Council of Environmental Quality and the selection of [William D.] Ruckelshaus as head of the Environmental Protection Agency.

SY: In the areas that you listed as your areas of responsibility under the Domestic Council, are there any which stand out to you as being ones which would be more historically significant than others and which might not be documented as well in the paper files? Not necessarily just their, the superficial documentation of who did what, but the whys, and how something was actually formed and how the policy was formed.

JW: Well, I think the most significant one of them all was the environment and the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency and the Council of Environmental Quality and the environmental messages that went down there. That's fairly well documented. As to how the decisions were made, I've really just said here in our conversation how that was really done, how we got this

committee together of young guys and put it together.

SY: Would you say that the environment occupied more of your time, relatively, than these other areas?

JW: Yes.

SY: Natural resources, [unintelligible].

JW: Yes. There were periods when that wasn't so. When we put out the first energy message, I put in a pretty heavy slug there of about six months where, I would say, I put more of my time into energy. I'm a little subjective about that because I don't remember how my time was split up that well; however, my secretary just did a, somebody over there asked us for a calendar on what we did, try to put it together. Do you know anything about that exercise?

SY: No. Was that Craig [unintelligible surname] from the Staff Secretary's Office, or something?

JW: [Shouted to a person in another room] Mary Dee [Beall]! Remember that call you got from Dick [Richard M.] Fairbanks to put together a kind of a schedule of what I did when I worked in the White House? [to Susan Yowell] Have you, do you want it? Do you...?

SY: It would be something that would certainly....

JW: [To unknown person] Could I have a copy, or do we have a copy? [to Susan Yowell] I think what you really need to know is who turned that on, so you can get them all. Or do you really care how it [unintelligible]?

SY: Well, hopefully it would be something that would end up

in the Central Files or in the Domestic Council files.

JW: Probably would, but I....

SY: We should check on it.

JW: Well, if I give it to you, that will help you check on it.

SY: One thing that has really helped from the standpoint of basic information on staff was the request to all of the staff to send to....

JW: Job descriptions?

SY: Job descriptions and,...

JW: I never wrote one.

SY: ...and then the goals of, "what should this job be in the next four years." That was a very useful thing, to actually require each staff member to sit down and think about what he did.

JW: Well, I don't know that we're the best source, but people who have been through a fundamental change in how the White House was organized.... Nothing like that was ever really, no attempt was really ever made to organize the White House staff domestically, out of the standard Cabinet thing until, I would say, the last year of Joe Califano. That's my, Joe made a first try at it, and then we worked further at it. I'm sure it'll go through more processes. We're in another one now, really, in a sense that the counsellor job, [Earl L.] Butz you know, the counsellors.

SY: Hm hnm.

JW: In a sense they, Earl Butz is doing what I just described as my job. Plus another job, he's Secretary of Agriculture on top of it, but he's doing the very thing, loosely referred to as coordination of several Departments. In other words, what I....

SY: Do you think that the counsellor idea will replace the need, or the same kind of direction from the Domestic Council?

JW: I can't answer that yet.

SY: The latest reorganization?

JW: I can't answer that yet. I do feel this way: if we were ever to get the lesser number of Departments with more responsibility, which the President has been trying to get for three years now, there would be less need for a large White House staff to coordinate it.

SY: Because there would be fewer heads of Departments to report.

JW: Right. I mean the President, when you get right down to it, is like any other man. He's only got two eyes and two ears. You could run a little business or IBM. When you come right--I run a, we've got fifty-nine thousand people working for us. How many people do I really intimately work with? About twenty-five. I couldn't work, if I had a hundred and fifty-nine thousand people in this Department, I could still only work with about twenty-five. That's the President's problem. He's clawed at by every constituency and a proliferation of

little agencies. When I say the President, I mean it in the abstract sense, not just this President, you know.

SY: Do you think, possibly, that the concept of having counsellors or decreasing the number of Cabinet positions would be preferred by the Cabinet or by the Departments, in the sense that the direction is coming still from the outside, from other Departments, rather than being focused together in the Domestic Council, which would be part of the White House staff?

JW: Oh yes. There is no question that, no matter who the White House staff are, the Departments resent them. They resent anybody more that's on the OMB [Office of Management and Budget], because OMB won't let them spend all the money that they want to spend. Thank God for Franklin Roosevelt for inventing it. I mean, the government would have been out of business financially. But there will always have to be somebody that says "no" for the President, some institution. And it's OMB.

A lot of, I'm changing the subject a little bit, a lot of what people call policy coordination really isn't policy coordination. What it is is a single-minded devotion to the President's day. When he has a meeting, he's got to know what he's talking about, he's got to know in advance what the man basically wants, he's got to have some help on suggestions on what that response should be or several.... He literally, like any man, doesn't have time to think about that. A tremendous

amount of your time on the White House staff is taken up that way. You just can't perceive the world from the point of view of the President when you're in a Department. I've been out of it now six months. Already I've noticed a little change. It's....

SY: Are you then saying...?

[An unknown person entered the room and delivered an item to Whitaker]

JW: Here's that, you're welcome to have one of these. That's just for 1972. It kind of is in a slap-dash way what I did every day. But, you know, [laughter] so what? I don't know what you'd do with it.

SY: [Unintelligible] reconstruct [unintelligible]....

JW: But, all I'm trying to tell you is that there is an exercise going on somewhere like that to fix it up.

SY: That would be very helpful [unintelligible]. Are you saying then that you considered yourself more of a coordinator of policy than a policy maker?

JW: I'm saying I think the word "policy" is highly overrated. When it came to difference on.... First of all, policies can usually be stated in one sentence. The implementation of them in a significant program is what people generally really call "policy". For example, you hear a hue and cry that we need an energy policy. We have an energy policy. We want adequate, clean as we can get, and as inexpensive fuel as we can get, period. That's the energy policy; nobody disagrees with it. "How

do you do it?" is what the question is, and that's a series of programs. So "policy" is a way overstated word. It's the decisions on who does what in those programs and the details. If you want to call that policy, we do a lot of that, but, in addition, an awful lot of stuff that simply takes the wheat from the chaff in what the President should know.

There I'll ask the question because Oou haven't--the most important question is what decision, not how the President makes a decision, but what decisions he should make. That's the one where there is no blue book for it. There are no ground rules for it. That's where knowing the President is a value, in contact with him, about what his priorities really are. For example, anybody can see that, if the monetary policy gets out of control and the foreign policy gets out of control, nothing else can happen right. So they're virtually everybody's, every President's first two priorities. Well, that's easy to say, but, in the everyday life, people all want to get in with their little thing about this and that to be.... That's one thing that's very strong about the President: that he has just blotted a lot of things out. He does not live by what comes in his in-box. He lives by his priorities, what he intends to accomplish as President, and I think that comes through to everybody.

SY: I think that comes through very much in his own decision-making, just the way he goes about it [unintelligible].

JW: That's right. He refuses to be a harrassed man, a slave of his box.

SY: As far as documentation of your activities in these specific areas other than in the Domestic Council files, would there be significant amounts of paper, paper files [unintelligible] in other...

JW: Well, yes.

SY: ...[unintelligible]?

JW: All the Cabinet papers when I was Cabinet Secretary. Those involve the agendas that were set up and the results of those meetings, insofar as those meetings, those things could be put on paper. By that I mean that he decided right in the beginning he did not want a kind of, anything that approached a conversational recording of what came out of Cabinet meetings and what was said. What he wanted done was a piece of paper on what was agreed to in those Cabinet meetings, how it should be implemented. So, at least during my tenure in that job, the only records you will find are the records of, the President said Secretary So-and-so shall do such-and-such, not how the decision was arrived at.

SY: And not the dissenting view?

JW: My memory doesn't serve me that well. You'll have to, all I can say is everything that was written is in the files. I guess you've got it in somewhere else. See after--that Cabinet Secretary role has been a very fuzzy one for years in government: as to whether you should

have or shouldn't have one. He [Nixon] had one; then he decided he shouldn't, that you needed coordination in a vast, much vaster way in the Domestic Council. That's one of the outgrowths of that. The Cabinet Secretary role is a good, soother kind of a guy in the White House [to hold the hands of a] Cabinet officer, a friend in court. On the other hand, it is a totally inadequate thing to get any basic decisions done. For example, when I was Cabinet Secretary, a Cabinet [member] would call me up and say, "I'm winning this battle," or "I'm losing that battle" on something. "Can you give me some help?" My first question was really, "Who was in charge of what issue?" When we first arrived, we were not very well organized at all in that sense. As I said, we had this just.... I used [to] think to myself, "How did previous Presidents ever function without some staff system like this?" Maybe they, I don't claim to know much about what previous Presidents.... I've talked to Califano a lot, I've talked to some friends in the Eisenhower administration, and I cannot glean from it where they had a systematic way of making decisions, other than Cabinet officers putting their point of view in. OMB, BOB [Bureau of the Budget] in those days, was always there to be the great leveler of dollars to produce, lessen the aspirations of a Department, but, beside that, I didn't see any other control.

SY: [Unintelligible] defining areas of responsibility.

JW: Yeah, right. See, he [Nixon] had in his mind right from the beginning to reorganize the government along functional lines. For example, when I had natural resources, that meant that I had the Forest Service and things like that in Agriculture; I had virtually everything in Interior. But, I didn't have Indians; they were under "people"; Len [Leonard] Garment had those. I had pieces of the Department of Commerce that dealt with natural resources. I had the water projects and the Army Corps of Engineers. We weren't just told, "You take that Cabinet officer and that Cabinet officer, and there are your functions." We broke it down by functions, not by whole Departments, which is along the line of what I knew the new Cabinet structure would look like, if politically you can ever accomplish it with the Congress, who, of course....

SY: Do you think, did the working experience of the Domestic Council itself, over the first two or three years, was that one of the primary motivations for the reorganization of the Cabinet?

JW: Well, the idea of reorganizing the government had been around a long time.

SY: That's right.

JW: You know, a Department of Natural Resources, for example, had been around since before Herbert Hoover, as an idea. Early in the game he [Nixon] decided on the Ash Commission [i.e. Council], and that got studied. But

even then, it was apparent to everybody that the way to do it.... When you say that.... Excuse me, I'm not being too good here. It doesn't do much good, for example, to say, "Whitaker, you handle the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Interior." You've got to get down to what in those Departments really ought to be in the same Department. For example, the Bureau of Land Management over here, with not great variation, does almost the same thing that the Forest Service does in the Department of Agriculture. So, one man in the White House has got to look at that (his name used to be John Whitaker; it's now Earl Butz) until we have a Department of Natural Resources. Then you can take it out of the White House, and the President will never see it again. You see? There's other things that haven't, there's things like, the Department of Agriculture has got all sorts of things that have to do with the price of products, and things like that, that are really not related to natural resources. They're related to the economy and industry. I never paid any attention to things like that; another guy did [laughter].

SY: Did you attend the seven-thirty staff meetings?

JW: Hm hm.

SY: Were there other very structured, organized responsibilities that you had on a day-by-day basis, where, in many cases, it's not as much a responsibility as just an on-going process?

JW: I can't remember. I remember we always had a seven-thirty in the morning meeting of the Domestic Council, just like [Henry A.] Kissinger had his morning meeting. Then the highest guys, and that did not include me, of the Domestic Council, that was basically.... Well, and then there was an Ehrlichman-Haldeman-George Shultz-Kissinger meeting, and then there was, if they needed to talk to the President, there was a meeting with him. I don't remember being tied down to another particular meeting or....

SY: I was thinking in terms of task force arrangements.

JW: I can't think of any other task force I ran other than the one that I've mentioned. I probably did and have forgotten. The whole concept of the Domestic Council was: don't be in things in an on-going way. If they're presidential, get them organized right, get the message to Congress, keep your eye on the legislation, but basically, get out of it and pick up the next ball that becomes presidential. If you didn't, we would have a staff that would really mushroom.

SY: I know the staff is small. Who worked immediately under you?

JW: You want their names?

SY: Yes.

JW: OK. My first staff guy was Chris [Christopher] DeMuth, twenty-three years old, who used to be on Moynihan's staff, and I got him from Moynihan. He, under me, really

did most of the nitty-gritty work on putting together this first environment message for the President. I later had a guy named Will [William E.] Kriegsman. Will is now a nominee to be a member of the Atomic Energy Commission. He primarily handled that function also, the environment side, and I'm talking when environment was really the hottest thing on the front. I just had this one staff guy. I never had more than one guy. I never believed in it. A lot of the other guys in my position had a lot larger staff, but I just never bought it. I made the agencies do the work. The other staff man I had was, he's there right now--Dick Fairbanks, who now reports to Ehrlichman. Pretty well does what I did before, but we have a two-tier thing now. We've got the Domestic Council, and we've got the counsellor relationship.

SY: Hm hhm. Then somewhere a combination of Dick Fairbanks and...

JW: Earl Butz.

SY: ...Earl Butz would have replaced you in,...

JW: Well, yeah, except Earl....

SY: ...in some point or another....

JW: Well, I'm not trying to say I was in a class with Earl Butz. He's Secretary of Agriculture as well.

SY: Right. But, he replaced your responsibility...

JW: Yeah. That's right. That's right.

SY: ...or took up your responsibility. Who was your

secretary when you were over there, or who would be most familiar with your files?

JW: Sally Dahler, who used to be Henry Kissinger's secretary, and later was mine. But, she's now not there anymore. She's in California working for the Department of Interior in San Francisco. I've had other secretaries, but Sally put all.... And then, during my Cabinet Secretary days, a girl by the name of Elaine Williams.

SY: When you were Cabinet Secretary, I don't know how that position fits into the general organization, were you...

JW: It didn't.

SY: ...reporting to...? You were very independent?

JW: I reported to Haldeman on procedure: when does the President want a Cabinet meeting and who does he want, those kinds of things basically. Same time I was reporting to Ehrlichman, talking about the substance of what is important enough as an agenda item for a Cabinet meeting.

SY: What about for foreign?

JW: What?

SY: What about agenda for foreign policy?

JW: Oh, well, no. No. If Haldeman just said.... I had nothing to do with foreign policy. The President might himself decide.... Let me put it another way. I checked with Ehrlichman. I checked with Kissinger. And, I checked with Haldeman. But the decision.... Then, I'd prepare a memo, basically to Haldeman, that says, "On the

radar screen are these seven or eight items; I think you ought to do these two," or something like that. "What does the President want to do?" Then, I'd get an answer from Haldeman or I'd see the President, if Haldeman wanted me to, or if Ehrlichman wanted me to, or Kissinger wanted [me] to, to talk about the Cabinet meeting and go set it up. Many times, it was foreign policy items were on there.

SY: Right.

JN: That's the way it was done. But that was not a....

Again, that's the basic problem: the Cabinet meeting is a very hard thing to be a useful kind of meeting unless it, again, involves budget, or general politics or some momentous event of the time, which each Cabinet officer kind of needs the President's line on. For example, he'd have Cabinet meetings that were, at the time of Cambodia and things like that. He'd kind of get Bill [William P.] Rogers or Henry Kissinger to make a pitch, or he'd make one himself, on kind of what he felt each Cabinet officer ought to be saying about Cambodia as a spokesman for the administration. That sort of thing. But they're usually not a tool to get a lot done. A small group of Cabinet officers is a good tool on a subject that involves all their Departments.

SY: Hm hmm.

JW: Have you been doing this kind of a....? I'll ask you a question now. Have you been doing this kind of work with

previous administrations, so you...?

SY: No. Me personally or...?

JW: Yeah.

SY: No. I have not. I was working for the National Archives in the Summer of 1970. And they needed someone at that time to make a third person in our office. We have since expanded quite a bit.

JW: Yeah.

SY: There have been, there has been a presidential papers staff at the White House since January 1969. However, until January of 1971, there was very little being done in the way of planning for a [Nixon] Library. Our major function at that time was maintaining a daily log of the President's activities, his Daily Diary,...

JW: Yeah. Well, that's another thing....

SY: ...which is pulled together in our office. It still is.

JW: I used to do that every time there was a meeting between the President and somebody that my staff responsibility was to set it up. I went back and dictated a little memo, generally the drift of it.

SY: What's now called the color report or a....

JW: Yeah. The color report.

SY: What--the Daily Diary that we're doing is not that at all, because we're not going into substance at all.

JW: Yeah?

SY: It's just a matter of pulling together an accurate account of who he has met with and who he has talked with

on the telephone and where he has been and how long.

It's a minute-by-minute account.

JW: Huh!

SY: Eight o'clock he has breakfast and then from there on, his contacts during the day, which you can imagine would be extremely valuable for a presidential library to have.

JW: Yeah. That's right.

SY: Just like anything else that's created at the White House, it does not belong to the presidential library until the President deeds his papers to be maintained by the National Archives. [Unintelligible].

JW: Now is there anything else that I can...?

SY: Well, what areas do you think you would be most interested in talking about in more depth in an oral history project, which would go into issues or into more analysis of particular policies?

JW: How the pollution laws were arrived at, the thinking that went on in the administration. That's when I say, an environment message. How the environment message decisions were made. What were the considerations? That's the area that I got, I guess, most deeply involved in. As for the record though, I would be glad to contribute in some way to.... I might name some people to you that might be more useful than I am, because they've got more the nitty-gritty in the other areas. I think still for energy policy, for the first energy message, Peter Flanigan and myself are the right people.

You're not limiting yourself now...? Are you also limiting yourself to people that, could they be people that are no longer...

SY: Yes.

JW: ...with the administration...

SY: Oh, yes.

JW: ...and that were involved?

SY: Oh, yes.

JW: Also under energy then add [S.] David Freeman of [the] Office of Science and Technology. He contributed a lot to that. In the area of rural development, Ray [Raymond J.] Waldman. Ditto for the National Growth Policy Report. I've forgotten when it came out. For farm policy, I would say your key players are not me there. I think your key players on the policy there would be, in OMB, Don [Donald B.] Rice, who is now gone, Bill [William A.] Morrill who is now gone, and in the Department of Agriculture itself [Clifford M.] Hardin and Butz, plus Clarence Palmby, who has since left. But Clarence was kind of the top intellectual guy in the whole development of the Nixon agricultural policy. I don't know, do you get out, I don't know if you consider Russ Train White House staff? I don't know if you do, Council of Environmental Quality?

SY: Not really White House.

JW: Yeah.

SY: The limits of what we have been doing so far have been

the White House staff, and that includes Domestic Council, but, and this is just a practical limitation at this point. Hopefully, a Nixon oral history project will cover it.

JW: Yeah.

SY: Just [unintelligible] office of the President as well as the people who [unintelligible] the [unintelligible]. What we're doing now, of course, obviously we are not prepared to go into depth...

JW: Right.

SY: ...on issues.

JW: But you want to catch where all the live wires are early, so you can later on.

SY: Right.

JW: Sure.

SY: Just to provide the jumping off point...

JW: Yeah.

SY: ...[from] which to begin an in-depth oral history project. Of course, that would require a lot of background research to [unintelligible].

JW: Right. Well, any other things that I can help you with?

SY: No. Other than one thing that we are also obviously, this is with our papers of people outside the White House staff who are still in the administration and [unintelligible] the office of the undersecretary of Interior is one of the offices which has been asked for papers, personal papers, which would include anything

which would reflect upon the administration. This may be anything from personal correspondence, other than the official correspondence, which would be covered under the records center records act, the Federal Records Act, and would go with the Department.

JW: Do you want me to get my secretary in here?

SY: Well, let me....

JW: I haven't got an idea of.... Now you're telling me that you want....

[End of interview]

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conducted by Susan Yowell  
in the Department of the Interior  
on May 4, 1973

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