GEORGE W. BUSH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

FINAL EDITED TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH PETER WEHNER

May 1, 2015
Charlottesville, Virginia

Participants

University of Virginia

Barbara A. Perry, chair
Sidney M. Milkis
Bill Antholis

Rhodes College

Mike Nelson

UNIVERSITY of VIRGINIA

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Perry: This is the Peter Wehner interview for the President George W. Bush Oral History Project. Peter was Special Assistant to the President and Deputy Director for Speechwriting from 2001 until November of 2002 and then became Deputy Assistant to the President and Director of the Office of Strategic Initiatives from the end of 2002 until August of '07. We're so grateful that you're here.

We have one more housekeeping item that we do. This is for our transcriptionist so that they can identify voices. We will start with Sid to say who you are and your connection with the project and the Miller Center.

Milkis: I'm Sid Milkis. I'm in the Department of Politics and I'm a faculty associate here at the Miller Center.

Antholis: I'm Bill Antholis, I am director and CEO [chief executive officer] of the Miller Center.

Nelson: Mike Nelson from Rhodes College. I have been involved with the Miller Center in various ways, especially on this project.

Wehner: Pete Wehner, being interviewed today.

Perry: We always like to get a sense of how the person got to the administration, what route you took. Let's go back if we can to your upbringing, where you grew up, was your family interested in politics, and then your education prior to your going into the [Ronald] Reagan administration.

Wehner: I was born in Dallas and we moved to Richland in Washington state just before first grade for me. I started first grade in Richland, a place called Spalding Elementary School. My formative years were there. Graduated high school and then went to the University of Washington. I'm the youngest of four. My mom passed away just a couple of years ago.

I had a happy childhood. My first memory of politics is from sixth grade. It was the 1972 election, [Richard] Nixon and [George] McGovern. I was pro-Nixon and Margaret Haney was pro-McGovern. We got into a lot of debates. I don't remember anybody else in the class caring about politics. Our teacher, Mr. [James] Castleberry, may have been slightly more for her side than mine, but was pretty objective about the whole thing.

Perry: Do we know what happened to Margaret Haney?

Wehner: I don't know what happened to Margaret Haney, actually.

Nelson: She is now a historical figure.

Wehner: Probably going to serve in the Hillary Clinton administration.

Perry: Were your parents particularly political? Did you talk politics at home?

Wehner: Yes, I did talk politics at home, particularly with my dad. They were both immigrants from Germany, so I was first generation. We had a cabin in the Cascade Mountains that we went to from spring until fall virtually every weekend for almost 15 years. That's where we spent my dad's vacation as well as weekends. It's about a two-hour-and-15-minute drive from our house in Richland. We would talk about politics. We would listen to the radio and news would come on at the top of the hour and we would chat about it.

When I was 12 or 13 years old, just before the '73 Middle East war happened, Israel and Egypt, I remember talking to my dad about it and then the war happening. There must have been something on the news about tensions rising, although I think it was something of a surprise about that war, how quickly it came on. But that was not unusual. We would talk a lot about politics.

My dad was of the conservative persuasion but not dogmatically so. He wasn't involved in politics in terms of working for any candidates or contributing money. He was just interested in what was going on, somewhat more about international affairs than domestic matters so we talked a lot about the years of Nixon and [Henry] Kissinger.

I remember making a bet with him when I was older. This was during the Reagan years and it was the air traffic controllers' strike.

Perry: Eighty-one.

Wehner: Exactly, so I was in college at the time. I bet him a quarter that Reagan would fire the air traffic controllers and he said, "No, he'll never do it. It would cause too much controversy." I said, "I think he will." He ended up giving me the quarter taped on a nice note.

I remember talking about the Vietnam War, which was winding down when I was young and over when I was in high school, but at that time it was still a very hot issue. I remember getting into debates with my social studies teachers in high school about politics and about the Vietnam War. One of our teachers, Mr. [James] Campbell, was fairly liberal and I did a paper defending the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. I think I got a C on the paper and I felt it was a little bit weighted, not because of the quality of the work but because of the position I took. That was my suspicion. But he was a very good teacher. The social studies teachers I had in high school were liberal and pretty up front about that. But I liked him a lot. There were a lot of fun exchanges. That heightened my interest in politics.

Perry: If I remember correctly, you had a very important mentor in college who took you down the path of evangelical Christianity.

Wehner: Yes.

Perry: Was that not part of your faith tradition growing up?

Wehner: No, it was not. We were not particularly religious growing up. I don't really remember going to church when we were younger. We did, but I don't have a memory of it. My parents believed in God but were not practicing Christians, so we weren't members of a church. I came to faith in my high school years. It was actually with my best friend, Brad Shannon. We began to ask questions about faith at roughly the same time.

I came at it with a very intellectual approach rather than a heart approach. I wasn't drawn to it because I felt like my heart was strangely moved. But I had questions. My older sister had gone to the University of Washington. She had come home one summer and was interning at West Side Church.

I had written down all these questions on my dad's work notepad asking what about this and what about that? How does this make sense? She was very good, very patient. And then there was a person, Karel Coppock, who was at the church at the time and who started a Bible study with Brad and me. We went through Romans. Again this was high school. That began my journey of faith.

I met the person you're referring to, Steve Hayner, when I was at the University of Washington. There was a place called the Inn, which was part of University Presbyterian Church. Steve ran the student ministry. The Inn was a gathering—when he started, which was in '74 I think, there were about 30 people in the building. When I went there, my first year was the fall of '79, there were about 900 or a thousand, 1,200 people. It had really grown.

I got to know Steve personally there, went to him with some burdens that I had. That was a key moment in my life and really forged a trust and a friendship with him. He was a very important figure until he died earlier this year.

He was president of InterVarsity [Christian Fellowship], which is a large parachurch organization, for 13 years. When he died he was president of Columbia Theological Seminary. Almost every key decision in my life I would involve Steve or ask him, even though we didn't live in the same city or necessarily talk that often, but we did stay in touch. Steve's mother, Jeannette [Hayner], was the first woman who was majority leader in the Washington State Senate. She was a Republican, and I actually interned in the Washington State Senate when I was a junior. I did two internships, which explains how I came to D.C. [District of Columbia]. Jeannette Hayner was there when I was, although I interned for a state senator named Dick Hemstad and did some work with him, which again deepened my knowledge of and interest in politics.

Steve was also a factor even throughout the years in politics. I had so much trust in his intellectual integrity that I would almost without thinking have him in mind when I would be doing things. That is probably a simplified version of *What would Steve think of this?* It was the integrity of the arguments, the way that I'm dealing with certain issues.

After he passed away, I was going through notes we exchanged over the years, and I was surprised by how many notes I had actually exchanged with him during the Bush Presidency. Quite a lot. He was an important figure.

Perry: That would be interesting archival material. What will you do with those?

Wehner: I didn't have anything in mind. They probably are archived because they were on my White House account.

Nelson: These are email exchanges?

Wehner: Yes, I was pretty liberal in my email use. I was not one of those who went in and said, "I'm not going to use it because I don't want it captured." I operate through email. It would have been really hard for me to operate in the White House without it. Whether it is wise or not, I decided that I was going to go ahead and do it.

I did make probably a bad decision, which is I took literally the counsel's guidance not to take any internal documents with you when you leave the White House. I did a lot of external documents through my work at the Office of Strategic Initiatives, so I've kept all those. But I didn't take internal exchanges and memos. I later found out other colleagues did and I wish I had. But they're still archived, and the notes with Steve are too.

Nelson: When your interest in politics is growing and your faith journey as related accelerated is about the time when the so-called religious right is coming on the national scene, with close ties with evangelical Christianity and Ronald Reagan—

Wehner: Right.

Nelson: Were you paying attention to that? Did you have any thoughts about that?

Wehner: Yes, you're right, it was happening. I was frankly never fully comfortable with it. This has probably been the arc of my writings on religion and faith. I was uncomfortable with it for several reasons.

Nelson: The "it" you're uncomfortable with was—?

Wehner: With the religious right model. Let's call it the [Jerry] Falwell–[Marion Gordon "Pat"] Robertson model for simplification purposes. I was uncomfortable to some extent with the mode of engagement, and I was uncomfortable with the idea of subordinating faith to politics because I think faith transcends politics and stands in judgment of all political ideologies. I have always been wary of connecting the dots from the Bible to X policy. It's tricky because justice matters, right? But what justice means is not always clear.

Then there are prudential questions. Even if you think that justice leads you to a particular position, are you John Brown or Abraham Lincoln? What is the right tactical approach if you're on what everyone would say is the right side of the slavery question? It still doesn't answer prudential questions. I was uncomfortable with the way faith got conflated with politics, mostly

from a faith perspective, frankly. I'm conservative, including socially conservative, so I was sympathetic to their aims.

I wrote a letter to the *Tri-City Herald*, the local paper where I grew up—I think this must have been a summer of college. Someone had written a religious right thing and I wrote a pushback against it. That has always been with me. I wrote a book with Mike Gerson, *City of Man*, several years ago in which we amplified that theme. I'm sympathetic to the causes—I consider myself, for example, pro-life but never completely satisfied with my position there, with some caveats. But the model of engagement bothered me and on a deeper level—

Perry: Is there also on your part a sense of separation of church and state, more of almost a Southern Baptist approach, very separationist, wanting to have their faith but also concerned that if the faith becomes too involved in politics, politics and government will become too involved in the faith?

Wehner: I'm not sure. If somebody more on the left came to me and said, "separation of church and state," I probably would say, "Yes, but that's not necessarily separation of faith and public life." Some of the great moments in American history are moments that were informed by religious faith, including certainly the abolition movement, antisegregation, Martin Luther King Jr., child labor laws. I've always been cognizant of the idea of faith—and we can get into this with President Bush—faith informing people's politics.

It informs my politics too, because for people of faith it creates a kind of moral architecture or a moral prism through which you look at things—the matter of justice and human dignity. This matters and it's not just a power game, it's not up for grabs, it's not [Friedrich] Nietzsche and the will to power. There is something deeper that transcends that. It has always been a kind of tightrope, which is its own informant, but you have to be very careful about it, as I said, to move from the abstract principles of justice and human dignity to saying, "That means you need to embrace school choice" or tax cut or whatever.

Milkis: Beyond that policy concern, Pete, when you mentioned the abolitionists and the civil rights movement, although they surely wanted to influence politics they kept their distance from government in their insurgency, it seemed like the Christian right didn't keep—this is just a question, beyond a policy position.

Wehner: Yes, I think that's right. Probably the best examples of faith would be where it nudged things along in the way you describe. Although there is the [William] Wilberforce example in England, in which a person of deep Christian faith—He was involved in Parliament and pushed it for 20 or 30 years. He had a very long-term commitment, he was involved.

Just being involved, the identification of faith with a political party or ideology makes me nervous. It's an almost instinctive thing. But I'm not in favor of complete separation and don't assert there is no overlay or even pretend that my faith hasn't affected my own view of politics. I'm sure it has.

Antholis: I remember in the primaries leading up to the 2000 election, then Governor Bush was interviewed by Brian Lamb, and Lamb asked him, "What is the most influential book you've ever read?" And he said, "The Bible." It got quite a lot of attention.

Wehner: Right.

Antholis: I'm curious if you remember that and if you remember your reaction.

Wehner: What I do remember, actually—it was in a debate and they said, "Who is the most important political philosopher?" and he said, "Jesus." I think it was a one-word answer. There was a pause, and then the debater asked and he said—this is from memory—"Because he changed my life." It was something like that.

Milkis: "Changed my heart."

Wehner: Thank you, that's right, "changed my heart." We can get into that because I think that was very true. I remember that answer. I was impressed by it because it seemed very authentic and it did speak to something that was quite genuine, it did change his heart. It changed the direction of his life. That informed and animated him as President in many ways.

He didn't elaborate much on it in terms of the political philosophy that one would have taken from what "Jesus" meant. Gary Bauer was in the debate at that time. He may have given the same answer but spoken about it in a more expansive way. I remember thinking Bush's was a short answer and didn't elaborate on it in a way that I would have been interested in hearing. What does that mean if you say that? What political philosophy do you take out of that? I had those two reactions to it.

Perry: Let's carry on then from college into your professional work.

Wehner: I was a political science major, University of Washington, I did an internship when I was a junior with Senator Hemstad. As a senior I did an internship program. Because I was political science, I thought, *This is not a very marketable major*. [*laughter*]

Perry: All four of us are political science PhDs.

Wehner: Change now. So I thought I needed to help myself in terms of being a marketable force, and I thought internships were the way to do it, both because of practical experience and because of the contacts you make. There was a program at the University of Washington and a career counselor, Gail, who was very nice and encouraged me to do this. I had two options that I was weighing. One was to work on a Middle East newsletter. One man wrote it and I would have been part of a two- or three-person operation. The other was the Center for Strategic and International Studies, which of course is a very distinguished think tank and I could work in the communications shop.

I went back and forth on which one to choose. With the newsletter I would have been part of a smaller operation and would probably have had more influence. In the end I went with CSIS [Center for Strategic and International Studies] because I thought of it as a serious, large institution and, frankly, Henry Kissinger was a part of it, and I had been fascinated by Kissinger in college.

Perry: Tell us more about that.

Wehner: And I want to get to [John F.] Kennedy because I noticed you also had mentioned in your notes about the Kennedy speeches. I had read Kissinger's *A World Restored*, which was his dissertation turned into a book. I found him a fascinating figure. In some respects, there was no one quite like him in American history. He was a foreign-policy figure who had a kind of rock star status, even his dating life. Hard to believe.

Milkis: German immigrant, which must have been of interest to you.

Wehner: Yes, he was one of those German immigrants whose accent got stronger the longer he was here.

Milkis: That was put on.

Wehner: I was really interested in his mind; I was taken by his wit and his humor. The Nixon/Kissinger approach to foreign policy was quite interesting. He was a very powerful intellect, which impressed me. I worked in the Reagan administration. Reagan was a very large figure to me as a young Republican and conservative, and of course Reagan ran against Kissinger, certainly in '76 but even to some extent in '80. And it was a different doctrine, it was rollback as opposed to containment. So I ended up at CSIS.

The other thing I should mention before we leave—because I did see in here about the John F. Kennedy speeches. I was fascinated to see the Ted Sorensen book on Kennedy over there, which I read in college, and then *A Thousand Days* by [Arthur] Schlesinger. I read both of those books and was really taken by them and captivated by the Kennedy administration and Camelot and everything that went with it.

I read a lot about Kennedy. I was always impressed with his mind. I thought he had an intellectually rigorous mind, a certain kind of detachment, serious intellect. One thing that struck me about Kennedy in reading lots of different books about him is he had this capacity that some politicians have—but it is a rare quality—the ability to connect to individuals in the world in which they are and then they think of you in that world. They think of you as supremely skilled in that particular world.

If Kennedy was with newspaper reporters or journalists, he would be able to communicate with them in that world, and they would think, "This guy really knows a lot about it." If he were here, he would talk to you about political science. If he were with philosophers, about political theory. He could do kind of high and low. He was an interesting figure. I was completely captivated by his speeches, they were fantastic. I used to go to Suzzallo Library at the University of Washington and listen to them on my own, it wasn't for any course. I actually began to memorize them inadvertently.

Perry: What struck you about them?

Wehner: Just the beauty, the sheer craftsmanship. There was a real style that you could see, which was the Kennedy style, and the ability to say certain things in new ways and elegant language. The depth of them and the range of them. If you read, for example, his tribute to Robert Frost, it is just a lovely speech, but it is about poetry. It is the kind of thing you don't

always associate with Presidents. A liberal arts education seemed to animate them. The power of them.

Perry: We talked about separation of church and state. What did you think of his Houston speech in September of 1960—and the Jeffersonian/Ted Sorensen libertarian view of religion and politics?

Wehner: I'd have to go back and read it again. Of course it happened before I was born, but when I later read it, it seemed to make sense to me. I knew that he did it as a political imperative too. I remember being struck by a certain boldness in that speech. He dealt with it head on. I'm not sure a lot of political consultants then or now would have said, "You just need to do this. You shouldn't say these words because it is going to elevate the issue so much." But he just dealt with it head on.

I'm doing this from memory, but I think he had this line where he said—it was a lead-up of essentially, "The Pope and the church will not have anything to say when I'm President and if that eventuality would ever happen, and it wouldn't, I would resign my office." It was a very emphatic statement. I was impressed that it worked. There was something to be said about efficacy and politics.

Perry: The two internships that you could choose from through the Washington senator, both were in communications?

Wehner: Yes.

Perry: It seems that you're moving from your political science pure major to what I presume you thought was more marketable. And you're reading these speeches. Do you begin to see yourself as a communications person or a speechwriter at this time?

Wehner: I don't remember that I saw myself as a speechwriter. I'm not sure I thought I was a good enough writer to be a speechwriter, frankly. I do remember when Jon Vondracek at CSIS did my intern evaluation he said, "Pete is a better oral communicator than he is a written communicator," and I wasn't a very good oral communicator.

Antholis: Then again in retrospect, that may say more about him than about you.

Wehner: Actually, what I think it does say about me is I did learn to write. Writing was not a natural gift to me. I was a person who got better through lots of reading and lots of writing. Some people—I think George Will was born out of the womb with ink—

Perry: A pen.

Milkis: And fully formed paragraphs.

Wehner: For him it came naturally, but for most of us it doesn't, it didn't for me. I remember thinking when I would read his books and Teddy White's books how neat it would be to be an aide to a President. I didn't think I would ever get there. I was a pretty good student at the University of Washington, but I wasn't like top of the class at Harvard [University].

I remember reading them and thinking, *Gosh, I wonder if I were in that position what would I do or what would I say or what would I advise*. I never really had a longing to be a politician or run for office. Probably because Sorensen—I used to think, *Wouldn't it be a blast to have a job like that?*

Perry: And you made it come true. Take us on your journey into the world of Washington and politics.

Wehner: I did the internship at CSIS. It ended in the summer of '83. I got a job at a State Department commission on foreign and economic assistance, which was under the auspices of CSIS. I was hired as essentially a gofer at this point. This was the pre-Internet age. I was supposed to take things around town and drop them off.

I went to the people who were heading up the research of this commission and I said, "I have to do this, but I'd like to volunteer in my free time, late hours, to do research if I can." Almost immediately there was a research job and they hired me for it. So I did that for the summer.

The internship was running out, I didn't really have any money. I was assuming I would go back to Washington state and figure things out. I heard that there was an opening in Latin American studies, Georges Fauriol and Bill Perry ran that at CSIS. There was a job opening for a research assistant and I applied. I didn't have any background in Latin American affairs, but I met different people at CSIS, including Fred Axelgard and a number of others. I asked them if they would weigh in on my behalf.

Georges Fauriol interviewed me because Bill Perry was out of the country. I ended up working with Bill. He hired me and said, "If you can lobby the Hill as well as you lobbied me for this job, you'll do just fine." So I got hired there and worked there from '83 until March of '85.

That was not a well-funded program at CSIS, so I was on a commission basis. I think I was getting $9,800 a year before taxes and health care, so I was not making much money. I was at a small gathering and a Catholic scholar named Robert Royal, who was at the Ethics & Public Policy Center at the time, mentioned that there was an opening because Ernest Lefever, president of the Ethics & Public Policy Center was taking a job as a special assistant. So I applied, did an interview. Then they asked for a writing sample.

You would do summaries of books they had published. I did one for a George Kennan book. You would do one or two introductory paragraphs and then take excerpts, because these were books of essays. Then you would do a summary. Dr. Lefever really liked what I had written and I got hired there. That was March of '85.

I was at the Ethics & Public Policy Center '85 to'86 and two things happened. One was Ed [Edwin J.] Delattre at the Ethics & Public Policy Center. He had gone to graduate school with Bill Bennett, who was then Secretary of Education. I was friends with Ed, got to know him. There was a touch football game that they played and they invited me to come out. So I came out. Then I started to organize games with other teams and it became a fairly serious thing.

Perry: That's a very Washington thing, softball, touch football.

Wehner: Softball more, touch football a little less. It was a little harder to get those games, but we did. And I figured out when Bill decided to hire me, which was a Sunday game. We were playing a team with former Green Bay Packers on it. I went up for a catch—I was Bill's best player, and I was his receiver.

Perry: He was the coach?

Wehner: He was the quarterback. I went up and caught a touchdown pass. I got hit kind of high and low, scissored. When I came up I had gotten hit in the mouth, so I was bleeding from the mouth, but I held onto the ball and we ended up winning.

Nelson: This is touch football?

Wehner: Yes, but it was pretty rough. We played hard. But I think the moment I made that catch is when he decided to hire me as a speechwriter. The other thing that had happened is I had heard Bill give a speech at some public policy center on the importance of history. Then he did the Q and A. I thought, *This guy is really impressive, he's really smart.* The speech was very well written and elegant. But what struck me was in the Q and A, because then you can tell if someone is just being propped up by speechwriters or whether it is legit. His command of his subject matter was really good.

Then he gave a speech on the Judeo-Christian tradition in the American political order, which I really liked. He had come out in favor of school prayer and I was not necessarily in favor of it, I was pretty agnostic on it. The speech itself I found quite interesting and I wrote a piece for the *Washington Times*, which at that point was a conservative alternative to the *Post*. It never matched the *Post*, but at that point had a reputation as a conservative place to go because of a lot of the media outlets.

I did a piece on the Bennett agenda. It was my effort to articulate the Bennett education agenda. The short version is that it was more than SAT [Scholastic Aptitude Test] scores and skills. It was education in the deeper kind of Aristotelian sense, the education of character and to love things that are worthy of being loved.

He called me early that morning. At that point I would work really late and got in late. I got a note that Secretary Bennett called, so I called him back. I was nervous and I tried to be clever on the phone and I wasn't, but he was very nice. He thanked me for it. That put me on his radar. Then I got to know him through the football games. He hired me in January of '87 as a speechwriter. I worked for a guy named Bruce Carnes, who was Under Secretary, because a slot wasn't quite open, so I was there for a month or two. Then I moved up and became a speechwriter for Bill.

Bill Kristol was chief of staff, John Walters was there, a woman named Marion Blakey, Michael Jackson, and my colleagues were Gene Scalia, son of Justice [Antonin] Scalia, a very good lawyer, a very good speechwriter. I replaced John Cribb, who is a friend and ended up doing *The Book of Virtues* with Bill. There was a colleague named David Tell and a number of other people. That began my career in government.

I was with Bill in the Department of Education from January of ’87 until I joined the Bush administration. There was a short period of time when we went to something called the Madison Center, which was created for Bill. But then he went back in government almost immediately as “drug czar” under President Bush. There I was a special assistant for him.

Perry: President Bush 41.

Wehner: Yes. At that time the drug issue was a very big deal. It was one of the top issues for the American public. Bill had been a very high-profile figure as Secretary of Education.

Perry: He was a real thought leader. I was in graduate school here at that time when he was in the Reagan administration. He came here to the university to speak and I remember all the graduate students and government, political science people going to hear him and speaking about him afterward for hours because he was a thought leader and a change agent.

Wehner: Yes, very much so. Very controversial in some education circles, but I think respected even by people who didn’t agree with him, because he is a person of learning and he was a thought leader. He was a crucial part of the Reagan revolution, Reagan army. He was a respected and even revered figure among conservatives, probably because he had a certain fearlessness and the issues he got involved in. One of the things I learned from Bill is the ability to tie politics to political theory and ideas. He did that very well. It made him rare as a public figure. He was able to weigh in on Supreme Court decisions and was able to talk about Lincoln and popular sovereignty and the Dred Scott decision in a way that actually helped his case and was persuasive to a lot of people.

Nelson: I’ve always thought, Pete, that there is a certain irony to Bennett’s tenure at the Department of Education because the Reagan campaign in 1980 promised to get rid of the Department of Education.

Wehner: Right.

Nelson: I’m intrigued if you thought about that, and writing about Bennett’s program for education, thought that instead of doing that he was formulating a smart, conservative position on education. Which you may have thought was a better thing to do politically and principally than getting rid of the Department. I don’t want to put words in your mouth, I’m just curious if that paradox was in your head as you were thinking about Bennett and when he worked there.

Wehner: Right. I came a little later. Reagan started his second term in ’85, so I wasn’t there right after he started. Yes, it was. The short answer to it was this was an answer to Jim Ceaser, which is, it’s not sufficient to say you want to get rid of the Department of Education—

Nelson: I’m just laughing because he is my close friend.

Wehner: He’s terrific, I love Jim.

Antholis: Parenthetically, he was my undergrad professor during this exact time period.

Perry: And my graduate school advisor.

Wehner: The looming presence of Jim Ceaser.

Antholis: But also Bill Bennett and Allan Bloom—

Perry: Yes.

Antholis: There was a period when Allan Bloom was writing *Closing of the American Mind* and the academy was—

Wehner: That's exactly right, and Lynne Cheney was—

Antholis: The academy was a huge presence—and Lynne Cheney as well.

Wehner: The "Killer Bs" they called them, Bennett, Bloom, and I think was it Saul Bellow? The Killer Bs being a term used about these conservative intellectuals in the world of either education or literature, and *Closing of the American Mind* came out in '87.

Perry: And Lynne Cheney was head of NEH [National Endowment for the Humanities].

Wehner: Exactly.

Nelson: You were about to give the short answer.

Wehner: Yes, which was the Department of Education. There were two or three votes in the Senate to get rid of it. Reagan ran in 1980 on eliminating it, but there was no practical way to do it. Bill's view and Reagan's view was that if we're not going to get rid of it, let's make the most of it. So we're going to use it to push ideas like choice, content, character, high standards. Some of this was policy, some of it was rhetorical, but Bill was a genius rhetorically, so he was able to get debates started just by speeches he gave.

Harvard had its 350th anniversary and Bill went up and gave a speech on the Common Core. Actually, the president of Harvard, Derek Bok, at the time, answered him. I don't think it was a debate, I'd have to go back and check. I know Bill gave a speech that got a lot of attention and then Bok responded. Bill was a genius at getting those things in there. If we can't get rid of it, we're going to make the most use of it.

There was a time early in '87, we had been fighting for a couple of years to cut the Department of Education budget. It was one of the few agencies that actually did that in the Reagan years. Every department would submit their budget. Bill was a genuine Reaganite and took his guidance seriously. Education spending always went up and it would completely dominate the debate, so we couldn't really break through the din. There was a *New York Times* story in which we had announced we would go ahead and support increases in the education budget. It was just a practical consideration. "Money is going to come anyway. This fight is a fruitless fight and in fact it is a counterproductive fight, and we want to try to talk about a proactive agenda. So we're going to go ahead and increase spending." There was some criticism among conservatives about that.

Perry: What were you learning, Pete, at this time about the art and craft of speechwriting and working closely with the principal who was also, as you say, brilliant, and I'm sure capable of writing a whole speech on his own?

Wehner: It was sometimes better without us than with us, but sometimes you do need a prepared text. One thing I learned generally was that Bill had put together a really impressive team with the quality of the people. There was a sense of common purpose and large purpose. People liked each other. There was an excitement to being in that. It wasn't a backwater agency that didn't do anything. There were ideas and fights and back-and-forth. As a young guy it was nice to be part of that. And the power of ideas. All the people there. Bill Kristol got his PhD at Harvard and John Walters had studied under Bloom. A lot of people came with an academic background.

I remember we had breakfast with Charles Murray, who had written *Losing Ground*, which is one of those climate-changing books on welfare reform for conservatives. It came out in '84. Then he wrote a book called *In Pursuit Of* [*Happiness and Good Government*], which didn't get nearly the attention that *Losing Ground* did, but it had just come out. It was more of a Jeffersonian book with more on his libertarian views. Several of us had breakfast with Charles Murray. Later, when I became OSI [Office of Strategic Initiatives] Director in the Bush Presidency, I would do a version of that.

In terms of speechwriting—

Perry: The process?

Wehner: Yes, the process was a similar process to the White House. In the White House it was both more intense and larger, but it was the idea of sitting down, sometimes with the principal, Bill Bennett, or sometimes with Bill Kristol, and laying out this is the kind of speech, doing a draft, talking it through, getting reaction, and then getting input throughout. You learned the process of speechwriting. Then you have to learn the voice of the person you're writing for, which is not always easy. I always found speechwriting the hardest of all the writing I've done, and I've done so many different forms—op-eds, books, essays, blogs. Speechwriting has always been to me the most difficult form, partly because I tend to think in terms of arguments. A lot of times speeches have that, but they're rhetorical too.

Of course when you do give a speech you're writing for the ear, whereas if you write an essay or an article you're writing for the eye. It's different. You have to have applause lines in speeches.

Nelson: What you hope will be an applause line.

Wehner: Yes, otherwise it is very quiet.

Nelson: If you write into your draft—

Wehner: I could just see somebody, you know, reading an essay in *Dissent* magazine to applaud halfway through. But I learned that, the idea of collaborating with other speech colleagues so I was close to those people, and the importance of the words in politics to drive debates and to frame issues.

Nelson: In the anthropology of Washington, my guess is that you are now known as a Bennett guy at this time. Did you think of yourself that way? Did you think of yourself as in effect having hitched your wagon to historic—?

Wehner: At the time, yes, I definitely was viewed as a Bennett guy because I'd worked for him from '87 until 2001. We were at Hudson Institute and then Empower America, which is a think tank, with Bill Bennett, Jack Kemp, Jeane Kirkpatrick, and [John Vincent] Vin Weber. I helped Bill with books that he did. *The Death of Outrage*, a book that came out during the [William] Clinton impeachment, I helped write that. It was written in eight weeks in the summer of '98. It was a number-one *New York Times* best seller. That will give you an example in terms of how it was easier for me to write. That book was a series of very discrete chapters. It was essentially the various arguments that were thrown out by defenders of the Clinton administration. What's the role of character and political leaders? And what about the law and all of—? There were about seven chapters. Each chapter began with quotes of the case being made by the Clinton defenders. And then the chapter would essentially go through and refute them. That kind of thing is fairly easy for me, because that's how my mind works.

I was very close to Bennett and he was very generous. He introduced me to his world and I got to know people. We still have a lunch with Bill Bennett, Charles Murray, Charles Krauthammer, and me. That started when I worked with Bill. I was very much known as a Bennett guy. A lot of my relationships in Washington started with Bill Kristol, a very good friend then and now, and John Walters I've known throughout. John served in the Bush administration as drug czar.

Nelson: Bennett was thought at times to have Presidential ambitions.

Wehner: Yes, actually he was. He thought about it and I talked to him about it. He was offered the Vice Presidency by [Robert] Dole in '96. I was in Capon Springs, West Virginia, with our family on vacation. That was a confusing time. It was Bill who recommended Jack Kemp to Dole—

Nelson: He didn't want to do it?

Wehner: Bill ended up not doing it.

Perry: Did he say why?

Wehner: I think he didn't feel—I don't remember the exact reason. My feeling on Bill in the end, even when he ran for President—I talked about this at dinner yesterday when somebody asked me about the Presidential campaign. First thing I said is that you have to want to do it. If you have to be convinced to do it, like I was mentioning last night, Mitch Daniels polling his family. I thought Bill would have been terrific and it would have been fun to be a part of the campaign, but I always tried to separate my own narrow career ambition/interests from my advice to him. My advice was always to do it if you really want to do it. But if you don't want to do it, don't get in. If you have a kind of nagging thing—for whatever reason he just didn't really want to do it.

Nelson: He had some gambling issues.

Wehner: But that was later.

Nelson: That hadn't already started?

Wehner: No, I don't think that was any factor. When Bill was talked about as a candidate it went back to even '88. He was a real rock star in the Reagan Presidency. Then '92 I remember Ed Rollins and some other people coming to him and saying, "You should challenge George H. W. Bush, he's weak." [Pat] Buchanan ended up doing that. "Conservatives are looking for someone to go to and you would be the guy." He wasn't going to do that, he was too loyal to President George H. W. Bush, whom he liked very much personally. He had been his drug czar; he wasn't going to do that.

Then there was '96, which would really have been the time for him to make a run. So there was not— The gambling issue wasn't a factor then.

Nelson: Are you saying that Dole asked him to be his running mate?

Wehner: Yes.

Nelson: Not just to be considered?

Wehner: No. I wasn't there, but it was taken by Bill and the Dole people—you know how this goes. It's like, "If you would, we would like you to." It was a signal to Bill that at least I always got from Bill and I remember the paperwork you would have had to fill out, that it was pretty much his to turn down, which he did. I'm sure he had mentioned Jack. They might have gotten to Jack anyway, but he mentioned Jack to Dole and that was the person he ended up picking.

Nelson: Through this process of wondering, "Is my guy going to run for President?" did it elevate that as something that was on your list of ambitions? *I'd love to be a part of something like that and if it's not going to be Bennett I hope it will be somebody else.*

Wehner: Not really. That kind of ambition has never been a particular part of me. When I read those Kennedy—I would think about being in the White House, but I didn't set—even with Bill running I never kind of weighed in. We were very close. He's always been kind to me. He was almost like family.

I could have gone in and said, "You really have to do this for the country." I just never felt that. I remember consciously thinking, *I have to give the advice that I think is best for him.* When he didn't run, I wasn't like, *Oh, God, there goes my chance. We could have done it.* It was never factored in. It was such a nice gig with him, it was working well. It was comfortable. I didn't have to raise money because he was getting money from foundations—the Heritage Foundation was there. I was part of the package deal. We were doing stuff, we worked very well together. I didn't get involved in the campaign; I wasn't active. I don't think I thought about being in the administration.

Antholis: Do you think it's fair to say as a general statement about Washington, across political parties, that there is a cohort of people interested in ideas or influence as opposed to actually

holding reins of power? If so, would you see yourself more as part of that circle than an apparatus and a machinery of explicit authority?

Wehner: Yes, I think that's right. Of course you do have people with both, and Bill and Bill Kristol—there are a number of people interested in ideas who do get involved. At the end the idea is if you don't have the apparatus, the power can often not mean anything. You do have to implement the ideas eventually. It's not just an abstract debate. As a general matter there are people who are drawn to politics on the ideas side and there are people who are drawn to it more on the mechanics of politics, the winning, the power.

It's a very imperfect way. I consider myself to be more a conservative than a Republican. The reason I think of myself that way is I think of conservatism as an intellectual tradition, whereas I think of Republican as being a party. I have never been drawn so much to the Republican/party side. I've been more drawn to the conservative/intellectual side.

Perry: So ideology more than partisanship?

Wehner: Yes.

Nelson: That's interesting.

Antholis: Philosophy more than ideology?

Wehner: Yes, philosophy more than ideology. Ideology is tricky because it has different connotations. Probably in common usage today you say "ideology" and people think of a kind of dogmatism. Mark Lilla wrote an interesting piece last year in the *New Republic*. It was about this distinction between dogmatism and ideology, but a lot of people associate them. Ideology has connotations, understandably so, of a kind of rigidity, we're talking about confirmation bias and so forth. Philosophy is a more nuanced term.

But yes, conservatism is an ideology like liberalism and naturalism and a lot of other things. I was drawn more to the idea of a slightly more philosophical grounding in it.

Nelson: During your time at Empower America, when did you first become aware of George W. Bush? Was it his actions as Governor in Texas? Did that come on your radar screen?

Wehner: The first time I saw him was at the 1992 convention for his father in Houston. Bill gave a speech nominating Dan Quayle. I remember being with Bill in the background and George W. Bush was there waiting. I thought of him as frisky.

Perry: Please explain, define.

Wehner: He seemed energetic, bounding about, joking with people, almost towel-slapping kind of humor. Other people were so quiet, and he seemed to be energized and having fun. It wasn't a long exposure. I had this image of him there. That's what I remember of him, being energetic and bounding about.

Nelson: Was it a favorable first impression?

Wehner: Yes, it was. I didn't spend any time with him, I didn't get to talk to him very much. He just seemed to be having fun. He didn't seem uptight or arrogant or "I'm the son of the candidate, get away from me." There was a people-liking quality to him that came through.

Then I saw him when he was considering running for President and he invited Bill to Austin. We got picked up by Karl Rove.

Nelson: Is this '99?

Wehner: Yes, this is '99. There was a breakfast with Bill and I thought I was going to be in the breakfast, but Bush made it clear that it was just going to be him and Bill. So I actually sat down with Karl, the two of us in the Governor's Mansion. That was the first time I met Karl. So they had breakfast, and it seemed to go very well.

He was making a pitch to Bill. He was going to run and he would like his support. Bill came away very impressed. I remember going to the press conference with Bill and Bush afterward. I had never really seen George W. Bush and I was impressed with him. I contacted a couple of my friends who were journalists—I think it was Ron Brownstein and Joe Klein, Joe and I had a falling out later, but at the time he was a friend and we have since reconciled—and telling them, "This guy is going to win the nomination and win the Presidency." I had a sense that this was a person with a lot of real skills as a candidate, which I hadn't been aware of. It wasn't something I had focused on. I knew about him in Texas, of course, and he was a successful Governor, but seeing him there and seeing that press conference— I remember seeing Karen Hughes, it was the first time I had ever met Karen—being impressed with him and thinking—

Nelson: The Bush take on education, which was something he worked on and cared about deeply as Governor, was a different take, not conflicting necessarily, but a different take or set of priorities than the Bill Bennett approach. I wonder if you agree with that or if you have any thoughts about that.

Wehner: I never thought about it quite like that, because Bill spent a lot of time as Secretary of Education on disadvantaged children. In fact, we put out a series of very good books called "What Works." One of them was just a "What Works" in terms of education more broadly, but one of them was what works for disadvantaged schools. Bill spent an enormous amount of time going to disadvantaged schools. That was one of the arguments for school choice, which was— There was a moral component to it, which is it is most important not for upper-income kids, because they effectively have school choice if their parents make enough money, but low-income kids who are stuck in these awful schools.

There was an entire set of editorials on Bill and his war with the Chicago public schools. If you go back to 1987, he went to Chicago and said, "These are the worst school districts in the country," which freaked out the Chicago people. "Oh, no, we're not." That was actually a good debate because all the media got involved and the *Chicago Tribune* and they essentially said, "Bill Bennett is right." Empirically the Chicago school district was the worst.

Bush had that kind of interest too. Bush spoke about education. Generally, he cared very much about it. It was this idea of social promotion, putting kids who can't read in third grade,

promoting to fourth grade. How to get a good education, why prospects are diminished. They complemented each other pretty well. Their agenda was pretty consistent too.

Milkis: What impressed you about Governor Bush in that press conference?

Wehner: He was really in command. I got a sense of a strong personality. He was funny. I don't remember the lines he used, but I remember laughing and the press laughing. He was good with Bill. They had a nice repartee, they joked back and forth. Bill is a pretty witty guy; they were a nice match for each other.

It wasn't an issue, per se, and it wasn't an issues-based press conference—

Milkis: He had command?

Wehner: Yes, those things that you sense in politicians. Is this a person who fills a room? What kind of personality does he have? I didn't really expect that. Not because I had prejudged him, but I hadn't spent much time with him. As I said, I reached out to journalists and with email or phone or whatever it was. I said, "Mark my words, I think this guy is going to win."

Perry: Tell us about any comparison or contrast between Bush 41 and 43 at this point. You've obviously been in Washington; you have seen Bush 41 operate. What were you thinking about their relationship and their different styles and personas?

Wehner: The relationship I thought was fantastic, it is an unbelievably good and impressive family. The children revere both parents, but their dad—it's striking to anybody who knows them. It is true with Jeb [John Ellis Bush] too, the way that he talks about his dad. That's the most important thing to understand about the father and the sons.

I got the sense that if you were a conservative in the Bush 41 Presidency, it was harder partly because he followed this conservative icon Ronald Reagan. He had done the tax increase and there was a lot of unhappiness with him not being sufficiently conservative. He was a different kind of conservative than Reagan for sure. I got the sense with the son that he was more driven by an agenda than I sensed with the father. Now I didn't work for George H. W. Bush. I may have met him once or twice; I can't pretend to know him. But (a) I follow politics, (b) I was in the administration, and (c) I was conservative, so I was fairly plugged in. But fairly or not, there was a sense of a kind of entropy in the Bush Presidency.

After two terms of Reagan or two terms of anybody—Hillary Clinton is going to find this out when she runs and if she were to be elected—you've gotten an awful lot, he was Vice President so a lot of the things that he believed in had gotten done. [Barack] Obama found this out in 2012. His agenda for his second term was pretty thin because much of what he wanted, for good or ill, had gotten through.

His father was at somewhat of a disadvantage, which is that a lot of big things had gotten done. Tax reform had been done; tax cuts had been done. He had done the tax increase because of the deficit. He had the Gulf War, which was a supreme achievement. But on the domestic side and intellectually, there was a sense of running out of energy, which was not simply or even primarily or even because of George H. W. Bush, but maybe circumstances. Whereas with

George W. Bush, this came after two terms of Clinton, after the [Newt] Gingrich revolution had crashed and burned. Gingrich lost the Speakership and there was a sense of the Republican Party casting about, and he came in with a real agenda and a cause. It had various elements, but part of it was compassionate conservatism. It was using government to catalyze, to push promarket reforms, but it was not a pure antigovernment agenda.

The education was a strong and deeply held view of his. There was more of a sense of energy and excitement and a real agenda. In 2000 Bush had a superb policy apparatus and a superb team.

Perry: Tell us about that.

Wehner: I was not involved. My relationship with Bush was really my relationship with Mike Gerson. I met Mike at Empower America. Our first conversation was about Malcolm Muggeridge, a British journalist who had then become a Christian. I remember talking to Mike about Muggeridge, and I think it was an interview Bill Buckley had done with him on *Firing Line*.

Mike became one of my closest friends. That relationship has stayed to this day. I remember talking to Mike when he was interviewed by Governor Bush, then once he was hired talking to him about speeches and campaigns and so forth. I was not involved in the campaign other than derivatively through Mike. But I got to know the people and I would talk to them. I talked to Dan Bartlett during the 2000 election. But the shop that was set up was really good. Josh Bolten was running it, Josh later became Deputy Chief of Staff and then Chief of Staff for President Bush. Flat out one of the most competent and impressive people I've ever met in government.

The team that they had was really good. They put out very serious speeches. They had a book that came out—it was a collection of his speeches and policy prescriptions. I remember David Gergen speaking very well about the Bush campaign and the ideas that they ran. Karl was a political genius, and they had Karen, who of course had been with Governor Bush for a long time. It was a close, tightly knit group that worked well together. They liked each other. There were relatively few tensions.

Bush really bonded with them and showed them something when he got destroyed by [John] McCain in New Hampshire by 18 points or something. Rather than recriminations, Bush met with them and said, "Look, this was my failure, not yours." There were no firings. "We're going to come back in South Carolina." That showed a lot. President Bush inspired a very deep sense of loyalty among the people who worked for him, frankly more than Ronald Reagan did. There were more tell-all books about Reagan. You had David Stockman, you had Donald Regan.

Nelson: Reagan was more distant personally.

Wehner: I think that was part of it. There's no question that President Bush on a personal basis—Reagan was a tremendously nice and decent man, but it's no secret that, outside of Nancy, even his closest friends felt like they never really knew him and connected with him. That's not true of George W. Bush. He is a person you can really know on a visceral and emotional level.

Nelson: Were you in touch with Mike Gerson in particular during the election year?

Wehner: Yes.

Nelson: What did you all talk about after Bush gave the speech at Bob Jones University?

Wehner: That was South Carolina, right?

Nelson: Yes.

Wehner: You mean the fact that he gave it at Bob Jones?

Nelson: Yes, and more generally that was taken as part of the salvo that was being used to undermine—

Perry: Against McCain and more moderate—

Wehner: I don't remember. I had some reservations about speaking at Bob Jones generally for all the obvious reasons. On the other hand, I wasn't running the campaign and he had to win in South Carolina. I know McCain came out with a position on the Confederate flag, which later he regretted and recanted. I understand when you're running and somebody says, "Fine, Confederate flag, I'm not comfortable with it either, but if we lose South Carolina we lose the election and everything that we care about is going to go down the toilet with it." It's easy to sit in judgment if you're not part of—I just don't remember talking to Mike much about the Bob Jones speech.

I remember talking to him about the convention speech and generally about the campaign. There was some tension, not between Mike and me, but Mike was in a slightly peculiar position because Bennett had not announced who he was for, McCain or Bush. He said positive and negative things about both of them. He had done a piece in the *Wall Street Journal* because Bush refused to talk about something in his past, and everyone was speculating he had used cocaine or something. There was a lot of pressure on him to say what it was. I think it ended up being the DWI [driving while intoxicated] that came out in the last couple of days of the election. But there was a lot of speculation, and Bill had written an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal*. It was critical of him about why he needed to come forward with it.

At that time Bill's endorsement meant a lot and his opinion, whether praise or criticism, was paid attention to. I remember Mike calling me and saying, "What can we do to get him to come on board?" Not in a pressure way or a forlorn way, but saying, "We feel that Bush has the agenda that Bennett would like and McCain is not a conservative in a lot of respects." Kind of "What's the problem here?" We talked about that. I don't know that Bill ever endorsed one way or the other until it was essentially a fait accompli.

Perry: Did you talk to Bill about it? Given what you're saying, that he was indicating in the *Wall Street Journal* piece and his care and desire for character, and given that he was the former drug czar, if the word was—and we all know that it *was* the word—that there could have been drug usage in the background of this Presidential candidate, was it *that* that he was afraid to support him?

Wehner: I don't think so. It was the idea that the explanation being given by the Bush campaign on why he wouldn't go forward wasn't working and was harmful because it left it open to all sorts of speculation.

Perry: Wasn't forthcoming enough?

Nelson: He had a one-sentence answer he repeated: "When I was young and irresponsible I did things—" Bennett didn't think that—

Wehner: I'd have to go back and read, but he praised Bush too and he was critical of McCain at various points, especially when McCain compared Bush to Clinton. Because there had been some stuff going on that the Bush campaign didn't do—There was never any proof that they did—but things were being spread about McCain. McCain became very agitated and kept comparing him ethically to Clinton, and Bennett weighed in on Bush's behalf. Bennett liked Bush a lot. I think he was helpful, but he didn't officially endorse.

Perry: Could I ask a specific question since you're still in the think tank business at this point before you go into the Bush 43 administration. I know that our Bill has talked to you about this POTUS [President of the United States] first-year study that we're doing, first of all—and Sid is working with me specifically on this, as is Mike. We're going to be doing a set of issues and commentaries and studies related to historical Presidencies and their first years. Then the next set of studies will be issue-driven, the obvious things: national security and defense policy and income inequality and many of the things we were discussing at last night's dinner.

We want to know, certainly—Bill Antholis knows from Brookings [Institution], putting out white papers to candidates and campaigns before they—in this case of Bush 43—win and take office. But even our own Governing Council will say, "What is the likelihood of Brookings's or Empower America's or the Miller Center's issue papers or historical studies being picked up and read by candidates and their campaigns?"

You know this from both sides, but at this point in our discussion you're on the think tank side, presumably wanting to influence the candidate you now see—

Milkis: The relationship to the speechwriter.

Perry: Tell us about that.

Wehner: That's true. That was a strong point for George W. Bush and the Bush campaign. This happened more with McCain in 2008, where they were looking around and casting about for ideas from the think tank world and they got them but they didn't always speak about them.

For example, John McCain had a very good Medicare reform plan, but he didn't really ever talk about it and didn't seem to absorb it. I don't think it was much of his interest. He was more interested in foreign policy.

In the case of Bush in 2000 they had been pretty rigorous about it. It was not a situation where I felt like they needed—Mike was calling and saying, "What do we do? We need to strengthen the

economy? or We need—what do we do there? What do we do for poverty? What would be a good education—?"

Perry: Because as you said, they had such a strong policy shop led by Josh Bolten for a year leading up to this.

Wehner: Right.

Perry: But from your perspective in the think tank world, were there ideas, even if they were as general as character, and/or specific issues that you wanted to get across to the campaign and the candidate ultimately?

Wehner: I don't remember thinking consciously, *Look, Mike, he should really stress this issue*. But I talked to Mike so often. We would talk about speeches and themes, but I don't remember saying, "I think you should go in this direction or that." It was more a sense of "We're doing this," or "We're thinking about that," or "How could we do it best?" Because Mike and I are very simpatico philosophically, and politically he would have thought about it already. Mike had a large influence on Bush both in the campaign and in the Presidency. Bush liked him and admired him very much, he was very close to him. Mike wasn't just a speechwriter; he was also an idea generator.

But they had ideas on poverty and on reforming Medicare and Social Security and education. I don't remember consciously thinking, *Here is one set of policies to push*. Some of it was how to frame it. I talked to Mike when Bush gave a speech at the Manhattan Institute [for Policy Research] where he used the phrase "We're not slouching towards Gomorrah" or something like that. That was a veiled shot at Robert Bork's book, which is a very dark and pessimistic book about American culture. That was a speech where Bush had used something Bill and I had done, the Index of Leading Cultural Indicators, which went from 1960 to the early '90s, crime, welfare, out-of-wedlock births, teen births, drug use, and so on.

By the time Bush was giving the speech some of those things had turned around, particularly welfare and crime. I think it was a cultural speech and that had very much echoes of Bennett. I think I'm right in saying that I weighed in substantively on that, that was an issue I had known about. I thought the theme that George W. Bush used—which was very true to him, which was upbeat and optimistic and "We can do this," the American capacity for self-renewal—did stir some criticism among conservatives when he took that veiled shot at Bork, who was a conservative martyr because of what had happened with the Supreme Court. I'm not sure conservatives, if they had actually read *Slouching Towards Gomorrah*, would have agreed with it.

The other one that I recall—Bush gave the "Duty of Hope" speech, his first campaign speech, that was June of '99 in Indianapolis. That sent a signal. That was in part about low-income people.

Nelson: A question about Empower America, those years. This is the decade in which, in political science and political commentary, you really see discussion about party polarization coming on the threshold. While you were at Empower America, I'm going to say this strongly, were you reflexively anti-Clinton? Because he is doing a lot of things you would think would be

of greater interest to conservatives than the typical Democratic President. My sense is, from Bill Kristol saying, "We don't want to pass any health reform," to Bob Dole saying that basically conservative think tanks are the default setting, seldom deviated from, was to find things to attack. Is that fair?

Wehner: Maybe yes, maybe no. I don't think reflexively and I'll give you some examples about it. Maybe think tanks have gotten more—I'm trying to think of what Brookings and AEI [American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research] were in the '60s. They were probably less politically active. There was a certain pride in think tanks in producing studies that nobody read that were a hundred pages long but were sort of dispassionate.

Perry: Like scholars.

Wehner: Like scholars. Heritage probably changed that model when it came in, in '73. They geared themselves toward Congress. It's probably true that think tanks, or some of them, became more partisan, more polarized. Frankly they became more—on both sides—influential too. The think tanks figured out a way to produce material that at least in the political world people could use—shorter, digestible, with practical steps.

My own views on Clinton—and it kind of reflected Bill's too—it depended. Jack Kemp I don't think was reflexively anti-Clinton and in fact a lot of Dole's people were—

Nelson: Wish he had been.

Wehner: Yes, were stunned when Al Gore at the beginning of their debate said, "It's just too bad that there aren't a lot more Republicans like Jack Kemp." And Jack was thrilled and proud and for the rest of the debate didn't attack Clinton. The Dole people were just—their heads collapsed. Bill supported and praised Clinton at the time on welfare reform, and Bill had worked with Bill Clinton when he was Governor of Arkansas. He had nice things to say about Bill Clinton and he had even worked with Hillary a little bit, because she was involved with some aspects of education when she was First Lady of Arkansas.

So Bill Clinton was a "New Democrat" and he had people like Will Marshall and Bill Galston and Elaine Kamarck on his team. And we had relations with those people. I remember talking to Will Marshall, but he was also liberal on a number of issues. Bill was a Republican and was certainly critical of them. Certainly in light of Obama, Clinton looks fantastic, that's part of it too. Wow, we didn't know what we had at that time.

There were genuine policy differences too. Then you took in something like the midnight basketball, which was supposed to be—or school uniforms. Those were symbolic issues. I don't think there was anything terribly bad about them. But the idea that they were actually going to make a difference or even that the federal government should be involved in midnight basketball programs struck a lot of conservatives as ludicrous.

Perry: Do I remember correctly that the Clinton administration had retreated to those that seemed to be minor, in some ways almost trivial, because their big policy plan of health care reform did not work? I'm reminded of this again with the 20th anniversary of the Oklahoma City

bombing recently. You think of Clinton after ’94 but before the shutdown and before the Gingrich revolution burns—

Wehner: He was very low.

Perry: He was low. The networks wouldn’t take his prime-time news conferences. The day before the Oklahoma City bombing he gave the famous press conference where he had to defend the fact that he was relevant to the system.

Wehner: Yes.

Perry: So that was part and parcel of what was happening within the country and the politics and the Clinton administration.

Wehner: Clinton had had a very rough start. He had gone back on his pledge on middle-class taxes. He had—

Perry: Gays in the military.

Wehner: Gays in the military. [Colin] Powell had come out against him, that was very tricky. He was viewed as socially liberal. He had Hillary-care. Those issues were small ball, but they were symbolic because he had to culturally get on the right side of these things. That’s what welfare reform was about. And he ran on it in ’92, but he sort of forgot about it.

In my experience the criticisms of Clinton, the people I was around, were not reflexive, they were genuine. Clinton was a Democrat and ran some liberal, or some fairly liberal, policies. Conservatives didn’t agree. But I don’t think there was—if you’re in campaign mode and you feel like your person has better ideas that would be better for the country and you get into that, one is probably less disinterested than one should be. But the character issue was a big deal to some people. Other people, it didn’t matter very much.

The thing that always bothered me about the Clintons mostly was their style of politics. I thought they practiced a brutal style of politics. It goes back to hiring private investigators to look into the history of both other candidates, the effort to intimidate the women he had affairs with, the kind of slush fund, the money that went there. All that stuff made me very uneasy. I think that manifested itself throughout the administration. When the whole Ken Starr thing happened, the way they went after Starr, it worked effectively and Clinton ended up surviving, but the kind of politics that they practiced really bothered me.

The affair bothered some people, lying under oath bothered more people. That was, I think, the issue where for a lot of conservatives, that lack of ethical core was troubling.

Milkis: This is connected to Mike’s question, although it is more philosophical. Because we were talking about your reaction to Bush policies and your influence on them, I was going to ask you what your reaction was to this concept of compassionate conservatism. It fits what you were describing as not being reflexively anti-Clinton because he was a Third Way Democrat.

Wehner: Right.

Milkis: Because many people describe compassionate conservatism as a conservative version of Third Way.

Wehner: Right.

Milkis: When did you first hear this term and what was your reaction to it? Was it something that stirred your interest in the Bush campaign?

Wehner: Yes. I heard about it probably in ’99, but I’m not sure exactly when. It had a lot of resonance.

Milkis: Had you heard it before the speech in Indianapolis where he really unveiled it?

Wehner: Yes, I’m sure I’d talked to Mike about it. That was something that was very true to Mike.

Nelson: He inherited that term; he didn’t create that term. It was already there from [Marvin] Olasky’s book. But he certainly—

Wehner: Publicized.

Nelson: Publicized it, embraced it, developed it.

Wehner: That’s right, Marvin’s book—he had written one on abortion and the idea of it was—it came in part from his faith and how he believed faith had changed his heart. He had seen these programs work to help people who were drug addicted and former prisoners, children of prisoners. That had been the focus of his work, and welfare reform in Texas. His faith, his experience as Governor, and his philosophy of government drove that view. This was the idea that since government is involved in a lot of these things, can we catalyze faith-based institutions in a way that shows fidelity to the Constitution and can actually strengthen them without forcing them to lose their intrinsic faith character? Is there some way we can do that? Let’s find out if we can do it, because these faith-based institutions are effective in a lot of cases, more effective than non-faith-based institutions because they are able to reach at least some people in a way that President Bush had been reached because of the influence faith had in turning him around on drinking and so forth.

I was open to it. I was familiar with and to some extent drawn to the communitarian network, Amitai Etzioni and—

Nelson: That’s interesting, your interest in—

Wehner: This was the idea of the importance of civil society, civic institutions, and does government have anything—the analogy that Bill used and I used in the ’90s was if somebody has been stabbed with a knife you have to take the knife out. But that is not sufficient, you also have to try to heal the person who has been knifed. That’s where the idea of government having a role to play, even if government had a role in the knifing so to speak. That is, government played a role in welfare, as [Charles] Murray showed, in actually making poverty worse and creating dependency. Is there a way to use government that is productive?

There was also a political intelligence to compassionate conservatism, because at that point the Republican Party was in a bit of a trough. Clinton had won reelection quite easily in '96. Democrats gained seats in '98 despite, really because of, impeachment. Because the perception was that the Republicans had overshot. Gingrich had become a polarizing and strident figure; he was forced to resign. Then Bob Livingston was forced to resign. There was a view of the Republicans as kind of harsh, serrated edges, too antigovernment.

Bush saw that and saw that he had to appeal, so he came out with compassionate conservatism. This wasn't a rebranding project per se, that wasn't primarily what it was. This was all true to Bush and his own philosophy, but it did have a political intelligence to it. You saw it manifested in other ways too, in education and immigration. He gave a speech in South Carolina, and it was pretty gutsy on Bush's part because he was being challenged on immigration. He was using immigration and he said, "Family values don't stop at the Rio Grande." That wasn't necessarily popular in South Carolina at that point.

It helped Bush. I don't think he would have won in 2000 against Gore without it. It signaled to voters that this is a person who—If you're a moderate voter, he is conservative, but he is not extreme. There are conservatives like Rush Limbaugh who would say that if you modify conservatives or criticize conservatives—Rush never liked compassionate conservatism because he said, "Conservatism is compassionate." In saying it, you're saying, "I'm different than" or "I'm better than." But it was merited substantively and it was wise politically.

Perry: I would like you to compare/contrast the "compassionate conservative" label with the one that you mentioned last night of "reform conservatism." You mentioned that Republicans, to be successful at the Presidential level going forward from now, not only need—in your mind—a reform conservative agenda, but that the persona of the candidate is important as well. We want to link that compassionate conservative to the persona of George W. Bush and why people were not only drawn to him because of this agenda but the personality and the style and the famous "Would you want to have a beer with this candidate versus Al Gore?"

Wehner: I think they were wed. Some people are now critical of George W. Bush. His popularity is going up, but some conservatives are critical of him as a political talent, which is ludicrous. He beat Ann Richards in a very tough race in Texas. She was a popular incumbent. He hadn't really run for office before and he ran a very smart and disciplined campaign. He had four items on his agenda and he just drove them and beat her. That was a big upset.

Then he won reelection in Texas by the largest margin to that time in history, carried a huge number of Hispanics, a large number of African Americans. This is a really impressive Governor. And he's endorsed by most of the Republican Governors in '99. Then he gets into the 2000 election, in which the economy is strong, the Republican brand is weak. He has never run a Presidential election before. He has a new team that no one has ever heard of. He is going against Al Gore, who had been in politics for a long time, who had been Vice President for eight years and did have a strong economy.

I remember the conversations with Mike trying to figure out what is the theme, where are you going to go after Gore, because at that time the economy was strong. There was this perception that things were fine in foreign policy—Of course we saw on 9/11 that dangers were growing

that we didn't know about at that time—so there was really a sense of what is the thematic against it. Bush ran and won, made very few unforced errors as a candidate, bested Gore in the debates, I think it's generally accepted. He had that moment where Gore kind of walked over and tried to intimidate him. You remember that look that Bush gave?

Nelson: The sighing.

Wehner: The sigh that Gore did. So Bush wins and then he reaches the highest point of popularity after 9/11. Republicans win seats in the House and the Senate in the midterm, which is very unusual in '02, wins reelection in '04. Never lost an election. This is a guy who never lost an election and was very accomplished and won in cases where he should have lost. There was something about him that people were able to relate to him and bond with him and trust him.

The compassionate conservative side joined those two things. They got the sense that this is a person who was a principled conservative but not dogmatic, was skeptical of government but was not reflexively antigovernment, and cared about people a lot of Republicans didn't care about. Cared about Hispanics, cared about the poor, and had an agenda and a program to try and help them. That's reassuring.

One of the things Republican strategists don't see and the [Willard Mitt] Romney campaign—I worked on it for several months, at the end finally agreed to join them. They asked me several times and I joined them in July or August of 2012. Paul Ryan wanted to give a speech in Cleveland on poverty. Paul is a friend of mine, I used to work with him at Empower America. I remember talking to Paul during the campaign and essentially saying, "Paul, you should do whatever you feel like you need to do so when you're done—" I may have used this line with Paul, but I remember it from Bill Bennett. He used to use it, which is, "You get your bite of the apple and you should take it."

Paul is running as Vice President. If you feel strongly about poverty, you should give a speech. Give it and dare them to stop you. It wasn't that they were stopping him, they were just not giving him the approval. My advice was to go ahead and do it and make them proactively have to stop you.

The view was not that they didn't care about the poor, but it was the idea that we were never going to win those people anyway in terms of the election. Number one, you shouldn't give up votes without trying for them, but beyond that even if you don't get those people as voters, you may get other people who are watching because it says that person does care about the good of the whole. This is why education reform, particularly the data showed for suburban moms, this is a person who cares about issues. Bush radiated that sense. It was true to him and it reassured people.

Nelson: For the sake of our time, we need to get you into the White House.

[BREAK]

Nelson: We were talking about Josh Bolten. Peter had asked if we had met with him and we said yes but we didn't get as far as we wanted to. Do you want to respond to that?

Wehner: I was just speaking to President Bush's opinion of Josh. Somebody asked, "Who are the people for whom his respect increased the most over time?" I think he said, "Josh Bolten and Steve Hadley." Those were people President Bush was very—he was close to a number of people. He was certainly close to Karl and Karen, although she left earlier, but Josh—there was a very strong relationship there, and with Steve too. He really admired them as human beings.

Perry: We had the pleasure and honor of interviewing him as well. That was one where we did a whole day with Steve in Washington, and then Russell went out and did a combined interview with Steve Hadley and Condi Rice. We had also done a whole day with her in Washington with about six of her people.

Wehner: Great.

Perry: Those can be fascinating as well. Mike, you were saying let's move on to the White House.

Nelson: The story of how you end up in the White House, start that story from wherever it begins.

Wehner: The beginning and the end of it was through Mike Gerson. Mike was one of my closest friends, maybe my closest friend. I was in touch with him on election night and was thrilled when Bush won and then down when he hadn't won. I talked to Mike about the statements and what was unfolding that night. Gore was supposed to give the concession speech and then there were these delays and he didn't do it. It was very chaotic. Then of course you had the 30-something days of the Florida recount. I was in touch with Michael a lot about that, and nobody knew what was going to happen.

Of course there was the challenge of getting ready to be President if you are finally elected and confirmed. So that finally resolved itself. Bush becomes President-elect. Mike asked me if I would come on as Deputy Director of Speechwriting. I don't remember consciously thinking about joining the Bush administration up until then. I probably did, but I don't remember holding my breath or expecting it. For a variety of reasons the decision was relatively easy to make.

I came in a little bit later because I was finishing up a book with Bill called *The Broken Hearth*. I didn't start officially in January, it may have been late January or early February, but I had to take care of a few things. So I wasn't there when they did the official swearing in, which I felt bad about. I watched it on C-SPAN [Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network]. I talked to Mike about the speech that Bush gave to the people who were getting sworn in, including Mike. So Mike asked me to come on board. He felt that I would be an important addition to him, that we worked so well together. I said yes, so that's how I came on board.

Nelson: Who was in the speechwriters shop?

Wehner: At that time it was Mike and then me. Matt Scully and John [P.] McConnell were in it as well, because Matt and John had worked with Mike. They were an amazing threesome in

terms of the speeches they produced, including during the campaign. They worked very well together. Outside of that, I don't think there was a speechwriting shop.

We ended up getting David Frum as the economics writer and a guy named John Gibson who did national security. I think I was the one who reached out to David or suggested David. John Gibson I didn't really know on foreign policy. Then there were a number of younger writers we ended up hiring. But the core of the speechwriting team was Mike and Matt and John.

Nelson: How did the speechwriting process work if Bush was going to give more than incidental remarks?

Wehner: There were roughly three kinds of speeches. There are major speeches, there are medium speeches, and there are talking-points speeches. Talking-points speeches would be two pages of—say he is going to give a speech on education at a school. He's not going to use the talking points; he knows that issue. The utility of them would be data, something specific to that school or that state or maybe there is a new initiative being proposed and there's an outline of how to talk about it. The talking points would get converted to note cards and he would write it up. He could do that in his sleep.

Then there are medium speeches. Say he is going to go to Philadelphia to announce a Department of Justice anticrime initiative, he'll have a prepared text. But it is not going to drive the news. It is a speech that he needs to give, but he will often get the draft early on the morning that he gives it and will go over it, and you'll see whether there will be lots or few changes.

Then there are the larger speeches, and of course the largest speeches we gave after 9/11. There he was heavily involved and he would essentially dictate what he wanted. He'd be quite involved from beginning to end and would edit those with his felt pen pretty heavily.

Nelson: In the speeches, the State of the Union in particular, that are on the calendar for the next four years—I'm looking for something about what you all were doing in this process. Would you all meet with the President?

Wehner: It would depend. He would meet with us periodically as a speechwriting team just to give us his feelings about—these are the kinds of speeches, this is what's working, this is what's not, "You guys are doing a great job," themes that he wants to explore. He would meet with us as the speechwriting team, partly to give us feedback, partly to create esprit de corps and to bring people into the Oval Office. That's a nice thing for a President to be able to do for staff. It makes them feel good and it's an honor to be there.

He would sometimes meet with you individually or would call you if he had a speech and go through it with you. Usually you wouldn't get a call because he needed to praise something. Usually it would be a concern or a call to change something. So sometimes you would go in and you would be alone or sometimes with one or two other people. Or you'd get a call at your desk from the President, and he would try to give you his thoughts on what you needed to do.

Milkis: Was there a two-way flow? Did you and Mike ever think the President should give a speech on something and urge him to do that?

Wehner: Yes. Mike was really the advocate. I didn't know President Bush very well. I have actually gotten to know him better since and am in touch with him on an almost weekly basis with email.

Nelson: Since leaving the White House?

Wehner: Yes. But when I joined he didn't really know who I was. He did know who I was, but I wasn't part of his inner circle. Mike was. But Mike had an unusual influence as a speechwriter. I used to think of him as probably the most influential speechwriter since Ted Sorensen. You can make an argument that Pat Buchanan was pretty important to Nixon and there were others, but Mike was not just a speechwriter, more influential than I think anybody in the Clinton administration, certainly than anybody in Bush 41. He was viewed as part a voice of conscience, part a policy idea generator, and as a speechwriter too. Then the combination of John and Matt and Mike was one that President Bush trusted very much.

You could give ideas through advocacy with other people, Karl, Josh, Andy Card. People were open to that. If there was a speech or a theme or something like that, they were certainly open to it, but for the most part it was an issue in which—Bush had run on a pretty specific agenda. Between his inauguration and 9/11 we knew pretty much what we needed to do. It was focused on education and taxes. Then stem cell came up.

Milkis: Which was the first televised speech.

Wehner: That's right, in August.

Milkis: It surprised me.

Nelson: That seemed like it was the first major speech.

Wehner: It was.

Nelson: Could you talk us through the making of that speech?

Wehner: Yes, it was an interesting speech. That was largely a Karen Hughes–driven speech, not Mike. Karen kind of took control of that process. I don't know why. It wasn't like she took it from Mike. That's just the way, you'd have to talk to Karen or Mike about it. Anyway it was mostly Karen who was involved in it. I was involved in it because I had done a pro-and-con analysis of that issue. I don't remember if it was columns or it may have just been divided, but it was a genuine back-and-forth. That was a thing I did pretty well. I did it for Bill. I did it once on a China trade-related issue, the pro and con.

Antholis: That seems to be a strength of yours. I noticed even in your columns that there is always this point-counterpoint quality.

Wehner: Right. That's how I think.

Nelson: An internal debate.

Wehner: Yes. I don't do it perfectly by any means, but I try to take the intellectually serious counterargument to it. In that case I genuinely did because this was a genuine effort to try to think through this issue as a complicated moral issue. There were serious people on all sides of it. There were competing moral goods at stake here. There were different assumptions at stake as well in terms of the value of human life, the embryo. Leon Kass had weighed in on this. That one was a real back-and-forth.

Karen would have to testify to it, but my memory is what I wrote was also something that was similar to how the speech went. You didn't know where he was going to come out on the stem cell speech until the very end.

Nelson: Yes, right.

Wehner: He had given voice to both sides in a very disinterested fashion.

Antholis: For a time, it seemed Hamlet-like. [*laughter*]

Wehner: It was a Hamlet-like decision. There were very serious—I had discussions with Mike and other people about the morality of this issue and where we should come out on it.

Nelson: It showed that he really had treated this as a morally complicated issue before coming out with a policy, as opposed to deciding on one way of going and making all the arguments for doing it that way.

Wehner: Yes, and President Bush did have much more than people knew. There was this idea that he was anti-intellectual. He was never anti-intellectual. He was anti-elitist, but he was never anti-intellectual. A lot of elitists thought he was anti-intellectual because he didn't like them. But he was very well-read.

I'm guessing you've heard this from an awful lot of people you've talked to, which is he's one of the most impressive people. He was sharp and energetic and asked about ideas, interrupted people not in a rude way but to probe their thinking and get to the core of an issue. He would raise these counter—What about this? And what about that? This is a person with a very active and agile—Mind you, it was Vice President [Richard] Cheney who said almost nothing in these meetings. He is a very smart guy; he just had a different mode. He would sit there sort of like Clarence Thomas on the Supreme Court. [*laughter*] He was quiet. He would take things in. Unlike Thomas, he would ask a question now and then, but I think that he would take his own counsel and probably give it to President Bush privately.

That speech had that, and it was the first prime-time speech. It was impressive. It was an unusual speech precisely because—for Presidential speeches it gave voice to the opposition view in a very fair-minded way.

Perry: I think everyone agreed that it is an important issue and a difficult one because of the moral imperatives on both sides. But did you discuss with your speechwriting shop or others in the administration why the President zeroed in on that issue?

Nelson: As the first prime-time speech.

Perry: Right. Just generally we understand that he spent a lot of time looking at the pros and the cons. This goes back to our first-year theme again.

Wehner: Right. As I recall, this issue was forced on us. I don't remember what the forcing mechanism was, but it wasn't as if—

Milkis: I think there was a regulation coming up.

Perry: Probably a funding issue.

Wehner: I'd have to go back and check. I don't remember anyone in the White House thinking, *Let's take on stem cell research. That will be a great issue.*

Perry: Even though Karen Hughes was pushing hard to do it in this way.

Wehner: She was pushing hard to do it in this way, but that was after it was an issue. We had to deal with it. Then it was a question of how you deal with it. But Karen wasn't sitting around and one day called up Mike and said, "Let's get involved in the stem cell research issue debate," which is an important thing I've learned in working in the White House and in government, that the best-laid plans of individuals can get waylaid. It's fine to be able to say, "We'd like to spend the next three weeks talking about X issue," but sometimes events interfere. An awful lot of what determines how you succeed in life and how you succeed in politics is how you deal with new situations and circumstances and how you adjust.

That's why to some extent when you're hiring people you need to hire people who are experts in policy issues, but you also have to hire people who have a certain temper of mind, because you can't possibly anticipate—

Nelson: The agility to—

Wehner: Yes, and think in a certain way and assimilate information. We didn't know we would have to deal with terrorism and be a foreign-policy President. We didn't know we had to deal with stem cell research. On the other hand, you do want to be proactive and strategic, and he ran on a set of issues. He spoke out about taxes and education and immigration and Social Security. How do you sequence those issues? What are the first ones you want to do out of the box?

That speech was a good one. My memory is that it was received pretty well and it was unusual. He gave the speech at the ranch.

Nelson: Was there a division of labor within the speechwriting operation? As Deputy did you have particular responsibilities?

Wehner: Yes. I wasn't the real key to the speechwriting shop, that was Mike and Matt and John. They were the driving force of the speeches. They were the authors of the most eloquent speeches, they worked together very well. We tried at different times to bring in larger groups to work together and it didn't seem to work as well. I have no idea how it did work with John at the keyboard and Matt and Mike walking around and looking at what was on the screen and talking

and coming up with language. For an outsider it was slightly chaotic to observe, but it produced marvelous stuff.

My division of labor was different. I can't take responsibility for the best speeches. My role was to be intellectual contributor, to be a sounding board, particularly for Mike, but I got along well with Matt and John and everybody in the speechwriting shop, to think through the issues, to advocate for them, to think about how to frame them. Then also to help take some of the burden and responsibility from Mike in terms of the operation, to make sure that things were going through, the process was getting done, the right boxes were getting checked, deal with personnel matters that came up. So to kind of run, or organize, the shop.

In terms of the speeches themselves and the creativity behind them, that was really Mike and Matt and John.

Nelson: Might as well bring this up now as any other time, but Scully wrote that harshly critical article about Mike Gerson for the *Atlantic*, basically saying that Mike was a glory hog. Could you comment on that?

Wehner: Yes. I strongly disagree with that. I know Matt. We get along well and I dealt with him on the Romney campaign. I thought the charge was absurd. But I think that it was known—Even if you read press accounts at the time, it was often mentioned that it was Mike and Matt and John, so I think it was actually the other way. Compared to most people, Mike went out of his way to make it known that Matt and John were involved with this. Mike is one of the finest people I know. He has an ego, like anybody else, but when you compare that to most people, his is tremendously under control, a very well-rounded guy and not a glory hog at all. I don't know why Matt did that, there were a lot of deep issues there. I'm not aware that he ever raised it with Mike at all in terms of any of these issues that are coming up, ever saying while he was in the White House, "I have concerns about this or that." It seems like this was there, it was brewing. He never brought it up and then decided to do this article in the *Atlantic.*

It was very unfortunate. Everybody in the administration that I'm aware of defended Mike when the story came out. I think personally it hurt Mike, but I don't think professionally it hurt Mike. It's not the kind of thing that shadows him, because it didn't fit for the people who knew Mike.

Nelson: Now 9/11?

Perry: Yes.

Nelson: What were you doing?

Wehner: I was in the senior staff meeting on 9/11 because Mike was at home working on a Communities of Character speech. That was at a time when we had gotten through our education proposal, we had gotten through tax cuts. There was some discussion about what the themes were going to be in the fall. We were already at that point even in the first year. We had gotten a couple of things done, so we were casting about a little bit for things. One of them was Communities of Character, which was very much in line with the idea of civil society and so forth. "Communities of character" may have been a line in the inaugural speech, I'm not sure, but it was one of the themes in the inaugural speech.

I went to the 7:30 staff meeting, which I would do for Mike when he was not there. One of the issues that came up was that there was supposed to be a congressional barbecue at the White House that evening, five o'clock or something like that. I remember consciously thinking, *Boy, this is one of the more boring days of the Bush Presidency.* There didn't seem to be a lot going on. There was a pro forma quality to the staff meeting that morning.

President Bush 41 came in at the end of that staff meeting. He had stayed that night and he came into the Roosevelt Room, to the door closest to the Oval Office, just to say hi. It was just for a minute or two, which was nice. He was gracious and it was fun.

I went back to my office on the fourth floor of the Eisenhower Executive Office Building and wrote an email to Mike based on the notes, just to recapitulate the meeting. The first line of my note was, "There's nothing much going on today." I sent it exactly five minutes before the first plane hit. I sent it at 8:41 A.M., and I think the first plane hit the tower at 8:46.

I saw it on the TV in the office, but like most everybody I thought it was an unfortunate accident. I went down to the basement floor of the EEOB [Eisenhower Executive Office Building] to get a cup of coffee. This is a little before nine. Then I came back. And the second plane hit. I called Mike and said, "You have to come in, something is going on here." He was stuck in traffic on I-395, one of the big highways into D.C. from Virginia. He was caught in traffic and he ended up seeing the plane that hit the Pentagon. I remember talking to him later about having seen a plane and he thought, *That plane is flying awfully low*. That was the plane that hit the Pentagon. But he was stuck in traffic, so he couldn't come in.

Then security came in and said, "You guys have to leave." There was a woman in the office before we were ushered out, I don't even remember who it was, who was very worried or afraid. There was something about being terrified about what was going on. I can't remember the exact details.

I was there and the rest of the staff was there and then they came in and said, "You guys have to get out of here." People were running to the doors and out the gates or walking very fast, not wanting to pretend that they weren't being harried, but they were in fact being harried. This is where you found out where you were on the White House totem pole. If you were significant and important and valuable you ended up in the bunker. And if you were me, you ended up on the corner of 17th and Pennsylvania not knowing what to do. I remember looking up, it was a beautiful day—

Nelson: It was a gorgeous day.

Wehner: The sky was a gorgeous blue. The temperature was perfect. Looking up at the sky and thinking, *This feels like a movie, except movies have scripts and they have an ending written and this is happening in real time.* You don't know what exactly is going on.

At that point I must have had a sense that it was a terrorist attack. I don't remember how soon it was after this happened that we were ushered out, but it probably was within an hour. Maybe it was after the Pentagon plane had hit. Yes, because then there were the rumors that the Capitol had been hit. That was when I think the woman got really nervous and felt like she wanted to go.

When I was out there on the corner of 17th and Pennsylvania I was thinking, *Is this a wave of attacks? Is this like Pearl Harbor? What's going on here? What are we facing?* I began wondering if we were going to see planes flying in all of a sudden. Then I tried to go to the Empower America offices to see my colleagues there, because the offices were just across the street from the EEOB. They had already left. I thought, *I've got to go home*. I couldn't get my car so I walked—

Nelson: Where did you live?

Wehner: I lived in McLean, Virginia, about 10 miles from D.C., walked several blocks—I didn't have a cell phone or I didn't have it with me. I walked several blocks down K Street, up in numbers, so from 18th, 19th, 20th, and stopped at an electronics store. You couldn't use cell phones at that point, so I used a landline to call my wife. We had two young children at that point. One was born in '97, one was born in '99. A guy had the radio on and there were rumors that the State Department had been hit, the Capitol had been hit. I remember thinking at the time, *We're in a shooting gallery*.

I called Cindy [Wehner] and told her I was fine, wasn't sure I was going to get home, I was going to take a cab. Of course all the cabs were being taken. There was a cab that came and somebody was in it and I flagged down the cab, half stood in front of it and asked if it would be all right to get a ride. It was fine. I think there was a woman in it who was going elsewhere. We went by the State Department. I remember thinking it was supposed to have been hit but it didn't look like it. Was it something that had gotten hit and we're just not seeing it?

We ended up going down through Georgetown and taking the Key Bridge, one of the bridges that connects D.C. to Virginia, and seeing the smoke in the background of the Pentagon and having the feeling when we were crossing the Key Bridge, *God, I hope this bridge*—it was funny, kind of irrational—not irrational.

Nelson: Not irrational at all.

Wehner: An unlikely fear. I wondered if bridges would get hit. I was a little nervous crossing the bridge. I called the cabdriver over and the woman was in there and I asked for a ride. I said, "I'll tip big." He ended up taking me home to McLean. So I was at home, Mike was at home. David Frum had left. He and Matt and John had gone—you'd have to check with them, but I think it was to either the AEI building or another building in D.C. Everything was scattered.

There was the question of whether Bush would come back, because he was flying around. He was very anxious to get back, but the Secret Service didn't want him to. I remember talking to Mike about that and then about a potential speech. Karen was mostly responsible for the speech that evening, the 9/11 speech. I don't know if many of our lines got in there. I think one or two of our lines got in there, but it was mostly a Karen-driven speech.

Perry: Do you remember any of the lines that you penned?

Wehner: I don't think I penned it. It had probably come through Mike.

Milkis: But you guys actually talked about the potential for a speech that night?

Wehner: Oh, yes. Everybody knew the President was going to have to say something.

Nelson: I know Mike Gerson said, "Two days after 9/11, if we think we're communicating well, we're kidding ourselves."

Wehner: Yes.

Nelson: Reflecting not just on the evening speech but the two brief remarks he gave from the Air Force base, who was writing those? Do you know?

Wehner: No, I don't know. But it was not going well.

Nelson: What do you think wasn't working in those first three speeches?

Wehner: The words and the ideas. To be fair, we don't even know exactly what we're dealing with, right? I'm not sure that any of us would have anything better to say. It was largely a product of circumstances, because you didn't have all the facts yet. You're thinking you have to calm the country down; you have to express the seriousness of what has gone on. Maybe I wouldn't be that critical. President Bush had said—it was pretty tough. He handled the thing with the school kids right. Criticism about that was silly. He did it right.

Part of it was the logistics. The second one, they didn't even get it at the underground bunker, it was sort of a fuzzy picture, which is where the Secret Service had wanted him.

Perry: And his communications were not strong—

Wehner: His communications were not—

Perry: And Air Force One—

Wehner: It was kind of on and off. You're dealing with a situation in which you have this extremely traumatic event and it's still very early. You haven't had time to process it. We don't know who did it, we don't know the scale of the damage. We don't know if this is a country—We know it's terrorists, but we don't know any of the details, and you don't want to get too far ahead of yourself.

Mostly it was a situation in which the circumstances weren't there. But part of it was the delay with him coming back. Now the truth was he came back that day and gave the speech from the Oval Office that night—and he wanted to come back. It was certainly an understandable judgment by the Secret Service to keep him away until we figured out what was going on, but I don't think the speech on the evening of 9/11 was bad. It just wasn't memorable. Things seemed a little bit off balance, but that's because they were. Anybody would be a little bit off balance.

I do remember when I felt like consciously we began to shift things around. I think it was a Thursday when the President had the phone conversation with [George] Pataki and [Rudy] Giuliani and then he was talking to the press. He had his hand on the desk of the Oval Office. He kind of teared up when he talked about what had happened, but there was a real determination in his voice.

I got an email from Jean Elshtain, who was a social scientist—you knew her.

Milkis: Yes, very well. We were colleagues.

Wehner: I knew Jean and liked her very much and respected her. She sent me a note about how moved she had been by President Bush that day in his remarks. I could get the feeling that that was the beginning of shifting around. Remember this happened on a Tuesday and that's only Thursday, so essentially we're talking about Tuesday and Wednesday when things were a little bit off balance. By Thursday things had settled down. Then of course you had Friday, which was a tremendously important day because you had the National Cathedral speech and then he went to New York with the bullhorn.

Relatively speaking I'd give us and the President a very good grade in terms of adjusting pretty quickly. When you're there in real time and these things are going on, you do feel like we're not saying things that are reassuring the country. Sometimes you want to reassure them, but you don't yet have enough information. Not enough time has passed where you have much to say.

Nelson: It's interesting. Two of the three great moments you mentioned on the 13th and 14th were utterly unscripted.

Wehner: Yes.

Nelson: And could have gone badly wrong.

Wehner: Yes. President Bush was magnificent during that time and his instincts were exactly right. He knew where the country was and he was able to give voice to it. But that period of time from Thursday to Thursday, which would be that phone call, the National Cathedral speech, the bullhorn, and then the September 20 speech, which was Thursday night, those were some very—

Nelson: Those were two very important speeches.

Wehner: Very important speeches and an important time for the country. Of course for the speechwriting shop—for the entire White House, but maybe particularly for the speechwriting shop—it was a *tremendously* intense period. I'm not sure "chaos" is the right word, but obviously every speech had gotten wiped away. Everything you had learned and done and executed in terms of how speeches work was thrown out. This was an instant acceleration in the process.

The National Cathedral speech, which I think was the single best speech in terms of eloquence that the President gave, was written in a day by Matt and John and Mike. That had a number of tremendous lines in it. The balance of that speech, in terms of the empathy for the people who died and the commitment and force—there was the line, "This is a war that was started by others, but it will be ended in a place and time of our choosing." It put grief and suffering in a religious context that was not trite. It was a masterful speech.

The September 20 speech—President Bush said on Monday morning that he wanted that speech and he wanted a draft by Monday night.

Nelson: Wow.

Wehner: And that was a 40-minute speech. He got a draft without the ending. There was a debate about that speech—what kind of speech he should give and where he should give it. I was an advocate—to show you how smart I was—of doing an Oval Office speech, which would have been a very bad place to give that speech, for several reasons: one, President Bush does better with live audiences; two, you would have a live audience; three, the joint session, you have a bipartisan, all-of-Congress, unified message to the rest of the world.

Nelson: Recognition of heroes, right?

Wehner: Yes.

Nelson: Theatrical in a way.

Wehner: Much more theatrical in an important way. And you could give a much longer speech. You couldn't give a 30- to 40-minute speech from the Oval Office. Karl Rove weighed in quite heavily and wisely on doing the joint session speech. John McConnell had thrown out an idea about the Army War College or something. There were different ideas being tossed about, but Karl weighed in quite heavily on the joint session and that's what we ended up doing. But, as I said, there was an instant acceleration in the process.

This is pretty high-stakes stuff. These words are being read very carefully to the country and to the world. The September 20 speech was a little—there was some analogue to the stem cell speech in the sense that it was a very educative and organized speech. It was very explicit: Who is al-Qaeda, why did they attack us, why do they hate us, what are we going to do about them?

Antholis: More purposeful than the stem cell speech though.

Wehner: Yes.

Antholis: A sense of competence and—

Wehner: Yes, this was not giving the al-Qaeda side of the story.

Antholis: There was no ambivalence. I remember that. That was the first speech I saw President Bush—of course I didn't see him live until much later—where he seemed like a forceful leader.

Perry: Presidential.

Antholis: Yes, maybe that's the way of putting it. He had found his mission; it was pretty clear.

Wehner: Yes. He really rose to the challenge rather than shrank from it.

Nelson: What intervened was that weekend at Camp David, where basically they made some decisions, so he could give a speech knowing that we were going to intervene with force in Afghanistan and depose the Taliban regime.

Wehner: I always got the sense with him that he instinctively knew what to do. Even if you go back and read the Tuesday night speech, there were elements of this determination. The decision was made not to use the word "war"—this may have been the right decision. This was the day of the catastrophe and he had to use it to speak empathetically to what had happened.

He knew almost instantly that we were at war, and he was going to wage and win this war. Once we understood it was al-Qaeda and the elements that led to it, that gave birth to the Freedom Agenda—A lot of people never understood that he was a root-cause President. He said, "What is the root cause of this?" There were various elements, but one of them was these unbelievably dysfunctional Arab societies. The Arab development reports had talked about oppressive leaders, dictatorships, low economic growth, young people with very little hope, and so on. He got that very soon.

You're right, he was at Camp David. You remember the pictures with the leather jacket on and the whole national security team there. That was on Saturday right after—

Milkis: There was some pretty powerful language in his Cathedral speech. He said, "We have to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil." That's a pretty powerful statement.

Nelson: Yes.

Milkis: And "war has been waged against us by stealth and deceit."

Wehner: You know what happened? The word actually got out of—it was in the text and he inadvertently overlooked it. He meant to say, "*this* evil."

Milkis: I was thinking that this doesn't sound like something you and Michael Gerson would write.

Wehner: "This evil" was. Some people said, "Isn't it a broad goal to get rid of evil in the world?" It was in the text, and when he delivered it, he inadvertently overlooked it.

Nelson: For a speech like this—you described the normal process: John sitting at the typewriter, Mike and Matt walking around.

Wehner: Yes.

Nelson: I'm guessing there were a lot more people in the room for a speech like this: State, Defense, NSC [National Security Council]. No?

Milkis: Karen Hughes, Karl Rove.

Nelson: So how did you know what to say? How did they know what to put in the speech?

Wehner: The President knew what to put in the speech. He knew the construct that he wanted in terms of "This is what we're going to do with this speech." Karen and Dan weighed in too. But it was not a different process in terms of who was at the keyboard.

Your point is right in the sense that there were different agencies giving input and trying to understand this. But it was not as if there was a deputy assistant of the Department of State saying, "Hey, Mike, don't you think you should say this or that?" "No, we know how to do the speeches. You just give us the information we need." It wouldn't have worked anyway, because we were on such an accelerated timeline that it would have created chaos to introduce five new people who had never been part of the speechwriting process. That's the kind of thing where you actually do the opposite. You say, "Get the hell out of here, leave us alone. We'll let you know when we need the information."

When I say "us," again I'm not the key figure. This is really Mike and John and Matt, but speaking collectively for the speechwriting shop, we know what the outline is, we know what we want to do. You just be there when we say, "What is the answer to this question?"

Nelson: You described Karen as being heavily involved in the stem cell and then the September 11 speeches, the evening in particular. Is this a turning point in terms of her influence? In other words, was she seen as having not risen to the occasion on the night of September 11 and therefore Bush is now turning more to you guys?

Wehner: No. Karen's influence was always significant and important and she was very involved in the September 20 speech. I don't blame her for the September 11 speech. I'm not sure it would have been any better if anybody else had written it, because I'm not sure that at that time you could have done a lot more.

With the Cathedral speech, you had several days to interpret events and think through and process them, whereas the speech on September 11 you had literally hours to do it. Everybody was scattered, the President was flying. Karen was in the White House bunker and Mike was here and everybody else was there. To get a speech even written was an impressive achievement. The speech was a fine speech, it just didn't connect, not because of any fault of Karen's. The fact that she actually took over and got it done was impressive, because somebody had to take ownership of that speech and produce it.

The President himself obviously had a big say in it. He made the judgment—and it was probably the correct judgment—that on the night of September 11 we're not going to use the word "war." We have to try to put the events of the day into a context. We're going to get another bite at the apple as well. It was not a situation where Karen was taken out. Through the entire Bush Presidency, the speeches were always primarily driven by the speechwriting shop. It was actually the stem cell speech that was anomalous, and I don't remember quite why it was, but she took an interest in it and it was a tremendously successful speech. Then the one on September 11 she was there, and she was so close to Bush.

Nelson: What was her involvement in the September 20 speech? You've described people outside the room as being on call.

Wehner: She was very much involved. For one thing, she knew Bush's thinking so well. You'd have to talk to Mike to get a better sense, but my memory is that she was very actively involved in the structure of the speech, talking to the President about the structure of the speech and talking to the speechwriters. Mike answered to Karen.

Nelson: That's interesting.

Wehner: Karen and Dan were—the key players in the speechwriting process became more key after 9/11. Those key players were Matt, John, Mike—Mike most of all among the speechwriters, Karen and Dan on the communications side. Dan was Karen's Deputy. Both of them knew Bush very well and knew the speechwriters very well. They were really involved in all aspects of where it's going to be given, how it's going to be done, when it's going to be done. Karl was very involved. All the people you would imagine would be important to the process were.

Perry: Can I ask about voice? I'm intrigued by that for a host of reasons, one of which was that you said it was one of the hardest skills of speechwriting to learn when you were first coming into the business. Then we said at this certain point Bush became Presidential. To me that means he found *his* voice as President. How do the speechwriters engage with the President on that? I'm also thinking of Sorensen and Kennedy. Do they eventually meld into one voice?

But how are the speechwriters writing for a President in this first year who is still finding his voice, in a crisis he could not have imagined, but being authentic to his genuine voice?

Wehner: I would challenge the premise, because I don't think he found his voice in the sense that I don't think he ever lost his voice, but change was the moment and the drama of the moment.

If you go back and read his speeches pre-9/11, his inaugural speech—he had his voice. It is a beautifully crafted speech. Then you had the stem cell speech, which was a different kind of voice but was his. Or you go back and read his speeches on education or the tax cuts, those were all authentic to him and they were all good, but there was no drama in them. It was the first year of a Presidency.

If you were to listen to him pre-9/11, I don't think people would have said, "He's not Presidential" or "He hasn't found his voice." You would have said, "Yes, George W. Bush is pretty popular after this very divisive election. He has actually been pretty unified." The inaugural speech was consciously—the organizing principle was unification after what had happened. He succeeded there; he began to bring the country together. He was successful politically; he pushed these issues. He was making the case on education and he was successful. He got the tax cuts and the education stuff through.

He was doing well and we were doing what we needed to do, but I get your point when people say he found his voice. I think what it means is a lot of times history determines these things. Bill Clinton lamented that he never had a dramatic moment.

Nelson: So did Theodore Roosevelt.

Wehner: Right. Roosevelt was kind of a heroic person who longed for some—Now you have to be careful, because Presidents have a lot of power and you don't want them going in search of great moments, but sometimes they come. Then the question is, do you rise to them or not. I think President Bush rose to it. There's no question in my mind that he elevated his game after 9/11.

Perry: That's what I meant. Not that he lost a voice, but his genuine voice elevated to where it needed to be.

Wehner: And he fit that moment and his rhetoric and his style fit the moment, which was a kind of determination, no nonsense. He spoke in a moral language that was not censorious.

Nelson: Had a kind of religiosity to it.

Wehner: Yes, it was religious in the right sense. It was a very fierce determination that we were going to wage and prosecute and win this war. It was genuine empathy for what was going on. It was genuine anger at the transgression and violation. That element of Texas within him, which some people didn't like—I always did—but that element of Texas in him fit because it was not excessive, it was not boisterous. It was a kind of toughness that I think the country wanted.

Nelson: I don't know if it was in that speech or in another speech, but he was the first President to mention mosques in a positive way.

Wehner: Right.

Nelson: In other words, going after the bad guys did not mean assuming everybody who was a Muslim was a bad guy.

Milkis: I think that was in the September 20 speech.

Wehner: I think what you're thinking about was when he actually went to a mosque. I think that was before September 20, I'd have to check. I don't think in the September 20 speech he mentioned it.

Antholis: He said something about Muslims.

Perry: Islam in general being a peaceful faith.

Wehner: Yes, when he said that I don't think that was September 20, that was when he went to the mosque, when he said it was a religion of peace—I think that was the phrase he used.

Nelson: Part of the same period when he is resolved to go after "this evil" but at the same time wanting to distinguish—

Wehner: Yes, and that was very impressive and very important. He was essentially signaling to people in this country—obviously the people who had committed this atrocity and this act of terror were of the Islamic faith and you couldn't deny that, but it was important to say that this is not necessarily representative of Islam. And the signal that we're all Americans, that includes Muslim Americans, and basically signal from the biggest pulpit in the land, "back off" if anybody is going to feel bigotry.

Perry: This will not be a World War II Japanese American internment moment.

Wehner: Right. We're not going to turn on each other and we're not going to turn on Muslims, but we're going to wage and win this war.

Milkis: He does say here and he talks about the sympathy offered at a mosque in Cairo for 9/11.

Wehner: There were some references to it, but the main one was the one that he went to and it was a mosque in D.C.

Perry: For the historical record I heard Judge Michael Mukasey speak at the law school here a couple of weeks ago. Now we're 14 years on, a lot has happened in the Islamic world. Judge Mukasey, as the federal district court judge in the Southern District of New York, tried the first World Trade Center bombers—

Wehner: He sure did.

Perry: In the early- to mid-'90s, and José Padilla, a 9/11 conspirator, we think.

Wehner: Right.

Perry: And has therefore had his life disrupted for many years for security reasons, as one can imagine. He is now taking issue with that approach, even though he served very meritoriously as President Bush 43's Attorney General the last two years of his Presidency. But just for the record, if people want at another more distant time in history to look at a different approach 14 years on, this was a speech given by Michael Mukasey on April 17 at UVA [University of Virginia] law school.

Wehner: Interesting. He is a very smart guy.

Nelson: We had a gathering of speechwriters here, pre–George W. Bush speechwriters, and things they said confirmed what was in Robert Schlesinger's book about White House ghosts, and in the Reagan Presidency in particular. It drove the speechwriters crazy that after they finished a draft everybody who had any excuse to go ahead and poke around with it would do so, in the White House staff, in the relevant agencies. You're not describing anything like that here.

Wehner: No, it didn't happen much.

Perry: Even in the State of the Union?

Wehner: I'd have to elaborate. The way I would describe it is confidence in the process gave President Bush confidence in the product. Unlike President Clinton, who I gather from reading stories about him—

Antholis: Never finished speeches.

Wehner: Yes, it was chaotic.

Perry: Written on the way.

Wehner: Written on the way to the State of the Union and then the wrong speech gets into the prompter. That never happened in the Bush Presidency and wouldn't happen. It was a different style. President Clinton was undisciplined in some areas of his life, including that. In speechwriting it worked relatively well for him because he was a good communicator. I don't think he was an outstanding speech giver. I don't think there were many people who could remember that many lines or speeches that he gave—a few, one is the bombing of the Murrah Building in Oklahoma City and so forth, but he was a very good communicator, mostly when he wasn't giving formal speeches but in more informal settings.

For us, the situation was that these things are going to be locked down and if you're going to unlock it, it better be for a darn good reason.

Nelson: Is part of this Michael Gerson's tight relationship with the President or is it just President Bush's style?

Wehner: It's both. It's President Bush not wanting there to be disruption and changes at the end. "This thing is done. We've had plenty of time to do it. If somebody wanted to make a change, they should have made it at the right time and in the right style."

Perry: That is emblematic of his tight, disciplined running of the ship, his MBA [master of business administration degree].

Wehner: Where it helped with Mike—because Mike had the stature and the confidence of the President to be able to fight that off, it was not like somebody was going to roll over Mike easily if he wanted to.

Milkis: But he had to have a lot of strong standing with the President?

Wehner: Yes, to be able to say, "No, we're not going to do it." That applied to agencies and various people in the White House, but certainly if somebody like Karen or Karl or Andy had an objection, you would take that into account quite seriously. Then the question was when you would do it. There was Harriet Miers who was staff secretary. She was also very involved in this process and very keen to keep it orderly and to make sure that it ran—

Perry: Keep the speeches running on time.

Wehner: Yes, and to make sure it was in a way that President Bush was happy with.

Perry: President Bush 43 is so charismatic and impressive in person, but you said not a great speech deliverer. Why is that? By the way, if you go back and listen to some really early speeches by John F. Kennedy, he was not a natural speechmaker.

Nelson: No. That's true.

Perry: So we'll be mulling that over as we go get our lunch.

[BREAK]

Perry: As we broke for lunch we had asked the question about President Bush's charisma, his persona, which is so striking and attractive and compelling in person. Obviously he wasn't putting people off on television, but you mentioned that he was not a superb speechmaker. Why is that, do you think, given his strong personal characteristics and likable persona and his ability to speak off the cuff?

Wehner: I don't know. As we talked about earlier, he obviously was a good communicator and won a lot of elections. That was certainly there. I always felt he was more impressive in private than what people saw on the camera.

Perry: Did the camera change him or did he change in front of the camera or a combination or something else?

Wehner: I had an operating theory, having seen him behind closed doors as well as with the camera. I felt like he was careful and cautious and understandably and rightly so in terms of what he said in front of the camera. He didn't make many unforced errors rhetorically. You can go through all the words he said, and there are not many things that he would want to take back. The ones that he did were pretty minimal, like "bring 'em on" or "dead or alive." A couple of things like that. "Crusades" was a big one. That was a lot of the press focusing on it, everyone knew what he was talking about. Nobody thought he was on a crusade. This was one of those things where it became a big deal because the press focused and kept talking about it. And he never used the word again.

Perry: But you can count those instances on one hand.

Wehner: Yes, and they were not major ones. He was careful, but the effect of that was to make him less spontaneous and less himself. If you were in meetings with him he was more at ease and, as I was describing earlier, engaged and interrupting, but not in a bad way. He never cursed, but his language was a little saltier, like almost everybody.

Perry: Texan.

Wehner: It was a little more Texan. That didn't come through as much I think. People who were in the communications shop who were very smart people—we who thought about it—never quite figured out how to translate the Bush we saw to the rest of the public.

I invited a group of people to meet with him, including Mark Noll, who is now at [University of] Notre Dame, used to be at Wheaton [College] and is a historian of Christianity and religion. Mark isn't particularly political; I don't know if he voted for President Bush. I would suspect not, but I don't know. But he was certainly not an enthusiastic supporter. When I was walking out with Mark from the White House after he'd come to the meeting, he said something to the effect of, "If the guy I was with for the last hour and a half had been the kind of guy I saw on television, I'd have voted for him." So there was that kind of effect.

Some of the caricatures of President Bush were viewed as silly and sometimes frustrating by people who knew him, because we knew what he was really like versus those impressions. We were talking a lot about the September 20 speech and the bullhorn and the National Cathedral. There were moments when he really connected with the public, when I think the speeches were very good and he was very good in delivering them.

Antholis: What do you think the formula was? What worked? You mentioned the drama of the moment.

Wehner: Part of it was the drama. Part of it was his ability to put political issues in a moral frame that either unified people or helped them to feel that they were part of a large moral enterprise. He wouldn't say that, or we didn't say that, but that was it, an enterprise involving things other than just power.

He is very accessible emotionally and transparent. Some people have an affect, they can be completely uninterested in a topic and then give a speech on a topic that they're truly bored by and speak as if they care about it more than anything else. President Bush wasn't like that. He was a person—and this worked to his benefit and spoke well of him personally—who wasn't able to affect enthusiasm for things he wasn't enthusiastic about. So part of it was when he spoke about issues that he cared deeply about.

Antholis: This is a common refrain about the Bush Presidency. It is a little bit like [Woodrow] Wilson. Wilson said, "I spent my whole career preparing to be a President who had important thoughts on domestic politics, yet most of my Presidency was about foreign policy," which left him similar to President Bush's Presidency. It's interesting that that is where he seemed to find his—

Perry: Elevated his game.

Wehner: Yes, I think that's right. There's just no question that he was a wartime President, viewed himself as a wartime President. It occupied his mind most of the time. He didn't lose his interest in the other things for sure, some of the things were done. Education was done and he got the tax cuts, but there was a whole series of other things. When he would speak about immigration he was very passionate and spoke very movingly about it. But in the end we didn't get it done because we ran into strong headwinds in the second term.

Perry: You've mentioned education, and No Child Left Behind is on track at this point. In fact, people probably remember Laura Bush was up on the Hill with Senator [Edward] Kennedy on 9/11, going to testify about her understanding of early childhood education. Did you have a part of that at all in terms of the public outreach and ultimately when the bill was signed?

Wehner: No, I did hardly anything, maybe less than hardly anything when it came to Capitol Hill. I didn't come from the Hill; I never spent much time on it. I don't know how it operates. There were people who were a thousand times better. My predecessor in the Office of Strategic Initiatives, Barry Jackson, when he was head of OSI that was much more what he did. He had come from the Hill, he ended up going to the Hill after the Bush Presidency. He was chief of staff to John Boehner. And Barry was vastly better, more experienced, and more qualified, than I to do that. I took OSI in a very different direction.

I did some speeches for Mrs. Bush and knew her staff and got along well with them, but in terms of the operational side or the legislative side of things, I didn't really have much to do.

Milkis: Do you remember the kind of speeches you wrote for Mrs. Bush?

Wehner: I'm trying to remember. For some reason Martin Luther King Jr., for some event that she may have done there. It was only a couple of speeches. That seemed to be one that she gave. I don't think it was an education speech. It was one that was a little unusual for her, which is probably why they brought me in.

Milkis: Interesting.

Nelson: You're going to become OSI Director in December—

Perry: —of '02.

Nelson: Are there more '02 events that we should be asking you about?

Milkis: I would like to talk about the State of the Union, which is probably one of the more important State of the Unions.

Wehner: Yes, the 2002.

Milkis: The "axis of evil"—

Wehner: Yes, I'll tell you a couple of stories about that. I remember talking to Mike in December about that State of the Union. That's as early as you would begin talking about those kinds of speeches. We knew that this was going to be a foreign-policy, terrorism-heavy speech. So I sent Mike a memo. I don't know if it was that we had already decided on this theme or I was advocating this theme or a little of both, but I felt like the importance of that speech—I'm doing this from memory, you may have the speech in front of you.

Nelson: I have it.

Wehner: At the end of that speech was the outline of the Freedom Agenda, human dignity and how—

Milkis: "Our enemies send other people's children," that paragraph? This is the penultimate paragraph.

Wehner: I need to find it.

Milkis: "Send other people's children on missions of suicide and murder. They embrace tyranny and death as a cause and a creed. We stand for a different choice made long ago."

Nelson: I remember when I reread this the other night I was thinking there is this very heavy stuff in the beginning, and then there is the laundry list and then there is a pretty good peroration, as I heard President Bush called it. I've heard he likes to actually talk in terms of structure.

Wehner: Yes.

Nelson: It was good that you had this editing here because the other stuff might have gotten lost.

Wehner: This was the line I was thinking of: "And we have a great opportunity . . . the values of lasting peace. All mothers and fathers and all societies want their children to be educated and live free from poverty and violence. No people on earth yearn to be oppressed or aspire to servitude or eagerly await the midnight knock of the secret police."

Then there is the reference to Afghanistan and Islam. "America will lead by defending liberty and justice because they are right and true and unchanging for all people everywhere. No nation owns these aspirations and no nation is exempt from them. We have no intentions of imposing our culture, but America will always stand firm for the nonnegotiable demands of human dignity, the rule of law, limits on the power of the state, respect for women, private property, free speech, equal justice, and religious tolerance."

I wrote a memo to Mike about that theme and that, I thought, was what the January 2002 State of the Union speech would be remembered for because this was a change in doctrine. Up until that time Americans, American Presidents, American foreign policy, had essentially fenced off the Middle East and said that for a variety of reasons we're not going to apply human rights and this idea of human dignity to the people there.

This goes back to what I said earlier, which is President Bush being in some respects a root-cause thinker and feeling *some* of what explained what happened on 9/11 was these dysfunctional societies. To put this argument about the nonnegotiable demands of human dignity, and that no nation is exempt from them and while we're not going to impose our culture we're going to stand for these nonnegotiable demands—that was very significant. It was a doctrine shift. I thought that was what the 2002 speech would be remembered for.

The other thing I remember writing, which is also in here, was this notion about using this moment to try to leverage civic engagement, which was the piece—

Nelson: The [USA] Freedom Corps.

Wehner: Yes, the Freedom Corps, which John Bridgeland handled. There is a fair amount in the speech here about "For too long our culture has said, 'If it feels good do it.' Now America is embracing a new ethic and a new creed: 'Let's roll.'" That was the reference to Flight 93. "We want to be a nation that serves goals larger than itself. We have been offered a unique opportunity and we must not let it pass."

That was an effort, which I thought was a very good one, an impressive one, to take that moment and channel the feelings of the country and the passions of the country in a constructive direction. There was a lot of that in his speech. And 9/11 made the State of the Union speech much easier in the sense that while it did have a laundry list in it, it is not nearly as much a laundry list as the traditional ones. It began with foreign policy, whereas historically foreign policy comes at the end of these speeches.

The "axis of evil" line and how that evolved. Mike was working and he had assigned different people to write paragraphs, sections of the speech, to submit to him. David Frum was the one who came up with the line, and I think he used the line "axis of hatred" and Mike changed it to "axis of evil." This is how these things worked sometimes. I had no idea that "axis of evil" would get the amount of attention that it did.

I went in believing and still believe that this argument I just expressed about the nonnegotiable demands of human dignity, that would be the thing people would notice because that was the more lasting doctrinal shift. But the axis of evil overwhelmed the speech. A lot of people got hot under the collar for reasons that weren't exactly clear to me.

Nelson: Did anybody express concerns about that line?

Wehner: In the White House at the time? Not that I'm aware of. I don't remember it ever coming up other than David submitting it, Mike changing it and putting it in. In the review process it could have happened and someone alerted Mike and not me, but I don't remember anybody saying, "Wow, is *that* going to kick off a contentious debate."

Nelson: I would think that is a failure of the process—because axis and then mentioning three countries conveys alliance, relationship.

Perry: World War II, the Axis powers.

Nelson: Did this arise because there wasn't enough vetting of the speech? I would think somebody in State or Defense would have picked up on that and said, "Do you really mean to say what this sounds like?"

Wehner: Maybe it was a failure, although a lot of eyes read it and didn't anticipate it. It may have been. It certainly became a big issue. The defense of it, the explanation of what was meant by it—it was not as if it were a phrase that was thrown out without explanation. If you go back and read the explanation, it still holds up. I experienced this a number of times. All I can say is when you're with different politicians, different administrations, and then I've seen it on the outside. When you're on the inside and something like that happens and doesn't get caught, all of a sudden everybody on the outside focuses in and says, "How could that have happened?" When you're on the outside and President Obama or somebody on his team says something and you say, "You mean they didn't have healthcare.gov figured out and they rolled it out? Are these people total idiots? Wasn't there somebody who said, 'When this thing goes, can we make sure it works?'"

Nelson: Let's try it.

Perry: Beta version.

Wehner: When President Obama said you can keep your doctor and your health care and they knew that that was not going to happen, did anyone in the White House say, "Mr. President, we really can't say it because that is not true and it will be shown to be not true?"

It's a lot easier when you're on the outside. Everybody, for whatever reason, decides to focus and elevate. Then you say, "Gosh, these people are really slow and dull. Maybe they've been working too many hours." But there are too many smart people in all sorts of administrations. Even in somebody as skilled as Bill Clinton, "the meaning of the word 'is' is"? Is that really a smart line? Do you think he should wag his finger and say—? This is a smart guy. This is how life happens. In real time you're in it, you have a ton of things going on, you're seeing the axis of evil. You have an explanation; you think this makes sense. We articulate it, we put in the proper caveats. Then for whatever weird set of reasons people focus on it. And all of a sudden you're there and you're forced to talk about it.

Having said that, people who are in the White House can invoke that defense even when stupid things are said and even when the process does break down. But it wasn't as if Colin Powell and Condi Rice—it wasn't just a bunch of neoconservative war hawks who put this together.

Nelson: So they saw this?

Wehner: They had to have, I'm sure. For something like the State of the Union speech [Donald] Rumsfeld would have seen it, Powell would have seen it, Condi would have seen it, Steve would have seen it.

Perry: Given that "evil" was used in the National Cathedral speech—

Wehner: And the talk was about nuclear—

Perry: I think most people would agree that what happened on 9/11 was an evil act.

Nelson: It was the "axis." It was the three countries that were chosen.

Perry: But even when Reagan referred to the evil empire—there is something about the word "evil" and it comes back to this ideological split and to faith issues. People on the left think it is too religious a word or we shouldn't be portraying things in such black-and-white language.

Wehner: This is interesting now. [*flipping through transcript*] Where is the "axis of evil"? Is it on the second page?

Nelson: It's on the third page, right at the top.

Wehner: Yes. "States like these and their terrorist allies constitute an axis of evil arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our—"

Nelson: Sounds like concerted action among these—

Wehner: Look, I'm familiar and you may be right. What we were talking about was a group of nations that had certain common denominators of evil regimes, and it had to do with the weapons of mass destruction and that is what unified them. The idea was that these kinds of states are the

ones in this post-9/11 world. There was certainly a logic behind it. Did the phrase work? It clearly didn't. You just measure these things—

Nelson: Back to the process. You described earlier that, generally, once the speechwriting team had gotten the information it felt it needed from the outside, it wrote the speech and it stayed in the White House. The State of the Union drafts are circulated?

Wehner: Yes.

Nelson: Is the State of the Union the only kind of speech in which that is going on?

Wehner: No. The State of the Union tends to get more circulation than others because that's the one speech where the Department of Energy feels like they have a God-given right to have something said about the Department of Energy. [*laughter*] So you have more agencies—that is why it was always one of the least enjoyable speeches to work on, because you would get *so* much input from agencies. There was always this push and pull of a laundry list.

The agencies feel like, "We want two sentences on our pet project or on our agency." And you as a speechwriter feel like, "Yes, but it is also a speech and it has to cohere and hold together and there is a limit on time." There is always that push and pull. But as a general matter, the State of the Unions got widely circulated, in part because the agencies had an investment in that speech they wouldn't have otherwise. More people would have seen a State of the Union speech. And certainly for a speech like this all the relevant national security people would have been involved, because it was such an important national security speech.

I figure I'll know when I read the transcripts of all these interviews you've done if anybody ever raised an objection. I was never aware of it.

Antholis: We're not even supposed to talk about it.

Perry: No, we're not supposed to talk about what other people talked about.

Wehner: Whenever they're out.

Perry: When they're out, obviously.

Wehner: You may have heard—somebody you've talked to may have said that they had objections.

Nelson: I've never heard that anybody had objections.

Wehner: Even somebody like Powell, you would say he's not Paul Wolfowitz. But in general the other speeches, the non–State of the Union speeches, would go through a process. I don't know how many people they would have. I remember being actually in hand and people would check off. The same people would always see beyond the distribution list: Karen, Dan, Karl, Josh, Andy, Legislative Affairs.

Nelson: Harriet?

Wehner: Yes, Harriet would always see it, because it would be funneled through her. The Vice President, Scooter [I. Lewis Libby], others. Some speeches you would add people, depending on the speech. If it was a welfare speech, I suppose someone like Ron Haskins, who did welfare, or for education you would get an education person. It would rotate through. People would send in their comments and then you would go through and use your judgment on which to incorporate and which to ignore. If you incorporated them, you would often have to change the language, because a policy person would give you an insert that only a policy person could understand. Your role as a speechwriter was to convert the language in a way that was accessible and not stilted but also conveyed the policy accurately. But the speeches always got vetted pretty well.

Nelson: By the end of 2002, are you already starting to bring outside scholars to the White House, or does that happen only after?

Wehner: That happens after. Mike and I would consult with people, that was the way we worked. We both came in with existing relationships in the world of thought. I was saying earlier, we brought in Bill Galston—that was just with the speechwriting staff. I talked to public intellectuals and thinkers to get their input. I didn't begin to host some of these meetings until I was OSI Director. That started in November 2002.

The idea for that was actually Josh Bolten's. Josh is one of the most impressive people I've ever worked with, and I always got along well with him. When he was Deputy Chief of Staff he had a very good process of policy that he would prepare for the State of the Union. And on the domestic side, I was involved with Kristen Silverberg and Joel Kaplan. I would read through papers that were given. I would sit in on these policy meetings in which you would bring in, say, John Walters at one point when he was drug czar and other people who would make their case.

I had worked with Josh and got along well with him, and I think Josh had confidence in me. I don't know why Barry left OSI. He was very valuable to Karl, very close to him, and I think Karl wanted him to work more on the legislative side of things. They had Barry do a lateral move. As the story was told to me—I think this is true, maybe Josh or Karl told me and Mike—I think Josh went to Karl and suggested me to be OSI Director. Karl liked it and in fact interviewed me and offered the job to me on Air Force One. It was shortly before the 2002 midterm elections, because I was going on a trip where we did three different stops. New Hampshire was one stop and several others. That was my first ride on Air Force One.

Perry: And you got a job offer.

Wehner: I was like a kid in a candy store, more than being in the Oval Office or more than—I called my parents from Air Force One. I called Cindy.

Perry: Did you take the M&Ms?

Wehner: Yes.

Nelson: Candy store.

Wehner: Literally a candy store. I remember coming off the plane and being on the tarmac and from a distance observing the receiving line that would be set up for the President when he went out and how excited people were to do that.

Perry: Did you pinch yourself and say, "This is what I wanted when I was reading the Sorensen—it's here"?

Wehner: I definitely had the sense of "Wow, I'm a lucky guy" and how these things happen. I don't know why, but it was being there and it is such an impressive—the whole deal of going out there and being backstage before the President—

Milkis: Were you writing speeches for this 2002 campaign? Because President Bush made an unbelievable number of appearances.

Wehner: He did. If I did write speeches, they were just stupid talking points. At this point he knew what to say. This was the stretch run. He got essentially the same speech. All you would do is say, "I need Scott Brown" or whoever it was to do this.

So I sat with Karl. It had essentially been set up that I would do this job. It was pretty much mine to lose. Mike thought I should do it. I thought I should do it. As I remember it, he said, "Your job is to bug me. Your job is to give me ideas. You're not a policy-executing office." Karl explained what he thought OSI was. That involved several things. It was hosting the "strategery" meetings, and we brought in public intellectuals from the outside to meet with the President. There were the Wehner-grams, these emails that were essentially—they were kind of internal and external. They were to people I knew, reporters, but they were off the record. Then it got a little awkward because journalists were receiving this from someone in the White House, and were they really supposed to treat it as off the record?

They eventually said it was fine to do it on the record. So there was that component of it. To the degree that I had influence in the White House, it was really derivative primarily of my relationship with other people in the White House. There was nothing about OSI that would have given it much influence. This is often the case in any organization, but as it worked in the White House—which is that it's not the office per se that gives you influence, it's other things. In my case, to the degree that I had influence it was derivative of my relationships with Josh and Andy, Karen and—she was there and then Dan and after he left to some extent Nicole [Nason], Dana [Perino] after that, Mike, Karl, people like that. But I had essentially free rein. I was a kind of aide-without-portfolio. So I could weigh in with each of those people. I did it pretty much when I felt necessary.

If I had a concern about communications when it came to Katrina, I would call Dan or write him a note. It was the only time I had a one-on-one meeting with Josh. I had written him a memo—I was quite alarmed about the Iraq War and I thought Rumsfeld had to go.

Nelson: We'll have to talk about that.

Wehner: He gave me 45 minutes, one-on-one, to make my case. I had actually come to Josh when he was announced, which I think was April of '06. It was the revolt of the generals. I later learned, Josh didn't share this with me, that he wanted to get rid of Rumsfeld. And the frustrating

thing for those of us who thought Rumsfeld had to go was that revolt of the generals. These former generals who came out and said Rumsfeld had to go meant that Bush dug in his heels because he felt like, "I'm not going to be intimidated." It was a misjudgment on the part of those generals. That was when Josh took over.

[BREAK]

Perry: We just started again for the afternoon session to talk about first years in office and the impact of 9/11.

Wehner: The contingencies side, which is having to juggle this tension between wanting to define and set the course of events and reacting to them, everyone wants to define the course of events, but often you can't. If you think you can define events when events are coming on you, that's silly. The real gift is to be able to react to events and then rechannel them in a way.

The other thing is this characteristic, it is *immensely* complicated, of the character and qualities of a President and how things are determined almost completely by whether you succeed or not. If you are holding firm to a position and that position is the wrong one, you're stubborn, rigid, and ideological. And if you hold to a position with equal strength and passion and ferocity and you're right, you're principled, brave, and courageous. I saw this in the Bush Presidency on the Iraq War. Things weren't going well, and we were holding initially when the first strategy was not working well. That was the wrong thing to do. Then when Bush under unbelievable—we can get into this—political pressure and assault even from within his own party, Mitch McConnell comes into the office and has a meeting one-on-one with the President and says, "You have to withdraw from Iraq, you can't do this." The President almost throws him out and says, "I'm not going to do this on politics." Because the surge was right and it was vindicated, his judgment was vindicated.

These qualities that in the abstract we praise, your strengths, can become your weaknesses. You see it in every area of life, you see it with a coach. If a coach is succeeding, he's disciplined, and if a coach is failing, he's lost touch with the players. The acid test here is whether it works or not.

Nelson: Is there any other President, Sid, who had to deal with two such extraordinarily surprising crises like 9/11 and the financial crisis?

Milkis: FDR [Franklin Delano Roosevelt] had to deal with the Great Depression.

Nelson: But he knew it was there.

Milkis: The Great Depression was there before him. He came in with the so-called clean hands. I think that's a great thing to think about.

Wehner: I used to say Bush had the worst terrorist attack, the worst natural disaster in Katrina, and one of the worst financial crises.

Milkis: Other than the Great Depression. Maybe the recession at the end of the 19th century.

Wehner: It was a lot.

Milkis: It was like 18 percent unemployment, but this we had the whole financial—

Perry: Meltdown.

Nelson: When more than 50 percent of Americans have more than $5,000 invested in the stock market.

Wehner: Exactly.

Antholis: That's a great question though, Mike.

Milkis: I want to ask one question before we get to OSI. This goes back to what you were saying before about party and principle. The perceived wisdom on the 2002 campaign, almost anything you read that has been written about that campaign is that this is when President Bush became a divider rather than a uniter. That is viewed as such a harsh partisan campaign and in an area of the War on Terror where President Bush had provided extraordinary leadership and had the potential to unify the country. This is not my position, but it is out there, so I wanted to get your response to that.

Wehner: I think the charge is largely silly. For one thing, 9/11 unified the country, but that was a temporary phenomenon and it wasn't going to last. I do think if you look at how the Democrats treated President Bush and how he treated them, just in terms of the rhetoric, it is not even close. If you look at Harry Reid, he said Bush is a liar and he's a loser, and [Nancy] Pelosi, and look at their rhetoric against him versus what he said, you're talking about different universes.

In terms of the 2002 campaign, I was there. I'll give you an example that speaks well of the President, particularly if you consider what some of his predecessors and successors have said. The only time I remember weighing in on this issue where I was troubled by something he said—this was in the 2002 election. He said it one time and it was on the issue of homeland security. He said that they were putting the interest of unions ahead of their interest in the security of the country or something like that.

I raised it with Dan Bartlett and I thought he shouldn't say that, that that wasn't fair. Who knows the heart of man, but we shouldn't say that they're putting the interests of politics or the unions ahead of the country. I think that was the only time he said it. He never said it again.

Now President Obama every other week says that Republicans put their politics ahead of country and that they don't care about autistic kids, I can go through the entire litany. The fact is, as far as I can remember, in terms of jagged-edged rhetoric, that was the worst that he said. That's pretty good by Presidential standards.

Nelson: Yes.

Wehner: In 2002 he went out and campaigned for people of his own party because he had an agenda domestic, but otherwise—He felt like having Republicans in Congress would advance his agenda. There's nothing wrong with that. That's what politics is about. If the idea of the critics was that he was somehow supposed to not campaign for Republicans or that he wasn't supposed to criticize Democrats on legitimate grounds where they disagreed with him, that wasn't going to work, it wasn't going to fly. It is completely legit and I would expect a Democratic President—If he had not done that, if President Bush had not said a single word during the 2002 election, I guarantee you 100 percent that when the Iraq War started to go south the Democrats would have leaped and gone after him hammer and tongs, and they did.

I've written articles about this. If you read what the Democrats said about the surge and when there was absolute empirical evidence that the surge was working, if you read what Obama and Pelosi and Reid and others said, they flat out denied it and said it was losing. The ads—with the Democrats, with the liberals, General [David] Petraeus. Senator Hillary Clinton implied very strongly in her hearing with General Petraeus that he was cooking the books and lying. So that would have happened in any event. That charge I never thought was—I once did a Wehner-gram because David Broder had made this point. I went back and unfortunately for David Broder I quoted things he had said about Larry O'Brien and how one of the chief responsibilities of Presidents is they're also leader of a political party and celebrated that.

Nelson: Yes, that's interesting.

Wehner: And a President is many things, but he is also the leader of a party. You can actually go back and read one of John Kennedy's speeches, he talks about that. So the idea that a Republican President would campaign for Republican Members of Congress so he can have more people to advance an agenda that he believes is good for the country, I don't think there are any apologies for that.

Nelson: OSI. You talked about how that came about. With this exception, was it a decision to replace Barry Jackson or did Barry—?

Wehner: I have no idea. My guess is that Barry either wanted to move or was happy with the move because it was a lateral move for him. It wasn't a demotion. He worked more closely with Karl to be able to do what Barry did best. I never knew the history of it. I always got along very well with Barry.

Nelson: Did Karl Rove say, "Here is what I want you to do that OSI has not been doing" or words to that effect? Did he get a guy who is about what he wanted?

Wehner: I think Karl knew what I did, Josh knew what I did, and Mike certainly knew what I did. "We know what you do and we'd like you to do it at OSI." I viewed this very much as an office that I could create and shape to my own predilections, which I did. That involved the various things I was talking about. I've always wandered outside my lanes professionally, but I've always been able to get away with it because people didn't feel like I was being pushy about it. I did it hopefully with a light-enough touch.

But I was direct too. As I said, I went to Josh about Rumsfeld.

Nelson: We have to talk about that.

Wehner: But it was the part of bringing in the public intellectuals. It was the part about—you know the historical analysis of second terms and pitfalls. One job that Barry did that I didn't was the strategery meetings. We said it and it was so matter of fact. The emails, which definitely were something kind of organic to me. The effort to offer up a serious articulation of what we were trying to do to the public, something deeper than talking points.

I would also often send out things that were unrelated to us, of no narrow political purpose or defense of the administration, but it may be a speech that someone had given or an article. I once sent out an article that David Brooks wrote in 2004 on the theologian John Stott. I would send things out to people under the premise that what would interest me would interest other people. That's always a dangerous thing to do. Sometimes [Anthony] Blair speeches that I thought were particularly good. A study would come out, maybe it was a Pew study or the Arab Human Development Report, and I would summarize it and send it out to my list.

Then there were the things with the newspapers. I saw in the clips that George Will had a criticism and I did an endless, 2,500-word response to Will. So I would do that too. I used to do these "then and nows," often without commentary. I would take a statement that somebody made now and then one that they made in the past, and it didn't require commentary because it exposed a complete hypocrisy. So it was an office in which I would basically—My wife described it as "Let Pete go in his sandbox and build a sandcastle"—sort of throw sand around.

Nelson: Tell me what you were doing that you would put under the heading of strategy and how much of it was—what most of the Wehner-grams sound like, which was sort of rapid response, tactical. What was the strategy about it?

Wehner: It's a good question. Some of it was the strategery meetings we had. We would sit down and say, "What's coming up? What's on the agenda? What do we need to do? What do we build around it? How do we execute?"

Milkis: Senior staff came to—?

Wehner: Yes, that was senior staff. It was Condi, Steve, Karl, Dan, Karen, Scooter, Mike, Legislative Affairs, Mary Matalin when she was there. Josh.

Milkis: Did you run them?

Wehner: Karl ran them. I would help prepare them. I would get information from Karl and then someone on our staff would prepare slides that might be necessary to show. Sometimes these things would focus on different items depending on the moment in time. Some of it would be laying out an agenda, some of it would be events we were doing, speeches that needed to be done, the sense of what was going on with Congress on the Hill. That was a part of it.

Then there were things that I would do internally in terms of memos—Dan Balz mentioned one when he wrote that piece on me. I had that file, second-term agenda. That was an analysis of what had gone wrong with previous second terms, any lessons to learn.

Some of it would be strategy in terms of—I may weigh in with a memo or email about the Iraq War and what's going wrong and what changes we might have to make. In some respects, it may have been a slight misnomer for me, because when people hear it they think I sat around thinking long-term strategy the whole time. I did some of that. But to tell you the truth, the more I was involved in the White House, the more I thought back to what we were talking about, a lot of it is contingency. It is both the ability to see the light on the distant shore, make sure we're going to get there, but just having to tack and the wind changes and the water current changes and sometimes it's dark out and sometimes icebergs come up.

It's not just sitting around thinking—

Milkis: Thinking big thoughts.

Wehner: And obvious thoughts, like *Let's win the war in Iraq*, instead of losing.

Nelson: Strategy.

Wehner: And then I'll leave that to the national security team to figure out, because I think it will help our domestic program if we win rather than lose a war. [*laughter*]

So actually being able to give thought on how to win a war or how to get legislation through or what economic—

Milkis: I know you were involved with a foreign-policy think tank, but had you thought deeply about foreign policy before?

Wehner: Yes, it was an area I felt comfortable in and immersed myself in. If you go back, I did a piece that was published, "Real Clear Politics."

Nelson: We've got it.

Wehner: There was another one on the Shi'a and the Sunni.

Nelson: Yes, got it.

Wehner: That was the kind of thing I would immerse myself in. It was in a way like a college or high school research paper, but I was just interested in it. I would be involved in that. But I was certainly familiar. I see the memoirs of Henry Kissinger up there, which are fantastic memoirs. I was certainly fluent in the foreign policy world and I know people in that world. I brought in people like Fouad Ajami. And people were in touch in the White House with Bernard Lewis and John Gaddis, and I spent a lot of time with Peter Feaver and Will Inboden on the NSC staff. Actually, I was responsible for bringing in Peter, who is at Duke [University] now, and Will was his assistant. I was responsible for that too, because Will and Peter didn't know each other.

I would have discussions—these were slightly more abstract—but when the issue of waterboarding and enhanced interrogation techniques came out, I had discussions with Mike and Peter and Will about the morality of it from a Christian perspective.

I'd have breakfast with a friend, Gary Haugen, who runs International Justice Mission. I was introduced to Gary by my friend Steve Hayner, and Gary is involved with international justice issues. He is not a person of the hard left by any means but was really concerned about this issue. I brought Gary in to meet with Peter and me and maybe Mike was there to go through the morality of the enhanced interrogation techniques. I did a lot of different things.

Milkis: Would you mind telling us what your view of that was?

Wehner: I had concerns about it, more than probably a lot of people. I've written about it. The way I eventually worked it out was that almost everybody is on a continuum on this issue. Should people in general be comfortable with waterboarding or what are called enhanced interrogation techniques? No. It is a very high bar to cross. Is it a bar that most people would cross? Yes, given certain conditions.

If somebody came to you and said, "We have a terrorist and we think there is a 50 percent chance that he has information about a nuclear bomb that could kill 500,000 people. We're not sure how effective it will be to get the information, but we're not getting the information otherwise. We think there is some chance he would break under enhanced interrogation techniques, and we feel we have the capacity to sort through the information. Would you go ahead and use it?" The answer is yes for most people.

Back in 2004 Chuck Schumer had an exchange in which he talked about the ticking time bomb—this is when the Democrats were in favor of these things, before the war went south—and said, "Of course you would use it if there were a danger of a city going up." Like most things, we're on a continuum, right? Then it's the application of it.

My sense was given the number of times—I didn't know about this in advance. There's a very small group of people in the national security world who knew these were going on, so this was post facto. If you're talking about three terrorists being waterboarded under the conditions that were given, and given the fact that it was not the kinds of tortures that you could really do, which were sadistic for no reason other than to inflict torture—but to get information, I could justify it.

Did they work? From what I read, and I read a fair amount on it, it seems to have. As a general matter, people will come back and say it is not a forum where the information that you get is very good. But if you talk to some of the people who administered the program, they make a fairly persuasive case that it did. These are the hard decisions in a war. I can justify it with qualifiers. I am not completely comfortable with it, but when you're in a position of protecting people—and I do think context matters. A lot of people have forgotten or they weren't aware of the intelligence that was coming in after 9/11. They were expecting an attack that was much worse. We were flying blind; we knew very little about al-Qaeda. We were scrambling to get information. What is the nature of this threat? You get a high-value target like this that you're not getting otherwise. You have to connect the dots. If you don't connect the dots, then you're excoriated because you didn't do enough to protect us when thousands or tens of thousands of people die.

In retrospect should we have done it? We ended the program. If they had never gone on would we have gotten less information? Maybe. When you're doing these things in real time I think it was justifiable. But it wasn't an easy or simple decision.

Nelson: You've referred a couple of times to your one-on-one meeting with Josh Bolten about Rumsfeld. Maybe this isn't the right sequence, but I want to make sure we hear your account of it.

Wehner: The backdrop of this is I had been believing that the war had been going well, arguing that and feeling like the people who were criticizing how the war was going were mistaken, but I was wrong on that. I was selectively interpreting the positive—I'm sure there were positive things. One of the mistakes that we made in the Iraq War was that we assumed political progress would translate into security progress, that those two lines would intersect. We were making genuine political progress in Iraq, but they never did intersect, they always stayed parallel.

In fact, what it required was security progress to make political progress. Now if al-Qaeda had never, if you never had the outside forces that intervened—Tony Blair has made this point quite well—Iraq actually would have turned out pretty well. But once these outside terrorists were flooding in and stoking the flames—You remember when they blew up the mosque, which triggered the Shi'a–Sunni tensions—that exacerbated it. We went in with a light-footprint theory, which was plausible but wrong. It wasn't just Rumsfeld, it was [John] Abizaid and [George] Casey and others. They were committed to that doctrine and they didn't change it when the facts on the ground demanded it.

I remember having lunch with a journalist, George Packer of the *New Yorker*, a pretty liberal guy but I got along with him. I think it was arranged by Jeff Goldberg, but I'm not sure. I think it was Packer and Mike at the Hay-Adams.

Nelson: When was this, roughly?

Wehner: Was it 2005? Maybe it was earlier.

Milkis: It was before the 2006 election.

Wehner: It was before then. I don't think it was 2003.

Nelson: What I really wanted to know is when you started thinking maybe things aren't going as well as—

Wehner: It was later than it should have been. It may have been 2005.

Nelson: OK.

Wehner: There were two issues that kept me up at night. I don't internalize lots of things, but when I was in the White House these really weighed on me for different reasons. One was the Iraq War, the other was the [Patrick J.] Fitzgerald investigation, an entirely different kind of issue, but one I got roped into as well. I got my chance to do grand jury testimony, which I wouldn't recommend to anybody—it's not fun.

I was worried about the war. I was beginning to listen to people like Max Boot at the Council on Foreign Relations and was worried about it and Fred Kagan and Jack Keane and—

Nelson: Not the usual critics.

Wehner: Right, not the usual critics, and very sober people who were very invested in the war going well and succeeding, not being driven by partisanship. And they were thinking, *Something is not working*. I think we brought Max in at some point to meet with the President.

Then there was an effort Peter Feaver organized—there is probably a public record of this somewhere—where Eliot Cohen, also a critic of the execution of the war, ended up coming on at the State Department even though he had been a pretty harsh critic of our strategy. I remember seeing him interviewed by Brian Lamb on C-SPAN. Brian Lamb—which is very unusual—showed his feelings and revealed his views, meaning he was very upset about how the war was going. I know and respect Eliot Cohen.

We were bringing people in and—I have no idea what the time of this was—Max had been in to see the President along with some other people and had voiced his concerns about the war. Those were brewing.

I think it's April of '06 when Josh takes over. I always got along well with Andy and liked him and admired him. I wasn't that close with him, I always felt closer to Josh. So I felt I had the ability to go to Josh the way I didn't with Andy. I had worked with him earlier. Josh took over the day that the revolt of the generals happened and that screwed things up, because Josh was already thinking about replacing Rumsfeld.

Peter Feaver had organized an event where there were several people, including Eliot Cohen, maybe two other people. The President was there to hear about how things were going. Have you talked to Peter Feaver at all?

Nelson: Yes.

Wehner: You might check—Peter probably did talk about this, but if not you may want to go back to him to talk more about it. But that was an effort that Peter—I had been in touch with Peter. I remember talking to Meghan O'Sullivan in my office and being pretty adamant about how things were going badly. Rumsfeld and DOD [Department of Defense] were promoting the strategy that just wasn't working. What's going on here? I remember thinking she was probably prudentially cautious in what she said to me. I was not; I worried about it. I wasn't going to get in trouble for it, but I was pretty forthcoming in my criticisms and concern.

I don't remember the steps that were taken, if I took any at all at some point, but I do—this is now relatively late but I think this was the summer of '06. I did a long memo to Josh on the war going very poorly, the need for a new counterinsurgency strategy. At this point it was out there. Kagan and Keane had put forward an actual genuine plan at AEI. Rumsfeld needed to go and I made the case for why. Josh asked me who should replace him. I think the names I suggested were Jim Baker, Joe Lieberman, maybe Fred Thompson. I didn't pretend that I really knew exactly who it should be.

Nelson: Did you mention [Robert] Gates?

Wehner: I did not mention Gates. I think that came from a friend of the President—a friend or someone mentioned it directly to President Bush, or somebody mentioned it to his father and his father mentioned it to George W. Gates was a great pick, but I didn't think of him. If you don't have the memo, it was my idea. That's just a joke.

I wrote the memo to Josh and then he said he wanted to meet. I don't think I requested a meeting, but I may have. He gave me 45 minutes, which was unusual for a Chief of Staff to do. And it was unusual for a Chief of Staff to do for *me* because I was not a particularly influential person in the White House. Josh gave me a lot of time. He was very Josh-like, asked a lot of questions: "Why do you have this concern? What do you think should be done about it? Why do you think Rumsfeld should go? Who do you think should replace him?"

Josh didn't reveal *his* hand so much, it was more asking questions. I came away assuming that Josh saw things as I did. The President bought into it. It was within a day or so after the 2006 election.

Nelson: The day after I think it was. Something else that comes up a lot in what we read about you is the second-term planning. When did that begin, and maybe you can walk us through how that began? Was it something you initiated or were asked to do?

Wehner: It's funny because those are the kinds of things—It appears in relatively few profiles that are done of me. It's like a big deal, whereas for me at the time, in the reality of my day-to-day life, it wasn't a big deal. If it never appeared in an article and you had asked me, I probably would have forgotten about it. Did I do that? I can't remember if it was my idea or Karl's. Maybe it was Karl's idea, it would be interesting if he remembers. It was a pretty obvious one, though. It was right after the reelection, so the idea here is that historically second-term Presidencies don't go well. Why not? Can we do an analysis of why not?

Milkis: Did you ever read Nelson on this?

Wehner: I should have, maybe the second term would have been better if I had.

Nelson: Probably worse.

Wehner: So what has gone wrong and what are the applications? I'm not even sure I have it. Somebody does, because it was an internal document. That's why I'm frustrated I didn't take those documents with me. It was the literal reading of the law. But some of it was scandal—there was Nixon in the second term. Some of it was lack of intellectual energy, some of it was in the second term the B and C teams takes over. Some of it is events that conspire against. [Dwight] Eisenhower, health issues. [Lyndon] Johnson, if you called it a second term, it was the Vietnam War. Nixon, of course, was Watergate. Reagan had Iran-Contra and arms for hostages. Clinton had [Monica] Lewinsky. Those are the obvious ones.

There were more things, which people forget about when you go through. Reagan had the '86 tax reform, which went well, so it was a mix of things. To go through and essentially do research on that and whatever the lessons were that we were supposed to learn.

Nelson: It wasn't a big deal at the time.

Wehner: It was one of those things where it made sense for OSI to think this through. I may have gotten into the sequencing. It was clear at that point what domestic issues—the foreign policy side was clear. Win the war instead of lose it.

Nelson: That mission was pretty clear.

Wehner: That's why they paid me the big bucks.

Nelson: Did you talk about Social Security reform?

Wehner: Yes.

Nelson: Immigration?

Wehner: Then immigration. Those were the two big policy issues on the second-term agenda that hadn't been completed in the first term. The first term was Medicare prescription drugs, education, tax cuts. Then the bigger ones for the second term domestically were immigration and Social Security. There was the issue of sequencing—do you still want to move forward with them and if so how do we sequence it, how do we succeed? There was no question that we were going to move forward with it because President Bush cared about them, he had run on them.

Nelson: This strikes me as important, that he ran on them. He talked about Social Security reform in 2000. He really didn't talk about it in 2004. There is a sense in which it took people by surprise.

Wehner: A little bit.

Nelson: He made that his number-one domestic priority the second term.

Wehner: My memory is that actually there were a number of Republicans—this gave us a kind of false hope—you need to go back and check the record, but I think people like Elizabeth Dole and several Republican Senators had run on Social Security reform. Elizabeth Dole had an ad in which she showed her opponent his Social Security plan and it was a blank, and hers was some version of the Bush proposal on Social Security.

A number of Republicans had run on it. We were able to point to Republicans and say, "They embraced Social Security reform and they won." That was in the '04 election. President Bush did talk about it, but of course the election, as you know, having talked to Karl—

Nelson: Was about the war.

Wehner: It was about the war and the leadership, that was the main thrust of it. But if somebody had said in 2004, "President Bush is going to promote domestic policies. What do you think he is going to do?" I don't think it would have shocked people to hear that it was Social Security and immigration. If you had said in 2000, "If Bush is there for eight years, what issues do you think

he is going to advance?" You would have said tax cuts, Medicare prescription drugs, education, immigration, and Social Security.

Some of those got tabled because you can only do so much in a first term and he had the war to intervene.

Perry: So then it is also a process of elimination. If those are still left as you came in, then why not switch to those with another term to go?

Wehner: And we made a mistake, which was we led with Social Security instead of immigration. If we had flipped those and led with immigration based on the capital the President had after the reelection, we would have gotten that through.

Nelson: Did you have a voice in the decision to do Social Security first, strategy guy?

Wehner: Since it failed, no.

Nelson: Karl must have had.

Wehner: To tell you the truth, I don't remember there being voices who said we shouldn't do it or we should do immigration first. I don't think I particularly weighed in on it. If I had, I would have said to do Social Security. I am of the view that Social Security was a kind of entitlement reform that had an urgency, because unless we reform entitlements we're going to face a fiscal catastrophe and it's going to happen sooner or later. If we do it sooner, it is going to be less traumatic to the body politic than if we do it later. I would have argued—if I were asked—let's do Social Security. But you know the history of it.

First, it was the personal accounts and then the [Robert] Pozen plan, which indexed it to wages, a progressive indexation, which I thought was a good plan. Pozen was a Democrat. It was a way we could say to Democrats that middle- and lower-class people were not going to have to carry the brunt. We were actually putting a higher cost on upper-income people. We thought that would bring in Democrats and that was a responsible way to proceed. We thought the personal savings accounts would bring in Republicans. I think the plan is still defensible. It wouldn't surprise me if when we finally get Social Security reform it will have some elements of those. But we couldn't move it and we never even got it out of committee.

We had that period of time where it was like 40 speeches in 40 days. We went, he gave these speeches, we focused attention. We didn't move the needle at all. It was the one time that of all the emails I sent out, the Wehner-grams, that was the only one that ever got me into trouble.

I actually had a tremendous luxury. I was able to send out these emails without getting anybody to sign off on them.

Nelson: You didn't have to ask Karl if it was OK?

Wehner: No. Now sometimes I did.

Nelson: Just to be cautious?

Wehner: I did on the Social Security, which I was glad about. And Barry actually, I think several others, but for the most part I could send these things out without—sometimes I would ask Dan Bartlett or Karl or Mike to look it over and give me a clinical judgment of whether it was a problem. But most of them I sent out without approval. That is a real luxury in the White House, to not have to get people to sign off on it.

It worked for me for a couple of reasons. One is a lot of what I did was time specific and time sensitive. If I'd had to have interagency sign off, it just wouldn't have worked, I'd be sending them out today.

Nelson: It is a little bit of a war room operation you're conducting, right? Rapid response?

Wehner: Yes, it's a kind of intellectual war room. And the second thing is I didn't want to have too many cooks in the stew.

Milkis: Kind of like your speechwriting experience.

Wehner: Just let me do what I want. If you don't like it, I won't send it out, but I don't want to go through the—I never liked that about a speechwriting process, which is you get something done and then you get all these comments and have to redo things. It's never been anything I particularly liked, and I didn't have to do it with these.

But I did send out this email and the *Hill* or some newspaper published it and thought it was some sort of secret White House memo, that I was revealing some grand secret. This is the funny way Washington politics works. I had done this a hundred times and it just happened that they put it out.

Nelson: What was it about?

Wehner: It was about Social Security. I talked about the Pozen plan and I argued for why the personal savings accounts weren't sufficient. I think the President had not officially embraced the Pozen plan yet, so I got out ahead. I felt sick about it because it was leading up to the second inaugural speech. And every time he would do interviews it would seem that he would be asked about this memo.

Nelson: The Wehner plan.

Wehner: Exactly.

Perry: Did you hear from him directly?

Nelson: Did he call you on the carpet?

Wehner: No. In fact, the only time that—it was actually the opposite with Karl. I felt terrible about this, like I had screwed up. I'd meet with Karl in the morning, I was probably apologizing again or something and he said something to the effect of, "It doesn't bother me and it shouldn't bother you," so basically get on with your life, which I appreciated a lot. It was like, "This isn't a big deal so quit worrying about it."

Milkis: Did you get a sense of how President Bush felt about it?

Wehner: No.

Milkis: You never got any word about it from President Bush?

Wehner: No, I never got a sense that, "Jeez, the President is pissed off that he is being asked about your stupid email." He may have, but I never heard about it. It didn't seem to affect my role in the White House.

Perry: And you never knew who passed it on to the media?

Wehner: I never did. But there were people in the media on my email list. Peter Baker was on my email list, Jon Rauch and all sorts of columnists, liberals and conservatives, people in my Bible study. There are a thousand people on my list. I'm sending these things out all the time for years. It's amazing that it never created more of a stir. That was the one time. It wasn't a big deal. The President ended up doing what I had said, it was just that I had released it.

As I said, that was one in which I had checked with Barry and Karl and maybe even a couple of other people. It wouldn't have made a difference, they were all relaxed and supportive, but just for me it was comforting to know that I had run the traps rather than had really gone off on my own.

Nelson: We passed by something that appears in the timeline in the briefing book. In December 2003 there is a reference to the Massachusetts Supreme Court decision legalizing same-sex marriage and then you writing a memo.

Wehner: Right.

Nelson: Could you talk about that? That issue played into the politics of 2004 in some ways.

Wehner: Yes, I'd be happy to do that. I had written, much like I had on the stem cell, a pro/con. I had done the arguments—it was the same kind of thing. I had read Jonathan Rauch and Andrew Sullivan. I knew the arguments very well. When I helped Bill Bennett with *The Broken Hearth*, which is a book about family, there was a chapter on same-sex marriage. I was very familiar with the arguments about it. They were not stupid arguments, but obviously they have been persuasive to a lot of Americans today. So I had done a back-and-forth.

For some reason I was identified with that issue in terms of being a go-to guy on it, an expert. The President one morning called me into the Oval Office with a couple of other people and we talked about same-sex marriage. Then there was a policy meeting in the Oval Office. Vice President Cheney was there. I can't remember if I was the person who led that briefing. I don't think I ever really led a briefing, because that wasn't my portfolio, but I don't remember who did.

I remember being in that meeting and speaking up about it and the issue.

Nelson: What did you say?

Wehner: I laid out the argument in favor of same-sex marriage.

Nelson: You were trying to be an honest broker, so to speak?

Wehner: I probably argued to keep the traditional definition of marriage, but laid out the honest-broker arguments for and against. I can't remember exactly.

Nelson: Probably the issue you were dealing with then was not whether to endorse same-sex marriage but rather endorse a constitutional amendment that would define marriage as between a man and a woman.

Wehner: That's right, there are two issues. There was the issue of same-sex marriage and there was the issue of the constitutional amendment. I always thought that Karl got unfairly blamed. His critics were like, "This is a wedge issue to try and divide the country on a hot-button social issue, exploiting same-sex marriage for political advantage." It made its way on referenda in states like Ohio and so forth. I thought those criticisms were off base.

This issue was in a sense—If not forced on us, it was the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court that made the decision that nullified the—so it changed it to an issue—People may agree or not, but there is a plausible argument that says states ought to do this, and when the court intervenes like they did in *Roe v. Wade* and takes this away from the public, that that is a problem.

Now that is not always the case, as we learned in *Lincoln v. Douglas*. Vote it up or vote it down doesn't always apply. But it applies most of the time, and a lot of people, including me, thought it applied on the issue of same-sex marriage. The question is, if state supreme courts are intervening in this way—

Nelson: What's the solution?

Wehner: That was one way to do a solution.

Milkis: You prefer it that way—to use [Stephen] Douglas's phrase "popular sovereignty" to the constitutional amendment, would that be your preferred stance?

Wehner: No. I thought in this case—I'm not going to associate myself with Stephen Douglas, I'm on Lincoln's side.

Milkis: A constitutional amendment was going to leave it to the state? I can't remember.

Wehner: I think it was going to define—

Nelson: So it was a national solution.

Wehner: Yes, I think it was going to define it, because it was saying—

Milkis: But you don't remember which method you preferred?

Wehner: What we ended up with, I think I preferred that one. People in the White House were queasy about it, not for political reasons but because it was an issue—People who are liberal and

don't know many conservatives think that a lot of conservatives are sitting around thinking, *Let's talk about same-sex marriage so we can divide the country, because we're really bigots at heart and we think our bigotry is going to win voters.*

The truth is that people were uncomfortable with the issue. In my experience the discussions were very impressive, so if anybody had parachuted in and heard the arguments you would have heard serious arguments on the merits and demerits of it and what is the right thing to do. I never had a conversation with anybody who said, "This will really help us win in Ohio" or whatever.

If the Massachusetts court had not done what they had done it wouldn't have been an issue.

Nelson: How did Cheney weigh in?

Wehner: He asked a question or two at the end of the briefing when we were leaving. I don't remember the specific question, but I remember having my hands on the back of a chair when I was standing up as I was about to leave. And he was asking some question, but I can't remember which one it was.

Milkis: I wanted to ask about this in a broader way, because you mentioned your ambivalence about the religious right at the beginning of the interview. Did the relationship of the religious right to the Republican Party or the Bush administration ever come on your radar screen? Did you ever write a memo about that? Did you ever have people in to discuss that? I remember discussing with Bill Kristol what the proper relationship should be. Given your ambivalence, I wondered if it ever came up.

Wehner: I didn't bring in any group to talk about the religious right. We brought in Richard Neuhaus and George Weigel, Mark Noll, other people, but never on the issue of religion and public life per se. I'm sure there were emails between Mike and me on the religious right. I never dealt with it. Tim Goeglein dealt with the [James] Dobsons of the world, which I'm sure he's going to get crowns in heaven, but I didn't deal with them that much in terms of the politics of it or coordinating or outreach. I didn't get involved in the politics of things in that way, constituency building or constituency energizing.

I did weigh in on issues and articulated the pro-life case and cause in Wehner-grams that I sent out. But one of the biggest manifestations of the issue of religion and faith and its effect on the White House and on President Bush, which doesn't get talked about very much, was PEPFAR [President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief], the global AIDS [acquired immune deficiency syndrome] initiative, and the malaria initiative.

What I think a lot of people don't understand, critics of the President never understood about him, was how religion affected him. It sanded off some of his rougher edges and made him a more empathetic person. The idea of human dignity, including the language we were talking about earlier in the first State of the Union in 2002, about the nonnegotiable demands of human dignity—Something important he used to do that was never paid sufficient attention to was he would bring in dissidents—Chinese dissidents, Burmese dissidents, North Korean dissidents—and was very animated by that kind of thing, very touched by it. The whole issue of human rights and human dignity was shaped in part by his faith. The malaria initiative, which nobody thought he was going to get any political credit for, he was the one who thought very boldly about this.

The numbers that were coming in for recommendations were much lower than he eventually endorsed.

For him as a human being and as an individual—he has been explicit about how faith played a role in ordering his life as related to alcohol, but it created in him an empathy and compassion and tenderness and sympathy for vulnerable people in society that I don't think would have been there had he not become a Christian. It informed his political philosophy—back to that question about why Jesus. If he had elaborated on that, he probably would have talked about this idea that people—this is a very Jeffersonian idea, the very idea of the founders, which is inalienable rights that are granted to us by a Creator. And Lincoln, who said nobody should be a slave to a master and people shouldn't be brutally treated because they have dignity.

Those elements of him were real, but if you're on the left you're thinking his faith caused him to go to war in Iraq because he wanted to usher in the return of Jesus, because of Israel or some weird conspiracy eschatology, which was just silly. He didn't think in those terms about the end times. Ronald Reagan actually did to some extent. But that never drove Reagan's policy. But the idea of how people thought faith affected President Bush versus how it actually did struck me as one of the bizarre cartoonlike images that emerge. If you actually know what is going on, you're thinking, *What weird books are people reading?*

Nelson: Did you work on the first inaugural?

Wehner: Only in the sense that I talked to Mike about it.

Nelson: You weren't there, just that line, "the road to Jericho."

Wehner: That was a beautiful line.

Nelson: When you were explaining President Bush's—I just thought of that line.

Wehner: It's a lovely line and that speech was very much in line with that.

Nelson: One other thing you said meant a lot to you, not in a positive way necessarily but important, was the Fitzgerald investigation, so I want to give you a chance to talk about that.

Wehner: I got roped in—I'm trying to remember why. There were emails—because there was this response to the [Joseph] Wilson *New York Times* op-ed. Long before there was ever anything about Valerie Plame, the wife, there was a response that we were engaged in to push back on a narrative that in fact was not true. And Wilson made several claims that we now know were untrue. But we got the subpoenas. I got a subpoena that said everything I had written on Iraq and the Iraq strategy group and two or three other things where I thought, *Oh, my goodness, this is going to take forever*.

So you go through, you print out documents, and then you're looking through the documents and you're worried you're going to find something that you don't remember or that is going to be incriminating or that you're going to have to explain. Then you turn them over, boxes full of them.

I was first interviewed by the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] in my office. I had nothing to do with the leak or her, I had no idea who she was. That went fine. It was a 45-minute interview. Months later Fitzgerald is named. I get a call from somebody saying, "Can you go and meet"—it was at 1400 New York Avenue or some such thing—"with some people from Fitzgerald's office?" It was a Friday. That was a little odd.

Perry: Had you hired an attorney?

Wehner: No. What happened is I called Bob Bennett, Bill Bennett's brother, a very high-profile guy.

Perry: Good choice.

Wehner: Bob was very nice. He called me back that day and I told him what was going on. He said, "You're not going in there without a lawyer." He volunteered to be my lawyer for free. I said, "Bob, I don't have anything to hide. But if I go in with you as my lawyer, they're going to think I did something." So he had a young guy in his firm, Joe Barloon, a wonderful guy who worked with me and was my lawyer.

I went there with Joe and they said I wasn't a target but I was something. Then for a couple of hours—it was a really aggressive investigation. "What did you mean with this email?" and "What about this memo?"

Perry: Was it not only because you had written on that topic but certainly your closeness to Karl Rove—

Wehner: Yes, it was Karl, I was in the Rove shop.

Perry: He was at the top of their list.

Wehner: Right, he was at the top of the list. I didn't know all this at the time. I'd written internal emails and memos. I don't remember exactly what they were. I remember Kate O'Beirne had written me an email in response to something I had written to George Will and somehow I think Wilson came up. Anyway, it was kind of aggressive.

I think what they thought was I was the opposition research guy and I was doing dirty work or something like that. I ended up being required to testify before a grand jury. They probably thought, *Maybe this is a thread we can pull*. I think three of my grand jury appearances got canceled. The third time I got pulled for Colin Powell because his schedule was better than mine I told Joe, "Man, is there some way we can stop this kind of—?" You're nervous, you're preparing. The one thing they tell you when you're meeting with your lawyers is, "You may have done nothing wrong, but you can still get yourself into legal trouble by saying something under oath that's wrong." So you're nervous about that.

I finally do my grand jury testimony. I don't remember it that well. I think at that time they had figured out I had nothing to do with the case that evolved. Your lawyer's not in with you. I met with Joe. I did remember I had written on a subscription card in a *Newsweek* magazine that had been pulled out. When I was looking through my files I had written something like "WMD

[weapons of mass destruction] arrow Wilson slash Hadley" or something. I could not to this day tell you what it meant. I don't remember when I wrote it because if I was in the White House I usually used a White House pad. Was I at home when it came up? I couldn't remember what it was. But it was the kind of thing where if you saw it in the context of this investigation people would think, *What does this mean?* and you can't explain it. You don't want to be in that position.

I remember walking over with all these files to Joe's office thinking, *Jeez, I sure would like a gust of wind to blow this damn piece of paper away*. There was no public record of it, it was just a stray piece of paper. Maybe because I was Christian I just went ahead and kept it and said, "I'll let them see it and answer that I don't know what it is." I don't remember if it even came up. But I remember that feeling that the prosecutors have a hell of a lot of money and they want to hang somebody's head on the wall. I didn't like that feeling very much.

The fact that Karl had withstood that, it was an unbelievably unfair prosecution and even persecution of him. And the fact that Fitzgerald knew it was [Richard] Armitage right from the get-go, and that in some ways the entire theory of the case was instantly refuted when he made the determination that Armitage was the one who had leaked the name and didn't intend to out her because it was a complicated— As we now know, it was a complicated set of facts, but there was no effort to try to out her in a way to injure her. I never understood how Powell and Armitage kept their traps shut—that always bothered me.

Perry: And the Libby conviction, your thoughts?

Wehner: I didn't follow it enough. I know Scooter and I've always liked him. I felt like the President did the right thing in terms of the approach he took. I know the President took very seriously the effort by the Vice President and his team to pardon him. There was a real effort to determine in an objective way what had happened. He made the determination he would not pardon him, but he would commute the sentence. I haven't followed it closely, this new book with Judith Miller seems to defend Scooter more and undermine the Fitzgerald investigation, but I haven't read it closely. I felt like it was a tragedy. Scooter is a very good guy. I think he got looped up and, as I say, Fitzgerald, who had a very good reputation, is a very good prosecutor, acted in a way that was inappropriate. In the end Scooter spent a lot of money for his defense.

Maybe an argument is out there that I'm not familiar with, but it never was clear to me after it all came out what the hell this was all about. It was a wild goose chase. You got the sense, which Justice Scalia wrote about in his dissent of the independent counsel law back in the 1980s—He said something to the effect of how fearsome it must be if you were on the receiving end of a prosecutor who has unlimited budget and unlimited time and has one goal and one responsibility, which is to convict somebody. There is a tremendous amount of inertia within the system to try and get someone, and they tried to get Karl. They didn't because Karl was innocent, as those of us who knew Karl knew he would be. The fact that Scooter got caught up in the collateral damage was very sad.

Antholis: We want to give you a chance before we wrap up here to provide some final reflections on the Bush administration. You can go any direction you'd like, strengths,

weaknesses, how you want history to think of the President, how should history think of President Bush.

Wehner: The strengths were OSI really. [*laughter*]

Perry: And speechwriting.

Wehner: For a time, speechwriting. [*laughter*]

Antholis: Follow the Wehner.

Wehner: After that I don't know.

Nelson: The recession didn't hit; you were holding it back.

Wehner: I won the Iraq War singlehandedly.

Nelson: You led the surge.

Wehner: What's that line? Nobody has ever lost an argument in their memoirs. No one in the oral history of any Presidency has ever been on the wrong side of a dispute.

I have a couple of reflections. Number one, President Bush is a tremendously admirable human being. Those of us who knew him and served with him saw that, and his tremendous acts of generosity and kindness, including his terrific act of grace when Scott McClellan wrote his tell-all book that was meant to injure the President. President Bush told the staff, "Just forgive Scott, show him grace. Don't get angry about it." It was really impressive, because it was on some level a wound. Scott had known him in Texas, and yet the President was a real example and had decency of heart.

The decision on the surge qualifies as one of the most courageous and impressive political decisions in my lifetime—it certainly was in my experience in the Bush White House. Unless people were there at the time, they don't remember the ferocity of the political headwinds to get the surge through. I wrote an email to Josh and Dan and Karl on the Friday after the January 10, 2007, speech announcing the surge. The speech was very good as a speech, but it was a bust in terms of trying to get support. It didn't move the needle at all. In fact, more opposition came up in response to it. I wrote this email alarmed because I felt that the floor was about to break on us politically and I was worried—there were a couple of Senators I had in mind who I thought were going to walk down Pennsylvania Avenue and say, "You have to shut this thing down." [Mitchell] McConnell ended up trying to do that.

I got a call from Josh that day—

Nelson: The ones you mentioned are John Warner and Richard Lugar.

Wehner: Yes, I thought Warner and Lugar were going to come walking down Pennsylvania Avenue and say, "You've just got to pull the plug on this." We knew the Democrats weren't

going to be on board, but the skittishness and nervousness on the Republican side was tremendous.

Josh called me Friday afternoon. I picked up and said, "How are you?" and he said something to the effect of, "I was fine until I got your email." Josh knew that I'm not a particularly dramatic person and I'm not overwrought. So if I'm writing an email that is expressing a lot of alarm, he noticed it. I told him I don't even know that I had particularly good ideas. I probably did have some ideas on what we needed to do. But there was definitely the sense of the Washington clock and the Iraq clock.

We just had to figure out—we had put all our eggs in the surge basket and in Dave Petraeus and Ryan Crocker. We had one shot left and we had to give them the time to get through it. We had to figure out by hook or by crook that to give the surge a chance and if we can, we can hold this thing together, but is this thing going to get strangled in the crib? That was my concern. But they held it together and it held together because of President Bush. He had a spine of steel on that. The team hung together too.

Nelson: The Republicans in Congress kind of hung together.

Wehner: They did, but they hung together because he was—McConnell came and I think their preference would have been, "Screw the surge, let's get out of this thing, it's hurting us politically." But to their credit they did. There never was that revolt.

The third thing I'd say is what I found myself telling people when they ask me what it is like to work in the White House. That's the quality of the people I got to work with. I had read a lot of memoirs. I felt going in that the White House would be a sort of snake pit of competing egos and turf wars and ugliness. I was prepared to go in to see that. I didn't think I would be all that much a part of it. It's not my character or temperament to get into things like that, but sometimes you get drawn into them whether you want to or not. That almost never happened with me. There were sometimes things going on between staff—that happens. You could go to any business or any church at the corner and probably have more internal politics than we had at the White House.

Nelson: You can go to our department meetings.

Wehner: The academy makes political fights look like kids' stuff. But the quality of the individuals I got to work with was really impressive. I went in not cynical about politics at all, I felt politics is about important things. We talked last night about justice. That's not all it is about; I'm perfectly acquainted with the downsides of politics. There are some unsavory characters, but I didn't come away more cynical. I probably came away less cynical in terms of my experience in the White House. That always struck me. I was very fortunate with the people I got to work with. It was a real joy and a privilege to be there.

I think about the Bush Presidency as in some respects like the [Harry] Truman Presidency, when Truman left he was unpopular but he was right on the big things, the Cold War. Probably the one sentence in the Bush Presidency that I would argue should be there is he kept the country safe after the attacks and he put the country on a war footing—not just in terms of military but the whole security apparatus. It required a tremendous transformation of government, from FBI and

CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] and intelligence and Homeland Security. An awful lot of people thought we were going to get hit a second time and we never did. That was because of him.

For all the problems the Iraq War created, he handed off an Iraq that was relatively pacified and in relatively good shape. And Joe Biden and Barack Obama testified to it if you read what they said in 2010. It took us longer to get there than I would have liked, but by historical standards—I'm not comparing us to Lincoln, but it is worth bearing in mind that it took Lincoln a while to get to [George] McClellan, I mean to [Ulysses] Grant.

Perry: Get past McClellan.

Nelson: He got to McClellan a little too quickly.

Wehner: He got too quickly to McClellan and stayed with him for a little too long. It took him a while to get to Grant, but he got there. Those things happen. Actually, to shift from one war strategy to another, and what that required was President Bush had to develop a healthy skepticism toward military leaders, which was not his inclination. He went in feeling that the Lyndon Johnson model was wrong. And he had this idea that Johnson choosing military targets and bombing targets in Vietnam was a mistake. He would be a President who would trust his military commanders and that's the right disposition. But some of our military commanders are honorable people but they were wrong. Casey and Abizaid were wrong in their strategy. And when the President had to go into the tank and make this case for the surge it was not easy. A lot of the military brass, the joint chiefs, seemed to think, *We don't want to increase it, we don't want it to break the force*. Petraeus was right. If you want to break the force and break morale there is a pretty good way to do it, which is to lose a war. So why don't we win it? That wasn't easy. The fact that he did it was very impressive.

The reforms on education are the right ones. They're tinkering with No Child Left Behind, but the idea of accountability and testing is right. The Medicare prescription drug plan, which a lot of conservatives were unhappy with, but if you look at the results of those reforms, the competition and choice, the costs of Medicare prescription drugs were 40 percent less than CBO [Congressional Budget Office] estimates. I don't think that ever happened before in a health care program.

Those kinds of reforms are really the basis—the Paul Ryan reform on Medicare, which is now the view of the Republican Party—that kind of reform, which almost nobody talks about now, was a significant one. The PEPFAR initiative and the global AIDS initiative was a great humanitarian achievement as well as a geopolitical one. More than a million people are alive in Africa because of it. Nobody had advocated it before and he went all in with it.

So we made our mistakes, some of which I've covered, but what can I say? I served in the Bush administration. I really respect and admire the President. It was a huge privilege to be there. It was about as good as I could have wanted when I was at the University of Washington reading those memoirs.

Nelson: That was wonderful.

Perry: Thank you so much for being here.