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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with

Griffin Smith
Little Rock, Arkansas
20 August 2007

Interviewer: Jerry McConnell

Jerry McConnell: This is Jerry McConnell. This is August 20, 2007. I'm sitting here in the home of Griffin Smith preparing to interview him for the *Arkansas Democrat* and [*Arkansas*] *Democrat-Gazette* oral history project for the [David and Barbara] Pryor Center [for Arkansas Oral and Visual History] at the University of Arkansas [Fayetteville]. And Griffin, I think that the first thing I need to do is just ask you if we have your permission to tape this interview and then turn it over to the university?

Griffin Smith: Yes, you do.

JM: Okay. Very good. Now, I know we've got a lot of ground to cover. I've been looking at your resume and you've—so you've had a quite varied career in a lot of areas in—in journalism and law. So I think—one of the things we're gonna do is just work you forward and how you got from law to journalism and everything. But to begin with, let's just start out—where and when were you born?

GS: Fayetteville, Arkansas—June 29, 1941.

JM: And it is—you are Griffin Smith, Jr. Is that correct?

GS: No, I'm Griffin Smith.

JM: You're just Griffin Smith now. You're father is . . .

GS: I'm the third of the people by that name in direct succession. I spent my time as the third and I spent my time as junior. And since my father died I am just plain Griffin Smith.

JM: Okay, so your father and your grandfather were both Griffin Smith.

GS: They both were.

JM: And they were both lawyers.

GS: Yes. My grandfather was also a journalist.

JM: Was he really? Okay. And were they both on the [Arkansas] Supreme Court?

GS: Well, my father was never elected to the Supreme Court. But, as you know, Arkansas has a system where if a judge recuses, the governor can appoint a temporary judge. My father was a friend of [Governor] Sid McMath's. Sid appointed him to be a temporary associate justice in a case, while my grandfather was chief justice. So they both sat on the Supreme Court at the same time in the early 1950s on one case, and they voted opposite.

JM: Did they really? Okay. [Laughs] Very good. How did it happen that you were born in Fayetteville?

GS: My father was in law school.

JM: Was he? He was still in law school.

GS: Yes.

JM: Okay. And so where did you go to school, from grammar school on up?

GS: From grammar school on, it was Little Rock.

JM: Okay.

GS: Primary and secondary education, with the exception of the year the high schools were closed [in 1958/1959, due to the effects of the 1957 Central High School integration crisis].

JM: Okay.

GS: I went to Jacksonville High School then, but the rest of my primary and secondary education took place in the Little Rock public schools.

JM: Okay.

JM: Okay, Griffin, which schools did you go to in Little Rock?

GS: I went to Forest Park [Elementary School] for six years. I went to Pulaski Heights Junior High [School] for two years. Then they built Forest Heights [Junior High School]. I was there one year. Then I went to Central High [School]. Then they built Hall High [School], so I was in Hall my junior year of high school. That was 1957/1958. And then my senior year the high schools were closed and I went to Jacksonville [High School]. Separately, I also took some correspondence courses in 1958/1959.

JM: And did you go ahead and graduate that year?

GS: Yes. I have a diploma from Jacksonville. And Little Rock required one additional course, so one summer in college I went back to summer school at Central and took that course and received a diploma from Hall High back-dated to May 1959, the year the schools were closed, which is the way they did it. I

understand there are only about seventeen of those in existence. So I actually have two high school diplomas.

JM: Okay. And then you went to Rice.

GS: I went to The Rice Institute [Houston, Texas] for college. While I was there, they changed the name to Rice University.

JM: Rice University. Okay.

GS: And then a year at Columbia [University in New York, New York] for a master's degree in what they called government—what people now would call political science. While writing my master's thesis for Columbia, I went back to Rice and took graduate courses. And then in 1965/1966 I went to [the University of] Oxford [England]. After that, to Texas Law School.

JM: Okay. Were you . . .

JM: At Oxford, were you a Rhodes Scholar?

GS: Well, my dad performed that function.

JM: Did he? Okay.

GS: We paid our own way. And it was incredibly cheap. It was about \$400 a year to go to Oxford then. So it was cheaper than going to Texas Law School, which was what I wound up doing afterwards.

JM: How was Oxford?

GS: One of the greatest experiences of my life.

JM: I would bet.

GS: Yes. It was the graduate level, and for the second term I studied under the famous legal philosopher, H. L. A. Hart. For the third term, I studied political

philosophy with Sir Isaiah Berlin.

JM: I've really heard of him. [Laughs]

GS: The system at Oxford is that you have what's called your tutor, and he assigns you a half a dozen books to read and a paper to write about them. And you read them and write the paper and come back a week later and defend your paper to your tutor. That's what the coursework is. Every term there are hundreds of lectures. You could go hear anybody you wanted to hear, like Hugh Trevor-Roper. Lectures were optional. Your official coursework was your weekly tutorial. So when you had Hart or Isaiah Berlin, you simply sat in the room with them and defended what you had written to these very wise professors. It was quite an intense but wonderful experience.

JM: I'll bet. How was Berlin?

GS: Well, he was—he was very much a *bon vivant*. He was not nearly as solemn as Hart. He was fun to be around—always stimulating. For example, Berlin did not like the concept of natural law, the doctrine that everything has a purpose and that is its natural purpose. He says, “Well, what's the purpose of this clock? Is it there to keep time or is it there because it's a beautiful clock?” In other words, in his everyday life he was thinking philosophically and saying, “Don't give me that St. Thomas Aquinas. That clock has more than one purpose.”

JM: I've always heard he was a great talker. Was he?

GS: Yes.

JM: Okay. So then you came back and went to law school?

GS: Yes.

JM: And you went to law school at the University of Texas.

GS: Exactly.

JM: And you got a law degree in 1969. Is that correct?

GS: That's correct.

JM: Now, I know you practiced law for a while, but how did you get from having a law degree into journalism?

GS: While I was at Rice I was at the student newspaper, which was extracurricular only, four years, and I wound up as the editor of it. So I had that journalistic temptation in my mind. Also, I had been in Little Rock in the midst of the [integration] crisis, and I'd seen how a lot of news media simply made stuff up. I thought that kind of thing was wrong. So I went to college with the thought that I wanted to be a journalist, but I didn't act on it beyond simply spending a lot of extracurricular time at the college paper. When I got out of law school I didn't know quite what I would do, but I did some political work including being legal counsel to some committees of the Texas Senate. Over about a two-year period, I fell in with a bunch of folks, including friends from Rice, who had said, "What Texas needs is a magazine like *New York* magazine—for Texas." And we decided to start one up. I was simply one of the editors. Mike Levy put up the money. He was from Dallas. We didn't think it would last more than a year. This was 1973. But it was a great success. Although I practiced some law in Austin at the time, the journalism ate the law practice. So from 1973 to 1977, I was pretty much a full-time magazine journalist. But then I went off to the speech-writing track at the Carter White House. Then I did freelance for the

[*National*] *Geographic* in the late 1970s, early 1980s—clock is ticking. My dad, who was a patient guy, understood my interest in journalism because he, too, as a young man had started in journalism at what is now UALR before he went to law school at the U of A in Fayetteville. My grandfather had spent half his life as a newspaperman before becoming a lawyer. My father started out in journalism but switched to law. You know, here I am, wavering. I believe it's genetic.

JM: [Laughs]

GS: But anyway, time was ticking. By then, Dad was in his late sixties. I guess he was about the same age I am right now. And he said pretty gently, "If you're planning to come back and practice law with the family firm, this would probably be a good time to do it." So I came back in 1981. Between 1959, when I went to Rice, and 1981, when I came back, my parents lived here continuously. I saw Little Rock as home in the important sense. But 1959–1981 is my "Rip Van Winkle" period. There are all these people in Arkansas that I don't know that I should've met in those years. But I came back to practice law. Dad, to his eternal credit—because the *Geographic* kept offering me assignments—said, "I think you ought to keep up with your writing." Why he said that, I do not know. It would've been so easy to say, "Look, son, if you're serious about practicing law, put that other stuff behind you." He did the opposite, and I've never quite known why. So I kept doing *Geographic* stories, "Dallas," "Texas West of the Pecos," "Guatemala" and so forth, in the 1980s, while practicing law. My law practice involved primarily wills and estates, probate and adoption law. And I really liked all of those. I'm not a courtroom lawyer, I'm more of what the British call a

solicitor. But then the [Arkansas] *Gazette* was sold to Gannett. The newspaper war got serious.

JM: I get confused between the *Texas Monthly* and the *Texas Observer*. Which one was Willie Morris with?

GS: Willie Morris was the *Texas Observer*. It was the keeper of the liberal flame in Texas. Willie was there. A lot of fine writers—Ronnie Dugger, Molly Ivins was there—Kaye Northcott, Larry L. King. It was a little newsprint tabloid that fought for liberal causes in the 1950s. They were very much on the side of [Ralph] Yarborough against [Allan] Shivers. In those days, Texas politics was conservative Democrats versus liberal Democrats. The *Observer* was not a slick magazine. It was a weekly advocacy newspaper that had a great deal of influence long before there was a *Texas Monthly*. That influence continued in this period after law school but before *Texas Monthly*. In 1971, I wrote three articles for the *Texas Observer*. They were the first thing that I ever got paid money for. Molly Ivins was my editor, bless her heart. Politically, we've taken different paths, but Molly was a wonderful editor, a wonderful human being. When I got to be editor here I flew down to Austin to try to talk her into coming to Arkansas after [Bill] Clinton had won [the presidential election]. That's getting ahead of the story. The point is the *Observer* was the first thing that I ever published that I got paid for. Afterwards my focus was at *Texas Monthly*.

JM: Were you editor of the *Texas Monthly*?

GS: Not the editor-in-chief. I was, like, the number two or three editor. My title was senior editor. My college friend, Bill Broyles, was the editor-in-chief. And I

ended up doing more writing than editing.

JM: Who else worked for the *Monthly* that we might recognize?

GS: Paul Burka, who is senior executive editor there now. Richard West, who was the son of Dick West, editorial page editor of the *Dallas Morning News*, is the brother of Elliott West, who teaches history at the University of Arkansas [Fayetteville]. Mike Levy invested his family money in it. Greg Curtis was at *Texas Monthly* from the start. Stephen Harrigan, Gary Cartwright, Al Reinert. Bill Brammer, known as Billy Lee Brammer, who wrote the novel about [President] Lyndon Johnson called *The Gay Place*, back when gay meant something different. Some people think of him as possibly the greatest writer Texas produced. He was a character. But Broyles assembled a good bunch of people and he said, "Let's write good stuff."

JM: Okay. Now, in speech-writing. Was it [President] Jimmy Carter?

GS: Yes.

JM: You were a speechwriter for Jimmy Carter for a while. Tell me how that came about.

GS: Well, let me make this as succinct as possible. What's the saying? God writes straight with crooked lines.

JM: Yeah. [Laughs]

GS: When I had been with the Texas Legislature, I had worked for a senator named Don Kennard and for Barbara Jordan and some others to reform the state's drug laws, which were terribly draconian. Life imprisonment for a first-offense marijuana possession. In the early 1970s, the sentiment was "Maybe we

shouldn't just keep arresting everybody we can find for smoking marijuana." A fellow named Patrick Anderson, who is still a novelist and well-known writer in Washington, [D.C.] came to Austin because he was doing a book on the man that was head of an advocacy group called NORML—the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws—a guy named Keith Stroup. Because of its harsh laws, Texas was kind of an interesting case. So the point is, in the mid-1970s I crossed paths with Pat Anderson in a completely utterly different context. Nobody'd heard of Jimmy Carter in Texas then. Pat just happened to be writing his book about the field in which I was serving as a lawyer for the legislature. A year or two later, James Fallows came to Austin because the University of Texas had a distinguished Ph.D. program in his wife's field—linguistics, I think. So here's Jim, who drops into our lap at *Texas Monthly*. Fast-forward two more years to 1976. Patrick Anderson is the chief speechwriter during the campaign for Carter and Jim Fallows is his assistant. Well, when Carter wins—and all I did in the campaign was to be active in an advocacy group called Texas Conservationists for Carter—Patrick asked me to be one of the White House speechwriters along with Jim. So the connection was not my Carter work, it was the fact that I had been a lawyer with the legislature and had met Patrick Anderson on the marijuana issue four years before. Pat resigned just before Carter took office, Fallows was his replacement and Jim renewed the invitation. But it was Patrick who asked me.

JM: And so you went to Washington.

GS: I went to Washington in late January 1977.

JM: Okay. And that would've been just after he was sworn in, right?

GS: Yeah. I couldn't get there immediately. I remember Patrick said in January, "Well, one thing I'd like you to do is do a draft for an inaugural." So I read every inaugural address of every president. Go back and read [Woodrow] Wilson's first. I mean, he and [Abraham] Lincoln are the two best writers we ever had in the presidency.

JM: Were they?

GS: Oh, yeah. Wilson's first still makes your heart sing. But I studied all of these—even quoted a few of them, which I realize now would be a no-no. No president really quotes a predecessor. But I drafted an inaugural address, like many other people, and sent it to Pat. And I didn't hear anything for a few days, so curiosity got the best of me and I called Pat and said, "Well, how was it?" He said, "Well, it was terrible just like all the rest of them," and, you know, Carter didn't use a word of it. Patrick probably wrote the one that he did use. The only line anybody remembers was "I want to thank my predecessor for all he's done to heal our land." That wasn't even in the speech. But it took a while for me to move from Austin and get up there.

JM: His predecessor being Gerald Ford, right?

GS: Who was standing there. The speechwriters worked in the old executive office building which is next door. Carter had a wonderful group of speechwriters, and I stayed until August of 1978. Jim stayed until about October of 1978.

JM: Okay. Why did you leave?

GS: I was so enthused when I started that I even thought of having a telephone

installed in the bathroom where I lived. So that if they needed me, you know, I could answer. You enter into it thinking, “I like Carter. He’s gonna be a great healer, a good president, and I want to help him every way I can.” The fact was Carter really thought of himself as a writer and really preferred to write his own speeches. So the process was not very satisfying. [Ted] Sorensen would sit with Kennedy and become his alter ego. Carter was completely different. It was, like, he really didn’t want to see your stuff, but—so you’d do a draft—maybe some talking points. You’d get input if it was a foreign policy speech from [National Security Advisor Zbignew] Brzezinski, and then you’d get the contradictory input from [Secretary of State] Cyrus Vance. Then you’d clip a paragraph out of here and a paragraph out of there and add one of your own and send him something. And maybe forty-eight hours before it was time to deliver it, he’d look at it and rewrite it. So it was not—it was not a satisfying job. That’s not Carter’s fault. Presidents are different.

JM: Uh-huh.

GS: It’s just that if you’re gonna be a speechwriter for somebody, be close enough to him that your heart beats with his in the same room. So it was obvious to me this wasn’t really what I was cut out for. It was one of the more frustrating periods of my life.

JM: Hmm. How did you like Carter?

GS: I thought and still think he was the best thing about the Carter Administration. I liked him very much. Presidents can either delegate everything, like [Lyndon] Johnson or [Ronald] Reagan, or they can immerse themselves. The Carter

philosophy was, commendably, “I want to know what my advisers are telling me. And I want to judge whether they’re wooling me around and pursuing their own agenda. So it’s up to me to read all this stuff, too.” I mean, this is a guy that booked his own tennis court at the White House. You had to ask him if you—if you wanted to play on his court.

JM: [Laughs]

GS: So I remember going in before one of his overseas trips. I’d been working on the talking points. I think it was Iran, before the Shah fell. But I was working on the talking points in my office—brought them over to him, and it was between 9:00 and 10:00 [p.m.]. The West Wing was deserted except for some Secret Service men sitting around. I went into the Oval Office and there was Carter. And all you could see was the top of his head, because here were all these briefing books that he was reading, like cramming for a final exam, before he left the next morning. I gave him my notes. He was cordial. He thanked me. It was—you know, it was—the president and I were in the room alone together. But I went away thinking, “That’s an insuperable task to master that material.” And I think in retrospect that was part of the problem, albeit for the best motives.

JM: Yeah.

GS: He said, “I want to know that I’m doing the right thing. In the end, I’m the only one who can decide that.” But given the amount of material you have, you have to depend on others more than he did. And speechwriters he didn’t really depend on.

JM: Okay. So what did you do after you left that job?

GS: I did freelance travel-writing for *Saturday Review*, if you remember *Saturday Review*, and other magazines. My future wife was office manager for Congressman Jake Pickle. We got married in 1979. She had ties in Washington. So I freelanced, which is a hard road, but I'm proud of the stories that I did. But it was not anything that you could make a living at. And I thought, "I'm in Washington. What magazines are published here?" And I found—of course, that *National Geographic* was.

JM: Uh-huh.

GS: I had to buy a *Geographic*. Who were the people there? And I looked up the names, and the assistant editor for text was named Joseph Judge. And I figured, "Well, text—that's me." So I called up and said, "I'd like to speak to Mr. Judge, please." And I got through to him and told him that I was a writer who had just stopped speech-writing for Carter. I had done some freelance, but would like to inquire about a staff position on the *Geographic*. And he said, "Well, you know, we've got more people around here than we can say grace over right now. We've actually thought about how we need to get rid of some of them, so I'm afraid we don't have anything. But, you know, it's—it's interesting you'd want something." Then a little pause. He said, "Well, if you're a speechwriter, why are you interested in writing for a magazine?" And I said, "Well, before I was a speechwriter I was a senior editor at *Texas Monthly*, and—" He interrupted and said, "*Texas Monthly*? You were at *Texas Monthly*? You were an editor at *Texas Monthly*? Listen, come on in. I want you to meet our freelance editor. I'm sure we can find something for you to do." And I had lunch with Joe Judge and Jim

Cerruti, and that led to half a dozen *Geographic* stories.

JM: Jim who?

GS: Cerruti. C-E-R-R-U-T-I, who was the freelance contract writers' editor then. He was from the old *Holiday* magazine. He was a gourmand, and he loved to see writers come for a visit to the *Geographic* because that meant he could take them to lunch at Camille's Restaurant.

JM: [Laughs]

GS: You know, a big platter of French sausage.

JM: On the expense account.

GS: Yeah, exactly. He was a brilliant editor, and I cherish what he and other editors did for me. But had Joe Judge not said as just sort of a polite parting line, "Well, you know, if you're a speechwriter, why would you be interested in writing for a magazine?" My connection at *Texas Monthly* would never have come up and I would never have gone to the *Geographic*. And who knows whether we'd be sitting here today?

JM: Yeah. So how did you make connections with the *Democrat*? When did you start doing any work for the *Democrat*?

GS: That's two questions.

JM: Okay. All right.

GS: The first connection was I was six years old in Little Rock, Arkansas, having moved here with my parents from New York after World War II. And the *Democrat* landed on our porch every afternoon, and I read both the *Gazette* and the *Democrat* before I was ten. The point is my connection with the *Democrat*

goes back to my childhood. We were a two-paper family. As far as the return in 1981, I subscribed to both papers and was surprised to discover by then, the *Democrat* was a morning paper.

JM: Uh-huh.

GS: I got both papers. My recollection is that they once told me I was the only person on my street who got the *Democrat* in 1981. But that's how I grew up: you got both papers.

JM: Uh-huh.

GS: So do you remember Betty Woods?

JM: Oh, yes.

GS: All right. Well, Betty Woods was the *Arkansas Democrat* travel writer. She didn't have a section in the 1980s, but she would occasionally go someplace and write a little something in the social pages about it. Libby, my wife, noticed that Betty Woods was getting married just at the time that the newspaper war was taking on more ominous dimensions with Gannett, and she was moving to Florida. And Libby's the one who said, "Well, you like travel writing." She was a travel agent for Poe Travel at the time. She said, "Why don't you ask Walter [Hussman, Jr.] if he wants to do a travel section?" This would've been the spring of 1987, so Gannett was in the saddle at the *Arkansas Gazette*. If my wife hadn't suggested I talk to Walter about a travel section it would never have occurred to me. So I sort of ran my traps. Gus Walton, who was an owner at Poe, was a friend of Walter's, and Gus and I had been in high school together. So I sort of asked around and had lunch with Walter. Walter liked the idea. And the next

thing I know, we were having a meeting with advertisers, and I had an eight-page section, and he gave me a budget. And I was paying magazine prices. I mean, I was paying a lot more for a freelance story than most regional papers would pay. But we could get original work from Jim Fallows, who then was in Malaysia. Michael Mewshaw, a well-known writer, did one on Morocco for us. We bought a John Updike piece on Finland from the *New Yorker*. P. J. O'Rourke had written one for the [*International*] *Herald-Tribune* in Europe about what if Mark Twain came back and wrote *Innocents Abroad* again. P. J. O'Rourke is a pretty funny guy. The *Arkansas Democrat* got first North American rights to that story. This all happens because Walter liked the idea of having a serious Travel section. Remember, Phyllis [Brandon] had started "High Profile" in 1986. And you're old enough to remember—Pulaski Heights and the Fifth Ward. The *Democrat* was seen as kind of a blue-collar paper. And the *Gazette* was more Pulaski Heights, Fifth Ward. Well, Phyllis had begun to turn that around. The conception was we wanted to do something like a *New York Times* travel section for the *Democrat*.

JM: Uh-huh.

GS: Bill Lewis was doing what he was doing and doing it very well at the *Gazette*. But Walter basically gave me eight pages. After a month I said, "Uncle. Just give me six." But that was the beginning. My position on the Travel section was freelance. I was not a *Democrat* employee. I practiced law, I wrote *Geographic* stories, and I freelanced a *Democrat* travel section once a week. Three jobs is too many. Two you can handle. But that was the beginning of my formal, every-week connection with the *Arkansas Democrat*.

JM: *Democrat*. Okay.

GS: And why did I do it? Well, “What’d you do in the war, Daddy?” The newspaper war was serious at that point. And I was for the *Democrat*.

JM: Were you?

GS: I was for the *Democrat*.

JM: Why was that?

GS: I had grown up feeling that the *Gazette* blurred the line between news and editorial opinion. Arkansans are afraid of being called hicks. The *Gazette* took advantage of that. They implicitly said, “Think like we think and you won’t be a hick.” In other words, I believe the relatively liberal politics of Arkansas, as compared to other neighboring states, were shaped by the *Gazette*, which made people feel like they ought to think liberal thoughts or they were hicks. In that specific sense the *Gazette*, I thought, had a malign influence on the state. They did some great journalism, and there were some great people there. They were rather snooty about the *Democrat* folks, and we’ve had a few wounded souls around the *Democrat-Gazette* who’ve done very well, but who were shunned by the *Gazette*. The main thing was simply that if only one paper was gonna last, I didn’t want it to be the *Gazette*.

JM: Uh-huh.

GS: As events proved, Bob Douglas came to the same conclusion about two years later. But that was it. It was, “What did you do in the war, Daddy?” “Only one of these papers is gonna survive,” was the conventional wisdom. I’d been reading both of them for a good chunk of my life, and I did not want the *Gazette* to

extinguish the *Democrat*.

JM: Okay. And the—the *Gazette*'s attitude and liberal perception—was that mostly the editorial page that you objected to?

GS: You know, as I've learned in my job, people often don't distinguish between the editorial page and the news columns. But at the *Gazette* it spilled over into the news side. I mean, there were things Harry Ashmore did, and Harry Ashmore was a great guy and a marvelous writer and wonderfully kind. He and my dad would have lunch about once a week at Breier's Restaurant on Markham. But he did things that I would never do now in terms of trying to affect the course of political events. I wouldn't write a speech for Mike Beebe like he did for [Orval] Faubus.

JM: Yeah.

GS: All I'm saying is the times are different. But I think that times were different in another sense. The *Gazette*, while in some respects did a superb job of documenting the times that we passed through, at other times they let their editorial instincts and preferences color the way they portrayed things. I don't want to make too much of that, because in the years that I've been in this job I realize that newspaper men don't sit down in a room at 3:30 in the afternoon and say, "How can we spin all this for the readers?" The danger, instead, is that they all think alike. But they don't sit there and conspire. If you're eighteen years old and see the news coverage that you're getting, you may think, "Well, now I see how it works." After a while you grow up and realize it's not a conspiracy. But in 1987, which is the time we're talking about, I'd edited a college paper. I knew

how things were done fairly and objectively and what your responsibilities were, but I still harbored the thought that the *Gazette* had misused its power in various ways.

JM: Uh-huh.

GS: And I did not feel that way about the *Democrat*.

JM: I will backtrack just one quick second for a reference. Betty Woods was a—probably the same one who had been the women’s editor at the *Democrat* for a while and had been married to Ted Woods, and—and he died and then she married somebody who was at AP—had been AP bureau chief. Is that correct—and moved to Florida? I think maybe . . .

GS: Betty Woods.

JM: Betty Woods.

GS: Millie Woods was the social editor of the . . .

JM: No, this is—this is Betty Woods.

GS: Betty Woods. Yeah.

JM: Betty Woods. That’s the *Democrat*.

GS: Right.

JM: Now tell me about your connection with Bob Douglas, who had been—and I had worked with him—with him and in the opposite position, but who had been a managing editor at the *Arkansas Gazette* and then the head of the journalism department at the University of Arkansas [Fayetteville]. How did that come about?

GS: It came about late in the cycle. Walter and I were talking in the spring of 1992

about my being editor. He said, “I’d like you to go up and meet Bob Douglas.” I had never met Bob before then. He was in Fayetteville. He was no longer the department chairman. But Walter and Bob had some relationship that had gone on for—I’m gonna guess—four or five years. The point at which Bob decided that “only one newspaper is gonna survive, and if Gannett is the one, everything I’ve stood for as a newsman is gonna die in Arkansas. If the *Democrat* wins, well, things might work out. There’s a chance.”

JM: Yeah.

GS: At that point, I was just a worker bee on the travel section. But I think in the late 1980s Bob was thinking, “It’s important that Walter win this because it’s important that Gannett not win.” All of that was before my time as editor.

JM: Uh-huh.

GS: But when Walter either was this close to saying, “You’re the one,” or had already done so—and I can’t remember which it was—he offered me the use of the company plane to go up and see Bob Douglas. I like to keep my feet on the ground, so I drove. But I met Bob for the first time. We hit it off famously. There were two “elder statesmen” mentors in my newspaper life—Gene Foreman was the other. You know, bless him. I’d love to see him again. He’s wonderful. Bob Douglas was the same way. After I was editor, Bob came down to the newsroom for the better part of a week. We set him up in the conference room. Anybody could go in and talk to him. And he’d ask them whatever questions Bob might ask to kind of see “How’s it’s going here?” Afterwards, he and I sat down right here in my living room. I taped it somewhere—right over there—for three

hours one day. He kind of debriefed me on stuff. But I kept up with Bob as you know—not as much as I should given my debt to him. I truly valued his advice.

And he perceived the importance of the *Democrat* winning the war before most of his circle did.

JM: What was your connection to Gene Foreman?

GS: Sort of the same thing. Walter and Gene had talked about the paper. There was a rumor that was published when I was just named, that Walter had asked Gene, and Gene had turned him down. And Walter sent me a note saying, “That’s not true.” Heck, if he could’ve gotten Gene, it’s not gonna hurt my feelings.

JM: Uh-huh.

GS: As far as I know, he was simply asking Gene for advice and possibly discussing resumes and candidates. And there were other candidates that Gene would know better than me. But similarly, when I was in line to be editor, but before it had been announced, Walter said, “Go up to Philadelphia [Pennsylvania] and let Gene show you the ropes.” And he did. I met with Steve Lovelady, who was the managing editor. With Max King, the editor in chief. With Jim Naughton, the executive editor. Gene basically put me through a whole day of briefings.

JM: Yeah.

GS: I met a guy named John Bull, I think, who was their ombudsman. He was fun to watch. A great, big ol’ guy. He could buffalo anybody. I remember a judge called him while I was there and complained about something, and he was amicably talking to the judge and said, “Judge, you old—you’re as crooked as a snake. You know you are, Judge.” It was interesting to see how different

temperaments filled different roles. We don't have an ombudsman. To the extent we do, Frank Fellone does that. And Frank's very different from John Bull.

About a month after I became editor, I had another three-day mentoring session at Philadelphia under Gene's supervision. And he's always been there when I had questions and so forth. I wish he were here in town.

JM: Okay, walk me through how you became executive editor of the paper. This was after—I assume, after Starr had retired—John Robert Starr.

GS: No, as I understand it, Starr had told Walter when the newspaper war was over, “If you decide you need to replace me, you won't get any back-talk from me.” The war ended on October 18, 1991. What Starr may have said to Walter, and when—I was not privy to that. But in November of 1991 my wife remarked, “Well, you know, Starr's not gonna be there forever. Why don't you tell Walter you're interested? Put your hat in the ring.” So I ran my same traps. Of course, by this time, Walter had seen my work and knew my friends and I had a track record. I paid a visit on him around Thanksgiving of 1991 and said, “If Starr ever leaves, I'd be interested.” Well, why would Walter say to a lawyer who's been his travel editor—freelance—“Sure, let's keep talking.” But he did. And we continued to talk through the early part of next year—of 1992. I became editor on June 23, 1992. I was supposed to start on June 21, but Starr was out of town. Walter said, “My plan is, I'm gonna call Starr in the morning and tell him that we're making the change. And then you can be in the WEHCO conference room next door waiting when I'm through with Bob and have thanked him for all he's done and told him this is his last day.” And Walter probably was thinking he

wanted Starr to stay on as a columnist. We moved the date to June 23. When Walter and I talked, certain things clearly clicked. One was that I said, “I don’t want to write a column.” Walter clearly wanted separation of news and opinion. [Paul] Greenberg had come to the paper in April 1992. But along there, I said, “The one thing I’d really rather not do is do what Starr’s doing and write a column.”

GS: Your question, I think, was why would Walter be picking me. He had me visit with Paul Smith. He had me visit with Philip Anderson—so forth. Who knows what everybody sees. But one thing was that I didn’t want to do a column and wanted to maintain the line between news and editorial opinion. Another, I think, in retrospect was that I was a native fifth-generation Arkansan. Walter has remarked that all of his editors at Chattanooga [Tennessee] and Little Rock have been natives of the state where the newspaper is located. So I think that figured to some extent. Interestingly, at that point he didn’t know or it hadn’t registered that I’d been editor of my college paper. When I told him that, just before we went out to meet the TV cameras, he seemed noticeably relieved. But in our other conversations it was, I think, a feeling of—that I believed in what you call objective journalism, and I don’t say it with a sneer. In other words, there are all sorts of rationalizations, for example, “civic journalism,” which Walter has spoken critically of at his alma mater, the University of North Carolina. Civic journalism is tempted to say, “Well, you know, we’d rather use our powers to save democracy or steer the country in the right direction or solve social problems.” Too many journalists succumb to that temptation and just rationalize

away the very idea of balance. They say, “Why have balance? One side is lying and the other side is telling the truth.” I disagree. Even acknowledging that what you *select* as news is ultimately subjective, how you *treat* it can partake honestly of an objective approach. I believed that then. I believe it now. I think that’s what Walter wanted to know. He didn’t want an editor with a cause.

JM: Were you replacing Bob? Did he hold the title of executive editor at that time?

GS: He held the title of managing editor. Walter and I talked about that, and Walter—perceptive guy that he is—said, “You know, I think you need a managing editor, too.” Well, of course, he was right about that. But the structure that we were gonna have was a top editor and a managing editor. I told him I could be either editor, executive editor, or editor-in-chief. Walter unhesitatingly said, “I think it should be executive editor.” But there was never a point at which we envisioned my not having a managing editor. Bob Lutgen was Starr’s heir-apparent. Lutgen had been brought from Texarkana to be Bob’s number-two. Everybody assumed Lutgen would become number-one when Bob left. But Walter gave me *carte blanche* to choose my own managing editor. And in a week I did. I’d talked to a number of people. Lutgen was my favorite choice, but I was under no instructions to choose him. I felt that Bob was the right choice.

JM: Okay.

GS: After Starr and I met on June 23—I guess I learned this from Walter because he met with Starr—they were the only two in the room—that Bob had expressed some doubt that the newsroom would accept me. Not a vociferous objection. It probably came up as, you know, “What problems would you see for Griffin?”

“Well, one is, you know, he’s not Lutgen, and the newsroom might not accept him.” Otherwise, I didn’t know what their conversation was. But Bob came over into the conference room, and we sat down. He wished me well. He clearly—he did not seem like a man stunned or anything. I’m still puzzled that if that’s the first he’d heard of it, that’s pretty quick. But, again, he was staying on at the paper and had worked out his arrangements with Walter for his column. I’m sure I told him, “I’ll need your help and advice,” and I’m sure he said, “You’ve got it.” And for most of the rest of his life, he was a joy and a pleasure in that he freely gave me advice when I asked and didn’t offer any when I didn’t. But one important question I asked him that morning was this: “I’ll be hiring new people as vacancies come up and charting my own course. I want you to tell me—is there anybody that you know that fits into either of these two categories: one, someone who has injured the paper on your watch—injured the *Democrat*—or two, someone who is personally objectionable to you?” And I was prepared for Bob, being Bob, to say [laughs], “Well, I just happen to have a really long list of people who are objectionable to me.” Well, that’s a misreading of Bob because he had a lot more breadth and scope as a journalist than that. He gave me one name, which I won’t mention. But it was the name of somebody who, because of timing when going to another paper, hurt the *Democrat* by leaving the paper dangerously in the lurch in a news coverage situation. And that’s the only name he gave me. I’ve always had the greatest respect for Bob because that was his answer to that question.

JM: And so then he stayed on just as a columnist. Is that—is that correct?

GS: He took a trip around the world.

JM: Uh-huh.

GS: He shared an office with Meredith [Oakley], but he was seldom in the office. There was, yeah, a place to hang his hat. But his arrangement with Walter was, “Keep doing the column.” And it was, of course, very well read—probably the best-read column in the paper.

JM: Did your relationship with him remain good throughout the rest of his life?

[Laughs]

GS: You sure you want to get into that?

JM: Yeah. Yeah, if you do. That’s your option. I only point that out because there is . . .

GS: Because you can read.

JM: Yeah and there is immense amount of interest in John Robert Starr.

GS: Okay. Well, I’ll try to walk carefully here. He died on April Fool’s Day of 2000. That’s one reason we had a hell of a time covering his death because by then relations between him and me were so deteriorated that everybody thought, “Maybe he’s capable of pulling this prank just to embarrass the editor.” We really had to run our traps to be sure he was actually dead. No disrespect to Bob or his family. But things were that bad by then. They had not been that bad as late as Christmas before. It was basketball season when it started, and Bob loved to tell [University of Arkansas head basketball coach] Nolan Richardson how to run his business. It was a Saturday, and Nolan Richardson had done something that displeased Bob. And as you may or may not know, the Perspective section is

an advance section on Sundays, so it had already gone to press. Bob didn't have a column on Sunday. So all of a sudden on a Saturday afternoon Bob has thoughts about Nolan and there's no place to put them. He's determined to get them out. At the same time, [Sports Editor] Wally Hall was having a very difficult time with Richardson, I forget just why. But Bob announced that he was gonna run his column in the sports section the next day. For reasons having to do with the good management of the paper and the principle that columnists run where people expect to see them, I told Bob no. And I told the people in the sports department that if he tried that this was my direct order not to do it. That's the only time I've ever called something "a direct order." I guess Bob tried and somebody in sports told him what I'd said, because from that point on, it became open warfare.

JM: Hmm.

GS: During that period I thought Bob wanted to kill me if he could.

JM: [Laughs]

GS: He started sending me weird stuff in the mail every few days—derogatory notes, pictures of lions, rubber ducks. He seemed to have lost his mind. It was getting to be a very bad situation.

JM: Hmm.

GS: You could see it in his published columns during that period. As you recall, he had a heart attack going over Wolf Creek Pass [Colorado]. He and his family had been in Arizona, and he loved to come back to Colorado. And he chose a pass that's 12,000 feet high, and I'm guessing his heart couldn't take it. Because he was dead when they came down the other side. It was that sudden. And he still

had bizarre stuff in the U.S. Mail pipeline that arrived to me after his death.

JM: Now I think we need to get into how the *Democrat* has developed as a newspaper since you've been the executive editor—how it's progressed. What changes has the paper made? This is not too long after the *Democrat* bought out the *Gazette* assets and became the *Democrat-Gazette*. How has the *Democrat* developed since then?

GS: That's really the meat of the whole interview, isn't it, right there?

JM: Yeah.

GS: My mind is spinning because there are so many different tangents on that. One of them is that when I became editor I was struck with how young the staff was and how little institutional knowledge we had. And I have been pleased to be able to recruit people like [features editor] Jack Schnedler, who started his career in the 1960s at the *Chicago Daily News* [Illinois] as a rewrite man and had been at a number of major papers. People like [graphics editor] Kirk Montgomery, and Guy Unangst, who was the managing editor of the *Fort Worth Star Telegram* [Texas] [and became an enterprise editor at the *Democrat-Gazette*]. Both of them were Gene Roberts and Gene Foreman disciples. We've kept Leroy Donald, who does a well-read business column with great institutional and community knowledge. [Editor's Note: Donald died in July 2009] Part of the plan was to recruit methodically to get the best people we could, including people who had careers elsewhere and who found that this paper freed them to do what they wanted to do.

JM: Uh-huh.

GS: David Bailey is an example. David had been a disciple of Lionel Linder at *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, which apparently was the good ol' days at Memphis. Linder was killed on [a] New Year's Eve in a car wreck on Union Avenue in Memphis. Everything changed. David went to be executive editor of Gannett's smallest paper, in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Lutgen recruited him in 1993 to be an assistant city editor. Think about that. At Hattiesburg you're the top guy. And you say, "I would—" What was it that Alvin Barkley said in his last words before dying during a speech? It was a paraphrase from Psalms 84:10: "I would rather be a servant in the House of the Lord than to sit in the seats of the mighty." I look at David and I think, "David was willing to come be an assistant city editor with no promises at this newspaper rather than work his way up the Gannett ladder." So there's an example. David had no idea that Walter would buy Chattanooga and Lutgen would go there. David came because he could do journalism here. We were able—in the early 1990s, when budgets weren't as tight—to recruit people just because we needed them and they were good. We've got a lot of talent as a result.

JM: Yeah.

GS: I think we did it in a way that didn't tell our own people, the ones who won the newspaper war, "That was then, this is now." We kept our loyalties to them and we surrounded them with other good people. Just take Kirk Montgomery as an example. As good a graphics guy as you can get. He's a pleasure to work with and adds a lot of talent. He came to us from the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. So one thing is we have more gravitas in the paper.

JM: Uh-huh.

GS: People who have both institutional and, in some cases, more local knowledge.

We opened the doors to, I think, the best the *Gazette* had to offer. We got people like [former Style editor] Karen Martin. Jerry Jones when he was at his best was—was fine. I mentioned Leroy Donald. We had a fairly limited number of *Gazette* folks who chose to come. But we hired some, and my impression is that their friends told them, “Well, be Benedict Arnold if you want. The *Democrat* is a terrible paper.” And they came and they thought, “It’s not. I like it here.”

JM: Okay.

GS: So that’s something that’s happened. I think the most important thing is what didn’t happen, because the paper still believes in putting news in the paper, treating news seriously, and having a lot of it, Walter and God willing. I didn’t invent that. Go look at that *Arkansas Democrat* on my wall, the one from the end of World War II. It was just bulging with news. This was the real stuff. The *Gazette* had news in it. Arkansans expect that from their paper. That was Gannett’s mistake. “Let’s tart up the Old Lady.”

JM: Uh-huh.

GS: The core value that animates our budget meeting when the front page is planned at 3:30 every afternoon is, “What are the five most important stories in the world today *for our readers?*” Some days they’re all local. Usually it’s a mix of local, national and international. The theory is, people respect the paper because judgment is shown about what’s news.

JM: Okay.

GS: Every now and then we'll put something on the front page that's just an exception because it's just too much fun not to have it there.

JM: Yeah.

GS: In other words, it's not, "everybody's talking about this. Get it out front." We only make an exception—rarely—for a story that's too good not to have there. And we know it's an exception.

JM: Uh-huh.

GS: The animating principle is the one that I inherited, the one Walter believes in, the one that won the newspaper war, which is give your readers serious news. Don't be dull if you can avoid it, but don't play games. For a while the *Dallas [Morning] News* [Texas] was putting—they were under instructions, "Have something on the page every day that nobody else has got." Well, that's pretty much a formula for trivia, except if you're really lucky. The *Seattle Times* [Washington]. We regard them as one of the best, particularly on investigative reporting. David Bailey came to me about two months ago with the longest look on his face, and he said, "It may be the end of the world. Seattle put *American Idol* on the front page."

JM: [Laughs]

GS: We wouldn't do it. The reason we wouldn't do it is not that we're holier than thou. It's that for fifty, sixty years—more—Arkansans have expected something different from their paper.

JM: Uh-huh.

GS: Walter's given us enough news hole. We've got enough staff. If we're not doing

our job it's our fault. People look at it and say, "There's enough in there, that was worth reading." So what are the developments? The biggest development is that we stayed faithful to the old ways.

JM: Did the salaries improve, though, after the end of the newspaper war?

GS: Yes, they did. Walter's benchmark goal is to be the Southern Newspaper Publishers Average [SNPA]. David and I—every time we do a raise, we have a computerized table. It shows where this person fits in the SNPA scale for that job. The problem is that we've got a lot more newsroom staff than a paper our size would normally have. The economics are that we're working from an advertising base of a much smaller community, and yet we're staffing and covering and distributing the paper to all seventy-five counties. I mean people are amazed. We have two interns [from the] University of Texas—they're amazed that our paper is bigger in circulation than the *Austin American Statesman*. The city of Austin has a population somewhere over 750,000.

JM: Going specific: Has there been any change in the thrust towards investigative reporting?

GS: Yes. We, of course, hired Mary Hargrove, who was nationally renowned. She'd been at the *Tulsa Tribune*. When Tulsa closed, she went to Miami [*Miami Herald* in Florida]. I remember Libby saying—because we wanted her to come here—Libby said, "She's not a coastal person." Well, Miami didn't appreciate her. They put her in the Broward County bureau. At Thanksgiving of that year, which would've been 1992, I got an early Christmas card from her. It was a nice little note. You know, just kind of reminiscing. I showed it to Walter. I said, "Look at

this nice note from Mary Hargrove.” He said, “The way I read it, she wants to talk.” I’d missed that clue completely.

JM: Uh-huh.

GS: So I called her up and said, “Mary? I’d like to buzz down to Miami,” because when I could, I liked to go the people rather than, you know, summon them to the throne like some papers do. So I said, “I’d like to come down and visit with you.” I went to Miami, and, sure enough, she was ready to come to the *Democrat-Gazette*. We made a deal right there. Mary was as good as they get. And it was because she knew what to look for and always nailed the story.

JM: Hmm.

GS: So we had the luxury of having Mary, although she never won a Pulitzer. She should have. But her health was not good, and I guess it’s been two years ago this month that finally we had to come to a parting of the ways, which was completely amicable. She’s now living back in Tulsa. So we have this vacancy. And, to make a long story short, Sonny Albarado, a veteran journalist who was at the *Commercial Appeal*, a first-rate editor who can inspire reporters, Sonny started July 31. We’re not a month into his tenure yet.

JM: About the time that you came in as the executive editor the paper also acquired a lot more technical equipment, didn’t they?

GS: The legends are that [Voices page editor] Meredith Oakley kept a close watch on the supplies at the old *Arkansas Democrat* and you had to turn in your old pencil before you got a new one. But these were people who didn’t know whether they’d wake up the next morning and have a job. Walter is a thrifty guy,

certainly. But he watched Gannett and said, “Gannett threw money around like there was no tomorrow and it didn’t really do them a lot of good, did it?” One of his life lessons is “the low-cost provider prevails.” That doesn’t mean that we’re sitting around in the newsroom trading in pencils or that we somehow feel that we can’t send someone to a seminar. Quite the opposite. I feel absolutely blessed with the budget I’ve got.

JM: Hmm.

GS: There are hard choices that other editors have to make every day that I’ve so far not had to make. So even though Walter’s thrifty, we’ve got enough fuel to run the plane. What I’ve noticed is that when it comes to capital expenditures and technology developments, Walter is prepared to pay what it costs. We never want for up-to-date capital supplies. Nobody says, “That computer was one that Bob Starr started on and it still works. You can just darn well use that.”

JM: Uh-huh.

GS: One of the finest compliments Walter ever paid to me came when I was telling him about how [photo editor] Barry Arthur had handled something in photography. And we’d gotten such-and-such for such-and-such a price. And Walter said, “You know, one of the things I most appreciate about you all there is that you treat the company’s money as carefully as you would your own.” And, by golly, he’s right. We don’t waste it, and he doesn’t tell us that we’ve got a hand around our throat. And it’s a great, great arrangement.

JM: Let me ask you about one question here, and I know that they’ve complained—Charlie Allbright and Richard Allin think that Walter was behind them being

released—that you wouldn't have done it without the approval of Walter. What happened on the decision to end their column-writing for the paper?

GS: That was my decision. I had felt that their columns had run their course. I don't think it's appropriate for me to elaborate on the record as to why, but my feeling was, "We don't have an unlimited amount of money. That's a lot of money. What am I getting for it?" Their readership had declined, but they still had readers. I certainly counted myself as one. But as a steward of the company's money, could I spend it better in another way? And I decided, yes, I could spend it better on news coverage. And down the pike came Iraq, and we sent [reporter] Amy Schlesing to Iraq. She's been there a total of sixteen months now. She was there for a year. Where did the Allin and Allbright money go? We spent it on Iraq.

JM: Yeah.

GS: I said publicly at the time the money will go for news-gathering. We're not replacing them as columnists.

JM: Uh-huh.

GS: We have two columnists front page of section B, something I had long wanted to do because that page is printed "live" with late deadlines—not the day before, as Allin and Allbright's pages were. One of those columns is Linda Caillouet's "Paper Trails." We'd had "Paper Trails" in the Features section for seven years. That's not a new column. The other one, Jay Grelen, is somebody we had already hired with the idea—we wanted him to do a column of his own. He was already on the payroll. He didn't replace Allin or Allbright. That was a separate track.

We put him out front. The positions called “Allin” and “Allbright” are still in the budget and as unfilled line-item positions. [Editor’s Note: Allin died in October 2007.]

JM: Uh-huh.

GS: What did Walter have to do with it? I think I told him it was gonna happen. I didn’t check it with him. I didn’t say, “Okay to do this?” It was my decision. Absolutely.

JM: This is Jerry McConnell again. This is tape two—starting tape two, and I think, Griffin, we were just talking about the decision to let Charles Allbright and Richard Allin go and where Walter stood in all that. And I think you were getting ready to make a comment about Walter’s reaction, but we didn’t get it all on here.

GS: To the best of my recollection, I did not mention it until it was well under way. I certainly didn’t seek his okay. He certainly didn’t put the idea in my head. When I let him know it was in the cards, I don’t recall. I figure because Walter goes to Trinity [Episcopal Cathedral] and Richard Allin is a cradle Episcopalian that Walter was probably under considerable pressure from friends to reverse my decision. To his credit—and this is characteristic of the way Walter functions as a publisher—he didn’t even ask me any pregnant questions. I did not hear anything from Walter that suggested that maybe things would be better for me or the paper or him if a different decision was reached. He stayed out of it.

JM: I take it from something you’ve said that you did not think that the editor or the managing editor ought to be writing a column—that there should be more of a separation between news and opinion.

GS: I don't have an opinion about everything like Starr did.

JM: [Laughs] Yeah.

GS: I'm not saying that in a critical sense. Partly, it was that I knew not writing a column would make my work easier. But in Walter's mind, it underscored the principle that it is good to keep news and editorial opinion separate. And I heartily concur.

JM: Until you were hired as the executive editor, were you still practicing law?

GS: Yes.

JM: You don't practice now, do you?

GS: I'm still licensed in Arkansas and Texas. Except for family matters, I don't have any active clients. I can produce about enough income from my law practice to offset my Supreme Court dues and my continuing legal education. But, really, by 1995, everything had run its course and I certainly did not seek business as a private attorney after I got this job. There were a few things that just needed to be wrapped up.

JM: Any regrets about your career choice?

GS: None at all.

JM: Okay.

GS: God writes straight with crooked lines.

JM: Yeah. [Laughs]

GS: I mean, it's been wonderful. I just hope that I've lived up to the opportunity I got. It's the best job in journalism.

JM: What is?

GS: The executive editor of the *Democrat-Gazette*.

JM: Is it? Okay.

GS: As I told the budget meeting the first week we met in 1992, I didn't take this job so I could build a record and go some place else. I'm real happy right here.

JM: Okay.

GS: And with the passage of fifteen years and when you see what's happened in the newspaper business, it's like we're in some sort of "Island of the Blessed." I've got a note from Walter on my wall. Paul Smith had sent Walter a page from *Press Time* magazine a year ago this month. *Press Time* was talking about all these blogs, and they said, "*Houston Chronicle* has sixty blogs; thirty of them by editors and writers." And Paul had underlined that—sent it to Walter, not to me. First I saw of it was when it came back from Walter with a note to me saying, "Griffin, I think this is a bad idea. I want our reporters and editors to spend their time putting out the best newspaper possible." You've got all these places that are putting these conflicting pressures on journalists. We ran that story about—was it Fort Myers—where a woman from the *Gazette*—I forget her name, but she's now the managing editor—and she wanted every reporter to file a story for the Web five times a day. When we send Cynthia Howell over to cover the school board, we don't want her to blog. We want her to catch the school board superintendent and the president after the meeting and say, "What was that all about?" She'll certainly phone in something if it was earthshaking—"They just fired [ex-Little Rock Superintendent] Roy Brooks"—and say, "Put that on the Web." But her job is to get the best, most complete story in the paper tomorrow

so people will understand what's going on on her beat. Too few reporters and newspapers enjoy that privilege anymore.

JM: Hmm.

GS: So, yeah, the *Democrat-Gazette's* the best job in journalism.

JM: Does the *Democrat* have a strategy about how it's going to handle all the competition from all the various medias and Internet and everything else?

GS: Well, you've seen Walter's little essay that ran in the *Wall Street Journal*. That is attracting a lot of attention. The best person to ask is Walter and Paul. I see through a glass darkly because my job under the plan is, "No, Griffin, you're not supposed to just every few minutes give us an idea for the Web. Run the newspaper. That's what we want you to do." So I'm liberated to concentrate on doing what I do best.

JM: Okay. Well, thank you very much for your time on this, and I really appreciate it.

GS: Thank you.

[Transcribed by Cheri Pearce Riggs]

[Edited by Jason Pierce]

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