



The Election of 2004 – Collective Memory Project

Interviewee: John McConnell

In 2004: Speechwriter for President George W. Bush and Vice President Richard Cheney

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Q: John McConnell, you were deputy assistant to the president in the George W. Bush administration and senior speech writer to the president and the vice president, Cheney, but over the years you've also written for another vice president, Dan Quayle, and for another presidential candidate, Bob Dole. I may be leaving some off that list. But would you compare writing for -- let's start with President Bush -- writing for President Bush as compared with writing for Dan Quayle in the '90s, Bob Dole when he ran for president in '96.

MCCONNELL: Writing for a president, of course, is a singular kind of experience. Even if you've written for a number of other people, writing for a president is something different, because there is such a carefully-put-together system around the president [00:01:00] and the speech-writing process. There's the staffing process that most people don't know about, and that's where the document, the draft itself, is circulated to the senior people on the White House staff for comment and revisions, edits, what have you, and it's put through a rigorous fact-checking process. By the time it gets to the president, it is a very polished piece of material, and in the minds of many, the process might be done at that point. Well, not in the case of George W. Bush. He was a very serious editor, a very good editor of speeches. He could tell you right away what was missing in the speech. He could tell you right away the logical step in the argument that was still needed. He liked to explain things. He didn't want a lot of references to himself. [00:02:00]



Getting into the differences among the people you mentioned. Bush, for example, when we would write a speech for him, he always wanted names at the beginning of the speech of the people that should be acknowledged -- VIPs, local officials, the band. I mean, he really wanted to acknowledge on a specific basis all of these people and groups who were represented at the event. Now we didn't have to write anything. The names just had to be provided, and our fact checkers or researchers, I should say, spent a lot of time getting those names together, because the president didn't want to look out into a crowd and see someone who should be acknowledged and not have that name there. He wanted to make sure he always had confidence in that. Then he would kind of riff off of the names. As I say, nothing had to be written, he would just say the name.

A lot of the humor in his speeches came from those names. [00:03:00] He would talk about experiences he'd had with that senator or governor, congressman, mayor, and that would kind of be his way of getting into a speech. Vice President Cheney was a little more direct in his style. He was a good storyteller. He had very good comic timing. He wouldn't so much riff on names as he would just tell a funny little story or a quip. Vice President Quayle, when I wrote for him, he also liked to get directly into the message. Maybe if he liked things at the beginning, but he was a very -- he had a writing background himself. He had been a newspaperman. Quayle was actually the only boss I ever had who gave me a fully drafted speech [00:04:00] that he had done himself on a weekend. It was a Monday morning. It was back when the speeches were on disks. This was in 1992. And I got called over to the West Wing, and I went in to see him, and he said, "John, I wrote a speech this weekend." And he gave me this little blue three-inch floppy disk. I plugged it into my computer, and there was the whole speech that the vice president --

Q: Was this when he was vice president?

MCCONNELL: When he was vice president. Had written the whole speech. He had a couple little notes in there for me, "John," you know, "Find this figure. Find this. Put in this paragraph" from a draft of another speech. But it was a fully-formed speech. He was fast, too. He was a fast writer. Again, I think it was the newspaper background. Bob Dole, when I wrote for him in '96, he spoke from the teleprompter. That was kind of a pattern that had been set up in the campaign that they wanted the Senator to speak from the teleprompter. [00:05:00] So the teleprompter was set up at just about every event. That's the atmosphere that I stepped into as the traveling speechwriter for Dole.

Well, the first time I did a speech for Dole, my first week, of course the draft is printed out. It's put into vinyl pages in a big book, and then it's also loaded into the prompter. You always have to have your reading copy in case the prompter



goes down. So it was I think Toledo, Ohio, and Senator Dole got up. I was backstage. The first speech I'd done for him. He's going through the speech, and he reaches down with his hand and he flips about 10, 12 pages into the speech. He just -- thump -- and he's in another spot of the speech. I looked back and the teleprompter operator is spinning that speech to catch up with the Senator. And my life passed before my eyes. What have I done? [00:06:00] Have those pages been loaded into that binder wrong? Has the Senator gotten lost? Is he trying to find his way? What have I done? Well, afterward nothing was said, and I went to the teleprompter operator and I said, "Can you explain to me what just happened?" He said, "Oh, no, he just wanted to change around the sections. He's done this before, and I just go to that section so he can read it if he wants to." Dole was that way. If he had a text, he might just decide not to use it that day. Dole, of course, his great gift was this naturally jokey manner. I think that he always wanted to really get an audience laughing at some point. You know, humor is hard to do, and we always tried with him, but no one was better at it than Dole himself. [00:07:00] He would make these little quips, and he would get the crowd going. Then sometimes I just had the sense he would decide, in the moment, oh, I'm not going to read this speech in front of me. I'll do something else.

Q: He was maybe in part from a generation and also from a Hill career that really didn't think too much of rhetoric -- am I right about that -- sort of lofty oratory.

MCCONNELL: Well, that could be. I think, you know, when I went to work for Bob Dole this was a guy who had been in an elected position every day of his life since I think 1950 or '52, I think, when he was elected county attorney in Kansas. [00:08:00] He just really, I mean, you think about it, he spent decades in politics before he ever had a speechwriter of his own. So maybe that was part of it. He was so comfortable and so fluent with audiences that maybe he resisted the scripted nature of a lot of events. That might be part of it as well.

Q: Back to Dan Quayle. You wrote for him as a candidate for vice president, for re-election I guess, in '92?

MCCONNELL: For re-election, yes.

Q: And prior to that you'd written for him as a vice president in office.

MCCONNELL: Yes.

Q: Is there a difference between writing for someone between elections and writing for them during a campaign?



MCCONNELL: Yeah. Yeah. For the office holder, the president or vice president, or even a senator, in non-campaign conditions it's a very different kind of [00:09:00] proposition. There's the work of governing, there's the work of policy, there's the work of building coalitions, governing coalitions. There's the work of reaching out, and there's the work of getting the country that has elected you to the position to support and understand what it is you're trying to advance. In the campaign, it's all of those things, plus the choice. Choice involves contrast, and so the writing then becomes more about what are the issues before the American people, what are the issues that are going to be decided on election day, what is the direction of the country going to be if you elect me, [00:10:00] and isn't it going to be terrible if you elect that other person. It's all about contrast and choice, but also striking the right balance. You want to be the happy warrior. You want to be the person with the upper hand, and you don't want to be small minded in your presentation of the choice either. You want to have set a good tone and take the high ground.

Q: Although traditionally the vice president sort of carries the attack to the opposition, so that the presidential candidate can fly at a higher level.

MCCONNELL: Yes. I remember '92, working with Vice President Quayle. He was a fighter. He was a fighter. It's interesting. He didn't say much about Gore. I don't think he said -- he was running against Gore, of course. He didn't say anything about Gore. They had their debate, and I think there was maybe [00:11:00] an exchange. There was an exchange in the Quayle-Gore debate, an exchange about Gore's book on the environment and something about a BTU tax or a carbon tax. I'm not remembering exactly what it was, but it was something, and Gore said, "Well, it's not in there," and Quayle gave the page number. But my point is for the rest of the debate Quayle went full bore after Clinton. Just forget Gore. It was my first campaign as a participant, and it was an education for me. The vice president, he knew that this election was going to be about George Bush versus Bill Clinton. It wasn't going to be about Dan Quayle versus Al Gore. There were going to be a lot of people voting who just -- maybe most people -- just did not think about, well, who's going to be vice president? [00:12:00] They were voting for president, and so Quayle brought everything back to the question of whether Bill Clinton has the character or the integrity to be president of the United States. That was kind of the theme in the debate.

Going to your question, a lot of vice presidential candidates do that. They're the fighter. They're the real -- starting at the convention, they say good things. The way I always describe it is the vice presidential nominee praises the presidential nominee in ways he couldn't praise himself, and he goes after the adversary in ways you don't want the presidential nominee to have to do. They don't all do it this way. Jack Kemp with Bob Dole, he didn't fight like, for example, Bob Dole did when he was Gerald Ford's running mate. I mean, it's a matter of record, Bob



Dole really, really fought hard for Gerald Ford [00:13:00] and really, really went after Jimmy Carter hard.

Q: Was Dole disappointed in '96 that Kemp didn't take on that role with greater enthusiasm?

MCCONNELL: I never had that conversation with him.

Q: I wonder, comparing -- in '92 the ticket you were working for was pretty much running behind throughout the entire campaign. In 2000, when you start writing for -- did you write for Cheney in 2000 as well as Bush?

MCCONNELL: Yes. In 2000 the campaign speechwriters were Mike Gerson, Matthew Scully, and myself, and Mike was the chief speechwriter. We had been colleagues in Dole, and Scully and I had been colleagues in Quayle, at the White House in the early '90s. In 2000 Mike indicated to Matthew and me at some point in the late spring, [00:14:00] when the vice presidential nominee was selected, you know, we got to help that person. We got to make sure that person has a statement at the announcement and then an acceptance speech. So the three of us did, I remember, we did a draft for Cheney. None of us had ever met him, I don't think, but we had a draft ready for him to look at.

Q: Was this a generic draft or was it written for Cheney?

MCCONNELL: Well, it was written for him, because the announcement came. It was a little bit of a surprise even to us in the headquarters. It's not like we had some kind of inside information. We found out watching MSNBC I think it was, and Lisa Myers called - - what's that county? Is it Jackson County, Wyoming?

Q: Where Cheney --

MCCONNELL: Oh, Teton County. Lisa Myers [00:15:00] from NBC called the Teton County registrar and said, "Do you have a Richard Cheney registered to vote in Jackson?" and she said, "Well, yes, we do. He just registered the other day," or something like that. Then it was, oh, OK, so Cheney is not a Texas voter anymore, and there had been these -- you know, there had been I guess some rumors and speculation, but none of this was known to us. Anyway, so we knew it was Cheney. It was sort of sudden when we did this thing. Then I remember Matthew Scully and I meeting the Cheneys for the first time at the Governor's residence, in this dining room in the back of the Governor's Mansion. It was sort of a large dining room. It's the room where John Connally recuperated from the shooting in Dallas. A little sidebar there. But we met the Cheneys, and the Governor [00:16:00] introduced us and said, "They're going to be helping you on your acceptance speech," which was, at this



point, about eight days away. Cheney said, “How fast do you gentlemen work?” And we said, “Well, we’ll have her for you tomorrow.” We turned it around fast.

Q: Something his daughter, Mary Cheney, points out in her book was that because he had been in business for the past several years he didn’t really have a political staff at the time. He didn’t have a speechwriter at the time he became the nominee in 2000.

MCCONNELL: Yeah, I guess that’s right. But he was great to work with. So we did, Matthew Scully and I did help with Cheney’s speeches the rest of the campaign, and Kasey Pipes, who was on the campaign staff, did a lot of writing for Cheney as well.

Q: So from that point on [00:17:00] -- well, let’s talk about the acceptance speech at the convention. Because in a convention that was generally sort of -- touchy-feely would not be the right word -- but emphasizing the compassionate side of George W. Bush’s conservatism, Cheney gave a different kind of speech.

MCCONNELL: Yeah, I remember the *Wall Street Journal* or somebody said, “Cheney rolled onto the floor like an Abrams tank.” (laughter) It was a tough speech, and what it did was it tied Clinton and Gore together. Here Gore was presenting himself -- it’s his first time nominated for president. He’s new. This is his first go at it. He’d run, you know, unsuccessfully in 1988, and now here’s his big chance and he’s the man. He’s the standard bearer. [00:18:00] And the Cheney speech was they had been there for eight years, this crowd, and here they go again. You’re getting the same thing, and what have we gotten for eight years? We’ve gotten, you know, this political environment and a very negative tone, just really kind of - he said it as a package deal. You know, they came in together, now let us see them off together. We’ll never see the one without thinking of the other. It was not Gore, it was Clinton-Gore. I remember hearing someone, right after the speech -- I watched the speech not in the convention, I watched it in the hotel bar. There was nobody there, just a big screen. I wanted to hear the commentary afterward. I remember somebody saying, you know, [00:19:00] “He can’t tie Clinton and Gore together like that. That’s just not going to work.” And I thought, well, not only can he, he just did. (laughter)

But also I think a lot of people didn’t believe Cheney had it in him to really get a convention audience as fired up as he did. And he had this refrain, “The wheel has turned, and it is time for them to go.” And “It’s time for them to go” was a refrain that Gore had used about Bush and Quayle in ’92, and Mrs. Cheney had suggested to us that maybe we could work with that, “It’s time for them to go.” That fit in perfectly with the notion that it was a speech reminding people that Gore is part



of this same crowd, and the country was, you know, definitely open to a change at that point. But there were also people -- I don't remember anyone saying this to me [00:20:00] inside the campaign, but I know there were people in the political world who thought, fine, keep bringing up Clinton, you know. I know there were people who thought that Clinton should have had a bigger role in that campaign, and that it didn't help Bush and Cheney to talk about Clinton. And I don't think Bush really did talk about Clinton. The Cheney speech was probably the high water mark in talking about, mentioning President Clinton, because he really was not as big a player in that election as some think he might have been.

Q: At the point at which Dick Cheney is announced as the candidate, had you been writing for George W. Bush?

MCCONNELL: Yes.

Q: Talk about what it's like writing for George W. Bush in 2000?

MCCONNELL: When I got there, it was the beginning of 2000, as I mentioned. Gerson and Scully had both been there [00:21:00] for a number of months. Gerson I think came in May, Scully in the summer.

Q: Of '99?

MCCONNELL: Correct. So by the time I came -- I was hired because the volume of speeches and the level of activity in that little shop was going to go up a number of degrees. I, of course, knew these guys, and so we just -- on my first day Mike said, "He's got an event in New Hampshire later this week. Can you draft a little speech for this?" I can't remember any of the details.

Q: This was during the primaries?

MCCONNELL: Yeah, during the primaries. This is the beginning of January. So Iowa was about to happen. New Hampshire was about to happen. [00:22:00] Of course, Iowa wasn't suspenseful, because McCain wasn't really playing in Iowa. But at any rate, so I did a draft and I sent it in to Mike a day or two later, and he came back and had some edits, and we just talked them over. And he did this kind of thing with Matthew. But then we got to the point, when the larger speeches needed to be written, that the three of us would gather in Mike's office and go over a draft that one of us had done, or a draft that maybe Matthew and I had collaborated on. Then the three of us would come in together and give it a good, careful cleaning up and editing and sharpening and all those things. And we started writing inserts together. OK. Karen, he was called, [00:23:00], she said the governor wants a



little bit more of this and she wants us to turn this around in an hour or two. So the three of us would kind of settle in and then work on this.

Q: This was in Austin?

MCCONNELL: In Austin. Mike was one of the few people on the campaign staff who had an office. Austin was cubicles, and almost everyone was in a cubicle. I was right just -- Scully was very close to me, Kasey Pipes, Dan Bartlett, Scott McClellan, I mean, a future White House press secretary. Ari Fleischer had an office, Karl Rove had an office, Josh Bolten, Joe Allbaugh, the campaign manager, Karen. But there were very few offices, it was basically cubicles, and we spent most of our time in cubicles. But when we were convening on speeches, we would go into Mike's office. Eventually we just started writing whole speeches that way, the way we had originally been editing speeches or writing inserts. [00:24:00] We just found that it produced very good material. We liked doing it that way. We felt it was more efficient than if one writer went off for two or three days, and we liked it. We did that for five years, starting in Austin and continuing through the first term, almost to the end of the first term.

Q: Did you get to know George W. Bush? What I'm wondering is, how do you write in somebody else's voice?

MCCONNELL: Well, I did get to know him. I saw him much more as president than as governor, when I was working there down in Austin. I mean, we would see him, and there would be meetings at the Governor's Mansion, and he would on occasion come over to headquarters. But he was really on the road all the time, [00:25:00] and he did not take speechwriters with him. I mean, we were churning it out in Austin. The technology was a little better, and so you could get it pretty quickly. Karen Hughes, who knew his mind and his communication style and the way he liked things better than anybody, she was there. She was on the plane with him.

So the point is we just didn't spend great volumes of time with him. But by the time he was president, of course, he knew us, and he'd spend a lot of time with Mike, because Mike was the chief speechwriter and the first hired. Mike became really a policy adviser in a very serious sense, because he's a pretty serious intellectual, a guy who's got a lot of experience in policy on Capitol Hill and went to a lot of policy meetings, both in Austin and at the White House. [00:26:00]

But writing for anybody, you know, the rules are generally going to be the same regardless of who your boss is. Speechwriting is different from essay writing, from news writing. The main difference is it's written for the ear, and so the sentences need to be shorter. It can't be endless. You know, a speech shouldn't be more than a couple of thousand words if you can avoid it, especially in a political -- in a



campaign-type setting. A couple of thousand words usually is enough to get your message out, two or three thousand words. You get much beyond that, even your friends will start looking at their watches. Really a decently written speech could be read by anybody who's comfortable speaking in public, [00:27:00] because, as I say, if it's written for the ear, if it's written in a conversational style, and has some rhythm to it, doesn't have choppy language or problems like that, they will be able to do it. The big difference is, in my observation, how does the person start the speech. As I mentioned earlier, I've had different bosses who liked to start in different ways. But that's -- I remember one day at the White House, the president had to cancel an event, and Cheney took on the event. The speech had been written for the president -- this was late in the second term -- and I hadn't done it and I hadn't seen it, but I was asked to turn it into a Cheney speech. I thought, well, I can do that in a hurry, and I remember it not being so easy, because I hadn't written it for the president. [00:28:00] If I had written it for the president, I could turn it into a Cheney speech. But I hadn't written it for the president and there were just a lot of things -- I guess in my style of writing it was a little more interchangeable between the two of them than this was. This just had a little bit different tone to it. I'm not describing it very well.

Q: A little more in Bush's distinctive voice?

MCCONNELL: Well, it wasn't even that. It was another writer's work, and so it was harder for me to adapt. But as I say, if I had written it for Bush and then was asked to turn it into a Cheney speech, I could have done it a lot faster and a lot more smooth. The big changes would have been at the top and at the end of the speech, and that's where you get more into the personality of the person. [00:29:00]

Q: So you mentioned that Bush likes to start a speech basically with a list of names that he would riff on.

MCCONNELL: Yeah.

Q: How did Cheney like to start a speech?

MCCONNELL: Well, he would read what you had, and of course he would have reviewed all of his speeches and made his edits, as the president did. But once he had it, you know, he would read it. This was a speech draft he had approved. Sometimes he would make just quips that were in the moment, something had just happened, he had just seen something, he had just spoken to somebody. He would often start with a little joke, and almost always he would say, "I bring good wishes from the president of the United States, George W. Bush," which is a great way for a vice president to start a speech, because the audience always applauds and there's always a nice -- it breaks the tension in the room, which always exists at



the beginning of a speech [00:30:00] when an audience is newly silent and a person is standing there at something like that. That was a great way to loosen up crowds, and in a campaign setting it's a way to get them cheering, because everything the vice president says is about re-electing the president.

Q: So when Cheney is named in 2000, do you then start writing primarily for him?

MCCONNELL: No, it was primarily for Bush in the 2000 campaign. That was our main focus. But Cheney did have a couple big speeches that I remember Matthew Scully and I worked on, but by and large, no. Kasey Pipes, who was a writer on the Bush campaign -- he was there before I was -- he did a lot of writing for Cheney in that campaign. I think the day-to-day stuff was really his responsibility. We were sort of [00:31:00] really really focused on Governor Bush. Q: And speeches, was there any involvement by you and/or the other speechwriters in say the debates, preparing for the debates, writing maybe lines or sample answers?

MCCONNELL: No. I remember nothing about sample -- we never did sample answers or anything like that, but I remember one time someone asked the three of us to think of some lines that might be good in a debate for him to use. So we amused ourselves and wrote a page or two of one-liners. The reaction that we got was that they weren't helpful. (laughter) It's funny, because, you know, weeks and weeks and weeks later we found this, [00:32:00] and it wasn't any good. (laughter) We were too close to it to be able to tell at the time. No, we didn't do. Mike Gerson went to some debate preps with the president. I'm not sure if he did it in 2000, but I know he did in '04. I went to all of Quayle's debate preps in '92, and I went to some Cheney debate preps in 2004, but I didn't have serious responsibilities there. It was just to be there.

Q: Before we get to election night and its aftermath in 2000, any other memories of that campaign or impressions of the candidates that come to mind?

MCCONNELL: Well, the 2000 campaign, it just was a thrilling experience. There were so many unexpected moments in that [00:33:00] campaign. I remember, of course, McCain buries Bush in New Hampshire, and then it's all fought out in South Carolina, and then Bush has a decisive win in South Carolina. Then it's Michigan, and Michigan is the firewall that's going to protect Bush. I remember Mike Gerson and I went to lunch that day on Sixth Street in Austin, and we just started talking generally about the campaign against Gore. We got back to headquarters after lunch to the news that Bush was going to lose that night in Michigan, the numbers were already bad enough to indicate that we were in trouble. And then, of course, the fight with McCain was continuing in earnest when we thought it was really probably going to end that day. Then by the time it was all over, sometime in April, one [00:34:00] who's been involved in other campaigns, one



expects a lull in the action. But no, the engagement between Bush and Gore happened immediately, and it was a day-to-day battle until the eighth of November, every day. That surprised me, and campaigns have been like ever since. You know, they used to say the traditional start of the campaign is Labor Day weekend. I remember in 2003 when Howard Dean gave a speech in College Park, Maryland, or somewhere, and CNN said, "Well" -- this was Labor Day, and CNN says, "Well, the traditional start of the presidential campaign, Labor Day" -- and I thought, wait a minute. It's supposed to be two months before the election, not fourteen months. But this is almost the way things are now.

Q: You know, I was thinking that kind of the stereotype [00:35:00] that both George W. Bush and Dan Quayle had to overcome was that they were intellectual lightweights, and fair, not fair, that was out there.

MCCONNELL: Yes.

Q: You have dealt with that obviously, as a speechwriter for Vice President Quayle. Did that give you any sort of insights into how to deal with that when you're writing for George W. Bush in 2000?

MCCONNELL: Not really, because the presidential level and vice presidential level are so different. Vice presidents get bursts of attention. Presidents and presidential nominees are just totally under the spotlight at all times. That doesn't mean the whole country is watching at all times, and I actually think that the average person doesn't spend a lot of time listening to the president. He just doesn't. They're busy. But [00:36:00] people watch a lot of TV, and they're bombarded with little moments of the president tripping over his words or saying something that doesn't come out quite the way he intended or making a funny gesture or a face that makes him look a little goofy if taken out of context. Those are the things that millions and millions of people are exposed to regularly and were in the Bush presidency. You know, they made a lot of fun of him, the comedians. But I think that got him reelected, in this sense.

Everybody also, at various points of the year, does get a chance to listen to the president. Maybe you're trapped in your car in a traffic jam, and, you know, the president is having a news conference, or [00:37:00] you watch a major speech because something big has happened. Anyway, you're exposed to the man in full. I just think for a lot of Americans, they thought, well, he actually is a very well spoken, well informed man. He knows what he's doing. So in that sense I think it helped him, that people are exposed to these little snippets, throughout the first term, for example. Then he's running for re-election, they pay a little more careful attention. They have these moments that everyone has where they listen to him



for, you know, 10, 12, 20 minutes, and then they see him for what he is, and it improves their impression, their entire impression, of him.

Q: What was election night and its aftermath like for you and the other speechwriters in 2000?

MCCONNELL: In 2000 we spent election day [00:38:00] -- we had a victory speech and a concession speech ready, and we just kind of waited it out. I remember Joe Allbaugh was the campaign manager, and Joe used to lead the staff meetings in -- there was a room. Clinton and Gore had the war room, Bush and Cheney had the sunshine room. That was the room where we had all the meetings, and Joe was a great leader of the campaign staff. He's a great big guy, with a crew cut, a tough looking guy. You know, it's probably the only campaign you could ever think of where if you looked at the campaign manager you'd think, well, that man could go through this office and dismantle the place and take anybody half his age. Just a big strong looking character, and a fine guy, just a very fine leader of the staff and a joy to work with. Joe would have these meetings, and at the [00:39:00] end of the meetings he would say something like this, he would say, "Keep up the good work, and just remember, we're working for George W. and Laura Bush, the next president and first lady of the United States." It was also, he would always give us the number of days to the election. He would say, "Well, 212 days until George W. is elected president of the United States." You know, he would remind us of this, of the nature of the enterprise we were in, and the countdown, and he would always tell us we were going to win. Anyway, election day there's these dark rumors going around campaign headquarters. And, you know, here we are insiders, we don't know what's going on, but all these rumors are -- and people are getting calls from their friends, they're all, "Oh, I heard you're losing," you know. [00:40:00] Joe called a staff meeting that afternoon, and it was quiet. People were really quiet. Joe says, "I told you all we're going to win," (laughter) "and we are. But it's not going to be an early night, so just hang in there." And we did, and, you know, we all know how it turned out. But Bush was declared the winner, and then the drama began from there.

Q: So during those five weeks or so, what were the speechwriters doing?

MCCONNELL: We were very busy, and then we would do nothing. (laughter) During the Florida recount period, [00:41:00] both Bush and Gore addressed the nation, you know, together, one and then the other, I think four or five times. There would be some court decision, and then, OK, both of the candidates are going to speak tonight. So in those moments, Mike and Matthew and myself, we had very quick, very focused assignments, and we didn't have much time to write them. But between those moments, I remember there were great stretches of not doing much of



anything. I mean, we're there and just sort of part of things, but really we weren't terribly busy. But we surely knew that at any moment something could happen and suddenly we're writing a speech that's going to be viewed by sixty million people tonight. So that was kind of hanging over us at all times.

Q: I know that Governor Bush kind of began the transition process [00:42:00] while all the recount stuff was going on. Did you know you were going to be working in the White House? Or when did you know you were going to be working in the White House?

MCCONNELL: I hoped and expected that we would keep doing what we were doing, if he and the vice president took power, but there was no discussion of that. I mean, really zero discussion of jobs, offices, nothing. It was all about -- Christmas is coming, and we still don't know what's happening. The morning after the second Supreme Court decision in *Bush v. Gore*, I called my grandmother in northern Wisconsin and said, "Grandma, it's over." She said, "Thank God, I couldn't have lived through another day of this." (laughter) It was hard for everybody in the sense that we just didn't know. Are we going to the White House [00:43:00] or are we going to be job hunting at Christmas time? And, of course, it's the same thing for the Gore people, and a lot of them were in the White House. Imagine that. Imagine what a terrible experience that was.

Q: So when did you know?

MCCONNELL: That we were going to work at the White House? I don't remember a moment. It was just more of a question of we've still got stuff to do, and let's keep doing it, and let's get ourselves to Washington and let's get in the transition office. I don't remember there ever being a moment when somebody said, "Well, I'd like to tell you what you're" -- nothing like that. We just kept writing.

Q: But the team, the three of you, stuck together as a unit in terms of --

MCCONNELL: Yes.

Q: -- moving from the campaign into the administration?

MCCONNELL: Yes. Yeah, we sure did. We kept doing what we were doing. [00:44:00]

Q: Was there any change in your role, any maybe division of labor once you made the transition from --



MCCONNELL: Well, from the beginning of the administration and throughout the eight years, I had major responsibilities for the vice president and just sort of stuck with that. But really, for the entire first time, with Mike and Matthew there, we did what we did in Austin. We wrote all the major addresses of the president, we edited everything else, any other thing we hadn't written, and so the team really did what it did. I did have -- and, of course, Matthew Scully and I worked together on a lot of Cheney speeches as well. Mike, not so much on Cheney speeches. He kind of left that to us. But Mike had a lot of -- I mean, when he wasn't in the office with us writing, he was off in policy meetings. [00:45:00] He would do brilliant outlines of speeches. Matthew and I were writing a lot, that was just all the time, either for the president or vice president, but 75% for the president.

Q: And then September 11th comes a long, and it turns out to be a very different presidency from the one that all of you had anticipated. How did that change things?

MCCONNELL: Well, in all of the respects that you would imagine. Suddenly the country is at war, and the country is afraid, and they look at the president differently. I remember Bob Dole [00:46:00] I think was the one who said that moment on the flattened fire truck in New York, with the bullhorn, he said something like that was Bush's real inauguration or maybe he said his second inauguration, or something like that, making the point that that's the moment that a lot of Americans really sort of focused on this new president and really saw him in the light that Americans so often do when the country is at war. OK, this is our guy. That was Bush's moment, and, of course, a moment not involving any speechwriting participation. That was just a firefighter shouting, "We can't hear you," and then he just took it from there.

But, yes, everything changed, of course, the kind of writing we were doing -- not the kind of writing -- the topics that we were writing about changed dramatically. [00:47:00] From then on, I remember saying to Mike Gerson, we figured that every 10 days or so there was a major speech that had not been on the calendar 10 days before. From the time of 9-11, there was a major speech, an unexpected major speech maybe it was every 10 days or two weeks, there was just always something. There was just always something coming up that was completely unexpected, or something we had to really scramble to work on. The speeches we were working on just before 9-11, there was going to be some big rollout of some education initiative or whatever, just all these things just kind of fell away immediately when the country was under attack.



Q: The three of you are basically domestic policy politics guys, so to speak. When it's a national security speech, [00:48:00] do others get involved in the drafting process? Maybe somebody from the National Security Council staff?

MCCONNELL: Well, yeah, on the front end you get all kinds of input from the policy experts, not just on foreign policy but on domestic. We didn't come in there as experts on anything. We had the experiences and we knew what the president's policies were and we knew his thinking on things, but if it was a major -- OK, the president is going to give a speech in Istanbul endorsing the idea that Turkey should be admitted to the European Union. Well, this is not something any of us is going to immediately know a lot of things about. But there are people around there. The president, you know, has his reasons, and then there are the policy experts who can sort of walk you through what our proposal is, [00:49:00], what are the arguments in favor of it what countervailing arguments need to be addressed, things of that nature. You always had, at the White House, superb policy people who were as well informed as anyone you've ever met in your career, and they were always very happy to talk about their areas.

I would also say that in the case of Gerson, Gerson was very close to Condi Rice. So if there was going to be a major foreign policy speech, the speechwriting department never had to, I mean, we never had to search around for good input or whatever. Her speeches were very important to the president, and Mike would come in and we would start working on something. He knew where this speech was going, because he talked to Condi. Perhaps he talked to the president himself. Sometimes we were there in those conversations with the president, [00:50:00] but it would always be very, very comprehensive, a very comprehensive level of knowledge and information that we had going into something. Otherwise we couldn't write persuasively about it.

Q: Here's what your colleague, Matt Scully, wrote, quote: "As a general rule in Bush speeches, if the writing is graceful, judicious, and understated, and makes you think about the subject at hand instead of somebody's particular craftsmanship or religiosity, there's a better than even chance that it is by John McConnell." And before you say something modest, the next sentence is "John is always the first to deflect attention elsewhere, a reflex of modesty and good manners." So...

MCCONNELL: Thank you for reading that. (laughter)

Q: Do you deny this?



MCCONNELL: What Matthew Scully doesn't write is that he was as good a writer [00:51:00] as has ever written for a president, just a superior talent. So I'm flattered by the compliment, but I would return it in full measure and with more credibility.

Q: Did you write these lines from President Bush's National Cathedral speech? Quote, "We are here in the middle hour of our grief." Quote, a separate quote, "This conflict was begun on the timing and terms of others. It will end in a way and an hour of our choosing." Did you write those famous lines?

MCCONNELL: Well, it was a team effort, a team effort. They have a familiar ring, and it was a team effort. That was, if I may say, that September 14th speech in the National Cathedral, that was written in a day.

Q: In a day?

MCCONNELL: One day. I'll bet less than five hours. [00:52:00]

Q: And then just a few days after that, the president makes a prime-time address to Congress.

MCCONNELL: Yeah, Monday, yeah, I remember, Monday the 17th. Mike Gerson told me, "The president is probably going to speak to Congress on Thursday, and he wants a draft today." And I said, "Well, we can't do a speech like that in a day." He said, "That's what I told Karen." And "What did Karen say?" "Well, Karen said, 'Well, the president said he wants it.'" I think Karen said, "That's what I told the president," but it was three days out, right. So we did, we hustled on it and got a draft ready that day. I remember it didn't have a conclusion, and we did see the president once during that day, and he helped us a lot with the organization of the speech.

Q: Which speech are we talking about now?

MCCONNELL: The speech to Congress on September 20th, so I'm about Monday the 17th. And [00:53:00] it's my recollection that he is the one who went through the questions that Americans have, and this became the organizing framework of the speech, the questions that Americans have. Who attacked us, why do they hate us, how do we fight and win this war, and what is expected of us now? So we did, we had all of that. It was all there by the end of Monday, and Tuesday was when we got a conclusion ready. So that was a quick turnaround.

Q: Let's make our way en route to 2004. In 2002, the midterm, both President Bush and Vice President Cheney were by historical standards unusually active in the



campaign, made more appearances than any other predecessors on behalf of the Republican candidates running for office. They sort of got back in the campaign mode there for a while in the fall of '02. [00:54:00] Were you involved in writing any of those speeches?

MCCONNELL: Yeah, I would have been, yeah. The fall of '02, you're saying?

Q: Yes, in the midterms.

MCCONNELL: OK, the midterms. Yeah. Yeah. I remember the '02 midterms. I'd have to go back and look, but I remember feeling generally good about those, and some of our -- I grew up in northern Wisconsin, and I remember traveling with Vice President Cheney to Duluth, Minnesota, which is not far from where I grew up. They don't get presidents and vice presidents up there very often, although George W. did go there in '04. But I remember Cheney went in there, and it was right after Senator Wellstone had been killed in a plane crash. Senator Wellstone had been my first professor.

Q: At Carleton College?

MCCONNELL: At Carleton in Minnesota, yes, when I was 17 years old, Introduction to Politics. And I knew him, and I loved him. He was a fine guy [00:55:00], and he was a good senator. But anyway, what happened, he and his wife and their only daughter were killed in this small plane crash. They hit a tree. It was just a terrible thing, and it was just right before the election. He was in a very close race with Norm Coleman, the former mayor of St. Paul. Cheney went in under those circumstances to campaign for Norm Coleman, and I remember Cheney talked about Senator Wellstone in his speech. He said that, you know, when something like this happens, election day just seems to come too soon. But Paul Wellstone [00:56:00] stood firm and fought hard for his beliefs, and he expected others to do the same, and in that spirit it was time to resume the campaign. Then in the case of Coleman, he was elected. They had put in at the last minute Walter Mondale to replace Wellstone on the ballot, but I think it was probably already set in stone that Coleman was ahead. Then just around the country, I didn't go on a lot of trips, but I remember just getting a pretty good feeling that it was going to be not your typical midterm election, that the president's party was going to do pretty well and pick up some seats in the Senate.

Q: So before we get to '04 specifically and sort of the separation between the campaign and the White House, in a midterm election [00:57:00] you don't have that separation? In other words, the President's and Vice President's speechwriters are writing for them as they campaign on behalf of other candidates?



MCCONNELL: Yes. Yes. Yeah. It's that way now. It's just the way it's done.

Q: Does it involve sort of changing gears, harking back to your 2000 experience?

MCCONNELL: Well, in 2000 it's all campaign. At the White House, the campaign is part of it. You've got serious business going on at all times, and so I don't remember being totally absorbed in campaign stuff except in brief periods. Really, you're just focused on the job, on the job that the president has and the vice president has. The campaign is part of it. The '02 campaign, [00:58:00] the things I remember about '02, almost none of them relate to that midterm election. There was so much else going on, yeah, in the policy world.

Q: With the re-elect, when is it that the separation takes place between the White House, the president's staff as president, and the campaign staff?

MCCONNELL: Yeah. I don't know. I couldn't tell you what month that people started leaving the White House to go over to the campaign. I couldn't tell you. It's probably late '03, I'm guessing. I'm trying to think. Ken Mehlman was deputy assistant to the president and director of the Political Affairs Office. He was gone. He was over at the campaign, the manager. I just don't know when that happened. Probably before New Years of '04, but I don't remember.

Q: Did that affect your office at all?

MCCONNELL: Not really. Not really. [00:59:00] We just did our thing. As I say, it was mainly the business of the presidency. The campaign staff, that would happen, but if the president would do fundraisers, things like that, I remember him telling us one time, "I don't need a speech for these fundraisers." (laughter) You know, he'll get up and talk, but he didn't need some involved speech.

Q: So you never left the White House staff during the re-elect year?

MCCONNELL: No. No.

Q: Well, governing and campaigning are easier to talk about as separate things than the reality is, I know. Certainly one of the things that people involved in the 2000 campaign will say is that candidate Bush underperformed among some groups in the electorate, particularly evangelical Christians, that the turnout wasn't as high as Karl Rove and others had expected, and they really saw '04 as [01:00:00] posing the challenge of how do you energize that core constituency to actually turn out and vote. Is anything I'm saying ring false with you?



MCCONNELL: You know, I was never involved in any kind of strategic discussion about the campaign. Mike Gerson never came from a meeting, and no one ever put it to us that a speech ought to be written because this segment of the population is the target audience. Never. Never once when he was president, nor even 2000.

“Well, this is a speech for them,” or anything like that. It just wasn’t. In that sense, I was removed from strategy or whatever else, and strategy -- the campaign [01:01:00] had its message. The president was running on his record. That was our task, and we were writing about things we’d been writing about the whole time, putting it, of course, in the context of the match up, which originally was supposed to be Dean. (laughter) But, you know, 2003 ended. Everybody thought it was going to be Dean, the Democratic nominee.

Q: I’m thinking about, there’s the special speeches you didn’t even know you were going to write until Monday, and then you’ve got to write it for Thursday. Then there’s the sort of set pieces, right? Like every year, the State of the Union. What was that process like?

MCCONNELL: The State of the Union is an example of a speech where you could conceivably write it months and months in advance. It’s always nice to think [01:02:00] you’d have a speech written or a lot of time to write speeches, so why not do the State of the Union three months in advance and have it ready? The fact is these things are always written in the moment, and that anything you would have done for the State of the Union in September is going to feel stale. It’s going to feel like it was written in September. It’s just going to be a different -- the air is going to be different in January, politically and issues wise. So the fact is these things are written in the moment. The policy development occurs in the year leading up to it. I couldn’t tell you when the meetings were held. I wouldn’t have been part of them. But by late in the year, we’re talking November 19th, by Thanksgiving time, it’s probably fair to say right now that President Obama’s team has a sense of what they’re going to be proposing in the State of the Union, [01:03:00] but I’ll bet the writers aren’t working on it yet.

In our case, a little before Christmas Mike Gerson would come in, and he would have received all of the input on policy, the agreed-upon policy topics and the agreed upon emphasis for those topics for the State of the Union. So he and Matthew and I would sit down and do a heavy outline of the speech, written in sentences, but six pages instead of the speech, which is going to be 25 pages. But it’s a heavy outline written for the president, and it’s for him to react to. OK, here is what’s going to be in the speech, and here’s how we are thinking the speech is going to proceed. Here’s how it’s going to be organized, here’s how we think we’re going to get into it, etc. [01:04:00] Then, in the years that we did this as a team, the president would, around New Year’s, give us his reaction to that outline.



Then we would choose -- for some reason it always took exactly a week, seven days -- we would choose a week to write the State of the Union, and we would work seven days in a row to do the first draft, because it's a long speech. We tried to keep it under 4,000 words in the first draft, because people were going to want to add things, and you didn't want it to get too long.

But anyway, then, of course, it would be staffed, but not the usual staffing process. I think that State of the Union would go to a smaller group of people initially, I think. But at a certain point it goes to a very broad group of people, including the Cabinet secretaries. [01:05:00] That goes through many drafts, because of the level of attention that speech is going to get, the profile, and it sets the tone for the year. So the president is going to be involved in that. He's going to be involved in editing multiple drafts, more than he does on the typical speech, and he's going to practice it. On a number of occasions the first read through with the president would be in the Oval Office, and he would be sitting in his chair at the Resolute desk with his glasses on reading it aloud and giving us his first reaction to the speech as a set of spoken words. Then we'd go make our edits. It was a long process. But it was also just one speech in January [01:06:00], in that other sense, and so they were constantly putting other things on his schedule. It's a very busy month for the speechwriters.

Q: And in an election year, or a re-election year, you've got to be aware that this is the first major speech of the reelection campaign, right? It's not just a governing speech, it's going to have a huge audience, and it's coming at the beginning of the year.

MCCONNELL: Well, that's exactly right. The beginning of a year, the president really wants to set his agenda before the people and, if at all possible, have the discussion proceed on his own terms. That happens every year with every president, and it's just heightened in an election year.

Q: How did that provision about endorsing a marriage amendment to the Constitution get into that speech?

MCCONNELL: Well, I don't know specifically how, but it was one of those things that came into the policy process. [01:07:00] It had come up in '03 with the decision of the

Q: Massachusetts.

MCCONNELL: -- the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts, and that's how it kind of got onto the national agenda, because it became a question of what the judiciary was going to do, and was the status quo going to be upended state by state by state by



judges. So the determination was made I guess that, as a matter of policy, there needed to be an amendment to prevent that from happening.

Q: I know Mary Cheney says in her book that that created a crisis for her in terms of her willingness to be involved in the re-elect. She decided to stay involved because of her support for the president on other things and because of her devotion to her father. But I wonder, was that a crisis, did that create a crisis for others in the White House?

MCCONNELL: No, I don't think so. I think the important thing there [01:08:00] was the way the matter was handled and the tone of the debate, the tone of the discussion, as far as the president was concerned. You could look at that speech and you could look at other comments he made on the matter, and his tone was always a tone of respect and making very clear that both sides of this argument are occupied by people of good will and people of good faith and people of good intentions who want the best for the country, and that it should always proceed on that basis. He didn't talk about it a lot. I think there were a couple of statements about the amendment, and that was it. But he was always very respectful of his tone. As I've always described it, [01:09:00] the debate, the national discussion in the political context, did not always have that spirit, but he always had that spirit. That was just the way he conducted himself.

Q: Do you think, I mean, let's say the state supreme court ruling had come down in fall of '02, do you think it would have been in the speech in '03, or do you think it was an election-year-driven addition to the president's agenda?

MCCONNELL: No, I don't think it would. I think the answer to your question is yes. I think as a policy matter, if that was his view on it, I have no reason to think he wouldn't have felt the same way a year before. I am quite - knowing him and knowing how that general discussion proceeded, I think the answer is yes, he would have talked about it a year before.

Q: OK. So for the whole of 2004, he's president of the United States and he's a candidate for re-election. [01:10:00] He didn't have to fight to get re-nominated, but it's a political year. How does that change the nature of the work you're doing in 2004?

MCCONNELL: Well, you have a layer of activity that's sort of laid upon, laid on top of the responsibilities you already have. In other words, the president is doing everything he's been doing for the last three years, but now he's also traveling the country speaking to large political rallies. The speechwriters get involved in that. But really, in terms of just buzzing activity, campaign-style activity in the



speechwriting office, really the drafting of the president's acceptance speech in Madison Square Garden, that was a two or three- week proposition, [01:11:00] in total. I mean, we were working on other things, but in a two or three-week period we generated the first draft of the president's acceptance speech. Now that was going to be an important speech, and that required a lot of time and effort. We did that exactly how we did the 2000 acceptance speech.

Then right after that it was -- the basic stump speech was ready, and that was pretty much, I mean, we didn't have to write whole new campaign speeches on a regular basis. I would use the most recent example of President Obama basically gave the same speech for that last couple of months of the campaign. That's pretty much what the president does. You know, you're involved, you know. [01:12:00] Obviously inserts need to be written here and there, but really the campaign stuff -- the people in the campaign are the ones really, really totally absorbed in that enterprise. I mean, we were separate from it and didn't really engage with the campaign. They were careful about that generally at the White House. They didn't want the White House and the campaign staff to be just completely one unit. As I recall, there were people at the White House who were designated to have contact with the campaign, and everybody else basically shouldn't, just stay out of it.

Q: Do you have any memories of that acceptance speech?

MCCONNELL: I remember it being very effective. [01:13:00] I remember there was an emotional section of the speech that the president had to really power through, when he was talking about meeting parents of members of the military who had been killed. I remember that. That's the most vivid memory of the speech, just knowing how hard it was emotionally to talk about this in front of an audience. But most of my memories of that speech are impressionistic, just it was effective. It was a careful piece of work, set the tone of the campaign, and we just sort of proceeded from there. Two thousand four is interesting because I had conversations with two of the great political reporters of all time. [01:14:00] One was Walter Mears, who was retired at that point from the Associated Press. He'd covered campaigns going back to Kennedy, Kennedy versus Nixon. And then David Broder from the Washington Post. At a Christmas party in '03 I remember saying to David Broder, we were just chatting about the upcoming campaign, I said, "The one thing that surprises me is the disappearance of John Kerry. I mean, you look at his credentials, you look at his standing within the Democratic Party, and he's going nowhere!" Of course, it was in the Dean moment, right? Within a month of that or a month and a half of that, John Kerry was the man and that was it. That's the first kind of mistaken impression I had in that campaign. [01:15:00]



And the second is with Walter Mears. We had lunch together early in '04 I think, just a long lunch, talking about politics and his experiences and everything else. The lunch continued afterwards, and we walked, and we went back to my office and we just sat there and talked some more. And I said, just kind of offhandedly, "So, how's President Bush looking in '04?" And he said, "Boy, it's going to be tough." And that really surprised me. I guess I thought he would say, "Well, he's in a really good spot for re-election," because I thought he was. But this seasoned longtime reporter for the Associated Press, who'd covered these campaigns, all of them, you know, it was not how he saw it. And that got me thinking, well, gee, maybe this is going to be [01:16:00] a lot tougher than I had been expecting.

Q: You joined the campaign, I guess, went on the campaign for the last couple of weeks.

MCCONNELL: Yes.

Q: How did that come about, and what was that like?

MCCONNELL: I was with the president for the last -- it was some number of days -- in that final stretch of the campaign. Mike Gerson also was there for part of that, as I recall. He may have left just -- no, no, I think he left just before the election and came back to Washington. But I remember being there all the way through election day when the president voted in Crawford, and we had all stayed at the hotel in Waco. Anyway, those days, I just remember it as a blur. I think in that final five days, [01:17:00] four of them involved trips to Ohio, including election day. I remember the president voted, and then I believe the question was whether he goes to Ohio or Florida, but he couldn't do both. There was just no way to do it, and so the decision was made to stop in Ohio. I remember that. So there was a lot of Ohio, and now that I think of it there was a stop in Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Wisconsin, New Mexico. New Mexico was the last full blown -- Albuquerque, the last full blown campaign speech the president gave as a candidate in his life, and it was outdoor, it was cold. That crowd was so big that they were lining the road leading up to the venue, and I just remember allowing myself to think that [01:18:00] -- on the night before the election -- that we're not going to have a 2000 experience here. It just had a different feel to it, is all I can say. Having been on a presidential campaign plane with Bob Dole up through the election and with Quayle on Air Force Two up to the election, this one just really feels different, a different --

Q: You mean it feels like you're going to win?

MCCONNELL: When you win it feels different from how it does when you think the alternative is the more likely outcome. But anyway, the president gave that last speech, and then we flew back to Texas that night, and he had one more rally in Dallas. I think



it was at SMU, wasn't it? I'm trying to remember. Anyway, it was in Dallas, and then we got on helicopters to Crawford. I remember Karl Rove saying [01:19:00] -- it was about midnight at this point, and I was in a staff car with Karl going over to the helicopters, and he said, "We're going to win." I remember sleeping very well that night. (laughter) And election day, the president and Mrs. Bush voted, and everybody piled onto the plane and headed first to Ohio and then back to Washington. Well, I was sitting back -- there was a conference room on Air Force One close to the president's cabin, and then behind there is a senior staff cabin, and then there's a general staff area. I was around there. There's a little office there on the plane, and I remember being in there on the computer. [01:20:00] But up in the conference room, Karl and Dan Bartlett and the rest were going over early numbers, and they were not encouraging.

Q: These are the exit polls?

MCCONNELL: I guess they would be the exit poll numbers, and they were not encouraging. Well, I knew nothing of this. I remember the plane landed at Andrews Air Force Base, and I went out the back door, and there were some cars waiting to take anyone who was going back to the White House directly there. The president got on Marine One. I got into a car, and it just happened to be one, and no other staffers got into it. The only other people who got into it were two nurses from the medical unit, [01:21:00] so they weren't involved in the election at all, right. So I get into this car with them. And I don't know that they've been looking at these terrible numbers or anything. I don't know this. So I'm in my happy zone (laughter) thinking I'm glad this is over. We got back to the White House, and I remember Karen Hughes looking a little more serious as she stepped out of the car she'd been riding in, looking a little more serious than she had in the morning, and then wondering has she heard something that makes her question things.

Anyway, I went into my office, and then a very short time after that I heard that the exit polls were terrible. So it was a matter of waiting it out. I can honestly say that I believed the president would get more votes than John Kerry. [01:22:00] I believed it, I said it, contemporaneously I said it to other people on the staff, I said, "I think he's going to win, and I know he's going to get more votes than Kerry." How could I know that? It was just my hunch. That's how I felt about the election throughout, not that he was a shoo-in or anything else. Walter Mears had disabused me of that early in the year. But I was pretty confident, and I just never doubted that Bush would get the most votes. There was nothing I saw and certainly nothing that I could, no experience that I could compare to others, that made me think otherwise.

Of course, that turned out to be a very long night, too. I remember there was an election night event over at the Reagan Building a few blocks from the White



House, and I went back to the White House, and I came through [01:23:00] the East Gate, and then I walked on the north side of the mansion. There's a kind of a moat-like area in front of the mansion where you can walk from one side to the other, and I walked there. I remember looking up at the windows, and there were still lights on, because a lot of the president's family were staying there. I remember thinking, I wonder if they're still up, if they're still up wondering what's going on. I was sure the president probably went to sleep, because he knew that it was going to take a while, and he'd feel better if he got some sleep. But I remember it was very late, it was the wee hours of the morning, and seeing those lights on. Then I went home and slept for a few hours. Then it wasn't until midday that the thing was resolved. I think Kerry called the president around [01:24:00] 11:00 or 12:00 and conceded at 1:00 or 2:00.

Q: When you got back to the White House that night and first saw those exit polls, did you think who's writing the concession speech?

MCCONNELL: No, because there was one ready. In fact, the Sunday before the election Mike Gerson and I sat down and we drafted both, on Air Force One. The president was off. We were somewhere in Florida, and the president went to a big event with his brother, the Governor. I think they also went to church that morning. But Mike suggested we stay on the plane, and we get an election night statement ready. So we wrote a victory statement and a concession speech, just to be ready, because you don't want to be presumptuous and you don't want your boss to be sitting there alone unprepared [01:25:00] for whatever happened.

Q: We know what the victory speech said. What did the concession speech say?

MCCONNELL: Well, like the 2000 speech that we had done, I guess the 2000, Matthew Scully definitely was involved in that, and as I recall we tried in '04 to remember what it was we had written in 2000, just because the spirit of it was just right. It was gracious, the way we knew Bush would be, and brief, but a really nice laying down of arms statement, the kind of -- we wanted it to be a model of the form. We consider it one of the great undelivered speeches (laughter), [01:26:00] happily so, where we don't mind it being lost to history.

Q: Well, thank you, John McConnell, for sharing your memories and your insights.

MCCONNELL: I'm glad to do it.

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