

William Jefferson Clinton History Project

Interview with

Paul Root
Arkadelphia, Arkansas
10 January 2002

Interviewer: Michael Pierce

Michael Pierce: This is Michael Pierce. I'm here with Paul Root for an oral history interview. It's a part of the Clinton History Project. It's January 10, 2002. [We are] in Arkadelphia, Arkansas, at 11:00 in the morning. Professor Root, you read the informed consent?

Paul Root: Yes, I did.

MP: You agree to be interviewed for the Clinton Oral History Project?

PR: Certainly, yes.

MP: Okay. The first thing I wanted to ask you is a little bit about yourself. What year were you born? How [did] you arrive in Hot Springs by [the] early 1960s to meet a young Bill Clinton?

PR: I was born in a country town of Bald Knob, about sixty miles east of Conway [Arkansas], where I went to school. I graduated from that high school. My first two years [of college] I went to the Arkansas College in Batesville, a Presbyterian school. Then I went to the army. I spent three years in the army and a couple of years in Germany. I came back and attended Arkansas State Teacher's College, [now the University of Central Arkansas, Conway], and graduated there. I taught my first year at nearby Greenbriar. I moved to Hot Springs the next year, and that's when I met Bill Clinton. The reason I made the move and went to Hot

Springs was I had a quartet in college. We were singing all over the place for high school banquets. We sang the year before for the Hot Springs junior/senior banquet. The principal caught me that night while we were singing and asked me if I'd be interested in coming to Hot Springs—I was a history major—and teach history and one course in music where I would train a quartet for public appearances around Hot Springs. I moved to Hot Springs for the opportunity both to teach history and to work in music. It was [during] my third year there that I taught Bill Clinton. That was my last year. I taught him tenth grade world history that year, and I left to go back to Fayetteville, [to] the University [of Arkansas], to work on my doctorate.

MP: What was Hot Springs like in the early 1960s when Bill Clinton was growing up?

PR: Hot Springs was pretty wide open. It's nice. I've often said the difference between the way they treated students and their parents was amazing to me. If a student ran a red light, he had to write a paper for the judge, and the teachers were always helping write papers. But parents could do an awful lot of things and not be noticed. There was a great divide between Hot Springs and South Hot Springs. [They are] two towns. Hot Springs was New Orleans, and South Hot Springs was more like Bald Knob, so it was really a strange situation.

MP: You met Bill Clinton your last year in Hot Springs?

PR: Yes, my last year there.

MP: What was he like in high school? Was he a good student?

PR: He was an excellent student. The only thing a teacher had to worry about with him was trying to stay up with him so as not to be embarrassed. He was such a

good student and so interested in just everything. I gave a special assignment in world history some time before just to add things to the class. I would let people choose what they wanted to read for the report. I was interested in the Russian rebellion, and I gave them a list of books to choose from. He chose *Animal Farm*. He was ahead of most of us in his thinking about relationships of government and society in general. I think I did not know at that time, but I learned later talking to other people that he was already talking to his counselor about maybe going into the Foreign Service. He wanted to be some kind of public servant.

MP: Do you remember anything else about Bill Clinton at Hot Springs High School outside of your class?

PR: He was an all-state saxophone player. I remember that. I wasn't involved in that, but I just knew from listening. Now, I did not know him [as] well as a student as I got to know him later when he became my boss. I was teaching full-time and driving a school bus and working in a hotel at night, so, I didn't get to know him as well, as I had been teaching students for several years. And if any one of them knew their students as little as I knew about Bill, I'd be disappointed. [Laughs] It is true that I didn't know him well at all. I've learned a lot about those years by reading other people's books. [Laughter] But he was a great student. I've joked about flunking thirteen students trying to make a test out that he couldn't make a hundred on.

MP: You write in *The Clintons of Arkansas*, the book that was edited by Ernie Dumas, in the mid-1960 after you had left Hot Springs, you came back and you went to a church musical function and you encountered Bill Clinton again. What do you

remember from that episode?

PR: Well, I went to his church for three weeks as choir director to substitute for his director who was on vacation. I guess the first day he didn't know I was there, but the second week he was there and looking for me. And that night, the second night, on a Sunday night, he came up and caught me and he said, "We're going to go get some coffee. I'd like to talk." So we went down the street to the little coffee shop and talked for an hour or two after church. It was then that I really realized how strong he was in [how] his life plans seemed to be shaping up. He was headed for Georgetown [University, Washington, DC], which surprised me because I thought every student was going to school in Arkansas. But he told me why he was going to Georgetown.

MP: And what did he say? Do you remember, particularly?

PR: Well, he just said—we talked about social problems in Arkansas. We talked about desegregation. Pretty much everywhere at that time in Arkansas there was segregation. He talked about what he could do about that. We talked quite a bit about that. Of course, I had just gone through a serious transformation of my own because I was born in a segregated world and didn't see it as a problem. At the university I was on a study committee with seven of us preparing for final exams. Four of them were black. One of them was a really sharp black guy. He, by the way, has been teaching at the University of Baton Rouge [Louisiana] for the past forty years, I guess. He couldn't find a place to live. He would call to find an apartment, but once he got there it wasn't available. He'd tell us that story every day, day after day. That was the first time I'd ever had a friend who had a

problem with segregation before. I'd started to understand what it was about. So we talked about that a lot. He [Clinton] talked a lot about Arkansas. He knew more about Arkansas than I did. I'd studied history to understand the present; he was studying it [to] learn and change some things. It was personal. I thought I could see he was not an average student. He was headed for something greater, [but] I didn't know what. He didn't say.

MP: After that encounter, did you keep in touch with him? When he went to Georgetown, Oxford [University, England], or [Yale Law School in] New Haven [Connecticut]?

PR: No, I did not. My next contact with him was when he had already come back to Arkansas to Fayetteville to teach law. Of course, I had picked up that from the paper. Then he ran for that Third District [congressional seat] and lost. That is when I wrote him a letter. I said, "Stay in Arkansas. Let me know what you are doing next because I want to help." From that time, we've stayed in contact.

MP: Were you involved in the campaign for attorney general?

PR: No.

MP: For governor the first time around?

PR: No, I was not. I didn't get involved until he lost the first time. That was the second time I decided to write a letter.

MP: What did you say after the election of 1980?

PR: I said, "Don't give up and don't leave Arkansas. I want you to stay in Arkansas. I know you've got good ideas." Mary and I—my wife and I have worked hard for years to improve education in Arkansas. He came to Ouachita [Baptist

University] just after he had lost the election to Frank White and he spoke to Girls' State one morning. [Editor's note: Boys State and Girls State are leadership and citizenship programs sponsored by a military veterans' organization, the American Legion.] I was driving on campus to the office as he was leaving. We saw each other and stopped. He came and got in my car. We must have talked for a few hours or more about where we both were going to be for the next election.

MP: So this was right after the election of 1980, when he lost. He was already planning on running again?

PR: Right. He wasn't telling everybody he saw, "I'm going to run again," but he was planning. He was thinking that he was going to run. He was planning to run. He was talking pretty openly about it. They didn't want it—they never announced it or anything. That was in the summer of—what was it, 1980?

MP: He lost in November of 1980 to Frank White the first time.

PR: It was 1981. The summer of 1981. I had been working four to five years at Ouachita in the desegregation project. I had traveled all over the state working for public schools talking to teachers dealing with problems in desegregation. So I knew teachers wanted that. I got on the phone and I put together a small group—twelve, I think. And I called him and said, "I got a bunch of people who need to talk." So we went to Little Rock and met with him.

MP: Who was in this group of twelve people?

PR: There were three from, I think, here at Ouachita—three from the history department. [Tom Claire] was a preacher and a part-time teacher here at

Ouachita. Tom Bush, who was a principal at Cabot, I believe, at that time [and others].

MP: And so you had a meeting with Bill Clinton?

PR: Yes, and Betsey Wright was there.

MP: And this was before or after his second term as governor?

PR: It was before, and [also] before he announced he was going back to [run for] governor. He announced in January of the next year.

MP: What did he discuss at the meeting?

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

PR: The percentage of our kids going to college who graduated from high school was thirty-nine percent. Today, it's about fifty-six percent. We still have a lot of remedial education in college, but those people doing remedial education now may do all right and may graduate. They may not have had the courage to go to college before these changes came.

MP: Before switching over to talk about other aspects of the Clinton Administration, is there anything else about the educational reforms package that we haven't touched on that you could comment [about]?

PR: Right now I cannot think of what that would be.

MP: One of the things—maybe you don't know this—maybe you can't speak to this, I should say—but much has been made of the use of polls by Dick Morris in the formulation of this education policy, of the political fight for the tax increase and passage of standards. Would you care to comment on that? What was the role of

polling of these efforts?

PR: First of all, I don't really know anything much about the polling itself, but I know about the process that was leading to polling. The reading Clinton was getting was for the need to offer courses preparing students for college. Don Ernst and I went to a place up in northeast Arkansas to meet with a few new superintendents from that area. This was in the summer of 1983 before the special session. They said to us, "Our teachers haven't had a raise for three years. The governor has got to do something. He has got to raise taxes. It will give us more money." Then I said, "Have you tried to raise taxes locally?" "Well, yeah. Three times, and we've lost each time. Could he raise taxes at state level?" I said, "Now, he's working on this. He knows about this. He knows where you are and he knows what's going on. He's working on it and he will call a special session." They said, "You mean we're going to have to wait until taxing is popular before he can do anything?" [Laughs] "No, not exactly that, but if you just give him a little bit more time to work on the issue and talk with them." About two months later he called a special session with the legislature for a one-cent vote. Fifty votes were all it took to pass it—got fifty-one. It was everything he could do—and the people who worked in education could do—to get that fifty-first vote. But when the standards came in and they could read the standards and they could see the amount of money coming in from one percent of the sales tax that all went to education, then they could see that local taxes would have to be raised, anyway. I know that one superintendent raised his local taxes based on the assumption that they were going to be consolidated if they didn't. Most of the superintendents

took the easy way and just blamed it all on Clinton. “We’re going to get it if we don’t.” We were always talking about this money—all this money going to education. One legislator said later, “All this money didn’t go to education. The colleges took some of it.” So that’s kind of the stuff that we were fighting.

MP: We’ve been talking about the education policy and the reforming of it. What I want to ask you about is can you [say] what this meant to Clinton emotionally?

PR: Yes. He was really excited when the standards were passed and approved by the board of education. He was hurt by the things—by the people—that would be hurt. He just knew that it was the best thing to do in the long periods of time and he was just humbled over this. In other words, he was just saying to himself, “This, my goal, has been reached. You have to move on, but this part of the goal has been decided, has been reached.” So I would say he was as happy as could be seeing his plan coming together. Plus, the one percent tax that the state would give—eighty-five percent of the schools passed millages raising money locally. He could see Arkansas people that he had been talking to personally on this all across the state realizing the possibility—and especially rural people—that it just pays. So he was selling change for Arkansans. “Here’s what we can do: stay where we are—we live where we live—and still make a living and make lives better for our kids.”

MP: In many ways, there were the educational reforms that propelled Clinton to the leadership in the National Governors Association, and he became, at that point in the Democratic Party, the leading spokesman in the 1980s on educational reform. Were you involved with him in any of these national organizations?

PR: No, I was not. Gloria Cabe did that. She was a legislator. She wasn't on staff, really, but she volunteered to do all that work.

MP: She also ran his 1984 and 1986 campaigns?

PR: She was involved, but I think you have to [say] that Betsey Wright led his campaigns.

MP: You took leave, didn't you, during the campaign?

PR: Yes.

MP: Could you describe your role?

PR: During 1984 and 1986 I took a leave and went to the campaign. My job was to sit in a little cubby hole with a telephone, a cup of coffee, and a piece of cake and talk on the phone all day long to the people I had talked to for years—that I had gone to visit—and just get readings on where we are at there—what's happening, what we need to do—talk about particular areas where we need to run radio spots, what they need to include, and what do we need to do for signs. Those kinds of things. That's when you gain fourteen pounds!

MP: Did you ever go on the campaign trail with Governor Clinton?

PR: Yes, I did that. But more often I went instead of Clinton. I substituted for him all the time, all over the place. I'd say a couple of things not very enlightening but interesting for thoughts. I went to a little town in north central Arkansas on a Saturday night. They had, I think, twenty-eight local politicians. I was the only one of state present. They must have had fourteen country bands. So, how long you got to speak for your candidate depended on how long it took the next band to hook up. [Laughter] I came back and wrote a memo to the governor that I had

spoken for him between “I Stopped Loving Her Today,” and “Can I Lean on You, Leona.” We lost that county, by the way. Another time I went up across the river to Conway to Toad Suck Daze. I went there with my five-minute speech all polished and ready with my suit and tie on. I got there and they said, “Pull off that coat, boy, get down here, you’re going to race a frog.” I was the only one down there with a tie on crawling around trying to gather frogs. But I went back and wrote a note to him saying, “If you have another job for me on my knees, I’d prefer if was to pray for you.” If my frog won, I’d get to come back Sunday for the finals, so I held the frog’s right leg and made him run at a forty-five degree angle before so I got disqualified. I said, “You know, I was raised in a little missionary Baptist church. There were a lot of things I still don’t understand theologically, but I know it’s wrong to race frogs on a Sunday.” [Laughs] I don’t know how you feel about this, but my Sunday school teacher would have been proud.

MP: You worked with Governor Clinton on religious matters?

PR: Yes.

MP: Could you describe what this entailed?

PR: Yes. It dealt with meeting with preachers and trying to convince them that he was not against them. I met with one group of seven preachers one day. This must have been early. They had just visited a preacher in Nebraska who spent Christmas in jail because he had a private school and the teachers were not certified by the state. In Nebraska, private school teachers had to be certified by the state. These preachers came in to make sure the governor wasn’t wanting to

put anybody in jail. They said, in effect, “If the parents want us to open a daycare center and want our church to take care of their kids, that’s none of his business.” The state law says that if you have so many kids you have to have so much space, [and] you’ve got to have shot records. They saw that as against the church. They made it clear they didn’t want to be against him. They didn’t want to stir up a lot of trouble or anything like that. He [Clinton] said, “What can we compromise on?” He appointed three or four of them to a committee with several other public people who ran daycare centers. They came up with an idea how they could live together. What they came up with was standards for church preschools, and if you could reach those standards you could be exempted. He said, “Yes, that would work.” They submitted it to the legislature. It ran through all the committees in both houses and was passed in just a matter of days. He signed it. Two weeks later we were in court. We were searching for the truth, and the judges decided what would be the truth in that case because his decision would be the law.

MP: This might be uncomfortable, but much has been made that Governor Clinton and President Clinton’s professions of faith were disingenuous. Can you speak to that?

PR: Yes, I can speak my opinion of that. I have been with him in different kinds of churches in different situations. I saw him [doing] what I considered to be worshiping as true and as honest as anyone I have ever known. Now, whether that was true, how can you tell? I know that when he came into office he, in effect, laid out these things which said, “These will be better for Arkansas.” And

he got some of them kicked out. He would lose some and bring them back the second year. He did what he said he would do. He took criticism, but he did what he said he was going to do. That, combined with what I saw as worship tells me he was genuine; however, it's not [impossible] to separate parts of our lives from religion, and he may have done that in some cases. I've done that in some cases, you know. [Laughs]

MP: Is there anything else in the gubernatorial years that you care to comment on? Things I've missed?

PR: Has anybody talked to you about the days at the mansion for school honor students?

MP: No, they haven't. I didn't read about it in your section of Ernie Dumas's book.

PR: The last thing—was one of my highlights because Mary always worked with me and my son.

MP: Mary's your wife?

PR: Yes. We did the registration at the front desk, each one of us. We would have 400 to 450 [students]. A lot of schools would send two people. Sometimes we would have five tied for valedictorian and they'd all come and their families would come. We'd have 800 to 900 people on a Saturday afternoon. They would come in and stand in line patiently—amazing to me—for an hour to have a picture made with Hillary and Bill. Then they would go into the backyard where a band would be playing, and they would just have a great time. I thought, first of all, it was a great day for education. And everyone, every family there, got a picture and a story sent to their home newspaper. It was great politics. It was

also [a] great, genuine improvement of education relationship. To me, it was one of the great days because I felt useful that day helping people around.

MP: Did some of those people fake fainting just to get to the head of the line?

PR: [Laughs] I don't know. The awful thing I remember is—this would be in May and there were few Saturdays in May when we would go without rain. So we'd get caught in a thunderstorm every once in awhile. I remember one day it was really starting to rain hard. We'd have 500, 600, 700, 800 people [standing outside in the rain]. We started looking [at] how we could get around inside. We must have had—I don't know—up to 100 people in that line inside the next room and the door was shut. They assumed they were going through that door, but it was shut. There was another line going the other way, so they were in that room for an hour or more. It had to be hot. There were times like that that we really worked hard to keep people comfortable, but it wasn't really possible that day. Those were great days for me. Of course, I saw so many of the people that I had been visiting all over the state— [they] would show up on those days. And it was really just a great, enjoyable thing. It was just amazing.

MP: Were they as enthusiastic as the last?

PR: Oh, yes. They were tired, you could tell. But we were the last. Those of us who had worked. Yes, they were still okay, but they were about ready to wind it up, you know.

MP: Did you work in the governor's administration in 1993?

PR: No, I left in 1987. I had worked in the governor's office trying to help people understand and pass the standards, not fight them. And in 1987 the standards

really became real, so it didn't make sense for me from the governor's office to be down there talking to him about standards that were already issued. I moved to the Department of Education. I did that for another two years trying—not that the standards are passed—you've got to pass them. You've got to do everything—let's work at getting them done instead of lowering them.

MP: How much contact did you have with President and Mrs. Clinton after you left the governor's office?

PR: Not very much. Not very much. I would see him out in the field. If there was something I wanted to see him about, I never went to his office. I found out what his schedule was and went somewhere where he was going to be and he would always stay and we'd talk. That's the only way I could reach him once I got out of the loop and things were moving faster as he was moving towards running for president in [1992]. After he actually got into the presidential race, I lost him. I saw him, but I didn't talk to him during the entire race because I was in the process of trying to get my education department and graduate school accredited. We were both busy.

MP: Did you have much contact with Clinton when he was president?

PR: Yes. We met several times. We were working on a project where we would have a meeting in Washington [DC], probably annually. We would go see him every time. Now, we didn't see Hillary as much. We'd see her only when she'd come back to Arkansas for something. But we would see him every time we went to Washington—you know, just a minute, not a long visit. We'd go up to his Saturday morning radio show every time we went to Washington. After that, we

would have a few minutes to visit with him. But we didn't have [much contact] during that period of time. I wrote to him once a month and he always answered.

MP: What would you write to him about?

PR: I encouraged him. When things were going well, I didn't bother, I didn't write. When he was having some big trouble, criticism, I would write. I would always end saying, "Keep doing what you're doing," and that "I believe you are on the right track." So, I wrote letters to encourage him, and he would always write back, "Thanks." I talked to him—he called me six weeks ago on a Saturday morning.

[Tape Stopped]

PR: During the teacher test period, Don Ernst and I received all the calls. We looked at teachers who didn't bother calling until they were really mad. It wasn't really easy duty for a long period of time. I will never forget one day a teacher came to my office. The man was bright, looked middle-aged, looked nice looking, [and] he was well dressed. He seemed to me just a good teacher in how you would judge a teacher. He asked me to ask Clinton [not to implement] that test. He was crying. It was that way day after day—well, not every day, but, you know, [it was a] pretty serious situation for teachers. One of my jobs for a year was to go out to schools. They wanted to know why we would do that. My first assignment was in northwest Arkansas—a real good, wealthy school. The first person on the program was the assistant superintendent. This woman said it would cost \$90,000 extra for the programs to continue, and they wouldn't get any extra money

because they had one of the wealthiest districts. She said, “Here’s the man from the governor’s office who will explain all this.” There were teachers in that school at that time teaching six classes, five days a week and making \$19,000 a year. That was a wealthy school. There were teachers in another school south of here who were teaching the same number of classes. They were making \$9,500. This is what we have in Arkansas. We want every teacher, every student in Arkansas to have the same opportunity. They were real nice to me. They accepted it. Then I went to another school closer to Little Rock, a rural school. One of the teachers—right in the middle of my presentation—turned mean. She just got up and started yelling at me. I just backed up and was real quiet for just a minute. And the other teachers started picking up my message and telling her what’s going to happen. “It’s hard now, but it’s going to get better.” The teachers told me she was crying as she was talking. She said, “I have a student [with] [Down’s] Syndrome and I have worked hard trying to help that student. Her mother came in today and said to me, ‘I hope you failed the test.’” So we saw situations like that where teachers were really under great pressure, unfairly—you know, because of their relationship with parents or other situations. So we just kept repeating how it was going to be better. “We know you’re going through hard times and we feel for you. It just needs to be done.”

[Tape Stopped]

MP: Do you have any stories about what it was like to meet people with Clinton?

PR: Yes. I met with him in an early morning press meeting down in western Arkansas to meet with a group of deer hunters. They were upset because the game and fish

commission had published a rule that said they couldn't run dogs in the December deer season in that area. They said they knew more about the area—what needed to be done there—than the game and fish commission. They wanted the governor to get that changed. He explained he couldn't do that himself. He didn't have power over them [the game and fish commission], although he appointed them. They were independent. They weren't interested in hearing that; they just wanted the rules changed. And at that time, many of them were stomping around and talking pretty loud and kind of rough. When we got back into the car I said, "Bill, I don't see how you put up with that." And he said, "You've got to understand this is a political issue here. That's the only one they have right now." And he said, "I come out here every two years to ask for their vote. They have a right to ask me to work for them when I go back because they're never going to Little Rock to stand up in a big auditorium and tell the media session what they think. They expect me to do that for them. So that's their right."

MP: When Clinton traveled, did he have state troopers or body guards?

PR: One state trooper as a driver and one of us. [Laughs] That's one of the things that just amazed people that came to visit. They could wander—they could walk by his office and be right next to his office, but they never saw anybody in uniform. There was a trooper there, behind the door next to the room—somebody they could call after the funeral. [Laughter] Probably not anybody to really be in the way or keep you away. And they had security guards there that worked in the building that people could call if they had problems. They were really nice. A man came in one morning with a fiddle case. He was just wandering all over the

place. No one knew what was in that case. Finally, someone got the nerve to call security and they found [the owner of the case] and made him open the case. And he had a fiddle in it. [Laughs] He left then. About two hours later, he came back. And I thought, “What a great plan. Now he’s got a gun in there.”

[Laughter] But he had a fiddle in there. I don’t know if he wanted to praise the guy who wanted to know what he was doing in there, but he was just wandering around.

MP: There are a lot of stories about Clinton speaking to people. Could you relate?

PR: Yes.

MP: Was that more of a problem, or was it . . . ?

PR: Yes, it was. I remember once when we were with him at a meeting in Little Rock talking to a large group. He had one habit that I thought was absolutely great, and great for him as a politician, but it messed up the schedule. When a meeting was over, he would not leave until everybody who wanted to talk to him talked to him. He’d talk personally with two, three people after a meeting was over. Well, the schedule is to have him leave in the car five minutes after the meeting was over. So he was always late to the next meeting. At the end of a full day, he’d be quite late according to the way he was scheduled. But it was because he was talking to everybody there who had a personal problem related to the governor. I remember that day we were late getting to Pine Bluff for the opening of their mall. He was to be on the radio with them and they were having the opening. We were rushing as we were driving in. [Laughs] And they were already started. They said—they went on the air saying the governor was to be on directly. So there were times

like that when it was kind of aggravating, but it was aggravating for a good reason. You know, as you can tell, I'm having some trouble finding very much wrong with Clinton. I really thought so much of him. And he's done so much for Arkansas. I told him his first year working with him, "You know, you normally study in world history that if the new king makes too many changes in his first year, then at the beginning of his second he's beheaded." He said, "Yes, I understand that but we only have until the next election." So it had all been heard. Some people would say, "Too much of a hurry. He introduced too many things at one time." I remember one day hearing the Department of Education director say, "I've got seventy new programs I'm trying to implement right now."

[Laughs] He made it difficult on a lot of people because he was in a hurry.

MP: Anything else you care to talk about? We haven't talked about working with Hillary.

PR: Well, the only thing I did with Hillary is I substituted for her some as a speaker when she would have more things than she could do related to education. She would ask me to talk. One thing I have to say about Hillary—one day there was an out-of-state convention downtown in a hotel, and the governor sent me down there to greet them from the governor's office. I really worked on my five-minute speech—a five-minute greeting. I had it right there where I could read it if I needed to. And Hillary was the speaker. She got up and spoke [for] forty-five minutes without reading a note of any kind.

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]

[Beginning of Tape 2, Side 1]

PR: The first year I had never been in the governor's office. I had never been in the capitol building when the legislature was in session before my first day at work. The thing that amazed me more than anything that I can remember from the governor's office, was the early morning news we had. We would meet at 7:15 each morning. Each person working in a certain area for the governor would be [there]. He would ask each of them what was up [that] day on the agenda. Was there something to be aware of, something that was going to pass, or something we didn't want to pass? What about that? We'd come to education. I would talk about bills that were up and if some of them had a voting before, then I would tell them how many votes it got. We would talk about the bills that might pass that day, and if that was all right with us, or if we needed to do something about them. Then we would go through all of that. I would talk about small schools mostly—how they would react to each bill, who would be against it. Don Ernst would come in and talk about mainly the AEA [Arkansas Education Association]—whether they would be for or against the bill and who'd be hurt if the bill passed, who'd be helped if it passed. Where did the administrations stand and the school board people? Then Clinton would take all this and talk to us about the implications of each bill in terms of money. He'd talk finance to us for a few minutes. We'd suddenly know a lot more about the bill than we did when we started. I was amazed about how much he would know about each [bill]. Then the next thing would be business and insurance matters. The next thing would be city and local government. The next thing would be social security or some such thing. There would be a long list of ideas and programs and each one of us would

go through our own part, and then he would go through each one. He would know who was against it, who was pushing for passing, [and] what needed to be done to push one through. He'd go through the whole morning—hour and a half, two hours like that. Committee after committee, bill after bill, he was working with up to a 150 bills a day. He would know what was in each one of them. He would know whether they were good or bad for us, or for the state, who was against them, for them, all of this. I just thought I really had trouble keeping up with the education bill. He was looking at over the period of a legislative session of about 1,500 bills. I couldn't imagine anybody having that much knowledge [of] those problems—bring it back out, probably, [laughs] and how he would categorize things like when he spoke to [Root]. Somebody would ask him a question and it would have three parts. He would say, "I want to talk about the third part first." He said, "One—," and then he would talk about that. "Two—," "Three—," and he'd have five points about that, and then he would say, "Now let me talk about the first part of that question." How in the world anybody could keep information separated and categorized that way and bring it out like that was amazing to me.

MP: It seems like you were right on his staff.

PR: I think that is true, to a great extent. I know I prepared notes for him a lot of times when he was going places, but I never made any attempts to write a speech. All I did was I said, "There were so many people—" "This is their concern . . ." "This is a possibility that they might want to talk about—" I would write if he was going to speak for a graduation at a high school. I would always call the

principal and talk to them before and get down some information about the specifics of the school, and about the valedictorian, and the salutatorian. I would take notes when the valedictorian and the salutatorian spoke. We'd go back out and I would write a letter of congratulations to those kids and he would sign them and mail them. There are a bunch of people—that letter is hanging on their wall that they are really proud of. As long as they are hanging, then Clinton's got a vote. He did so many things, and those of us helping did a lot of things to help him.

MP: In the governor's office, what role did Betsey Wright play?

PR: She was the chief. I'll give you an example of what happened in my case once. I always wrote the most scripted jokes for the parties we had. You know, I would write little skits to different people. One day I wrote some pretty strong negative things about a fellow Democrat who wasn't running at the time, but he was always on the air. She said, "We may get to explain these to him next fall when he runs again." She would watch closely over anything that would give Clinton any problems in the next election or any negative publicity. She read, I think, every memo that went to Clinton through her because when I would go on trips with him, he would be reading those memos and checking them off. They all had notes from her to him. I think she knew everything that went out of there. She worked from about 5:30 in the morning till 8:30 at night every day, forever. She absolutely dedicated her life to that job. She did a tremendous lot of things that I thought were really good—were morally good things that a lot of legislators didn't like because she was too high-handed. She decided [whether] to take it to

the governor or not, and things like that. There were some people who thought of her as negative, but I never had a negative experience with her. She was tough. One of the legislators called me and said, "Can you get me in to see the governor?" and I said I would try. So I called the [scheduler] and she scheduled him in. I got a call from Betsey after awhile, and she said, "I see this guy is on the schedule. The governor doesn't have time to see him. So just tell him he is not on the schedule." [Laughs] She was quick to jump on things and she saw problems very quickly. She was sharp a lot of times. We were, I think, good friends. She didn't want the staff members giving information to the press. She wanted that to come through the press person. I found myself in a situation. I was in Springdale or Fayetteville. We were in a meeting talking about tax standards and this and that. The TV people from that area came to me immediately after the meeting. They said, "Can I interview you?" I thought, "I'm not supposed to do this." "But," I thought, "If I say nothing then that doesn't really look good, so I'm going to do it." I did the interview. As soon it was over, I called the office and confessed. But there were certainly some staff members that she didn't want talking to everybody.

MP: Someone once described Betsey Wright as sort of like Clinton's big sister.

PR: Yes.

MP: Is that accurate?

PR: Yes. I think that's the way she saw it. I'm not sure that's the way he saw it.

[Laughter] There would be a lot of times [when] he was thinking about doing this or that and she would tell him, "No, you can't do that." She was strong as a

person giving advice. She is greatly responsible for his success in his early days.

MP: You were on the governor's staff from early 1983 to 1987. How did the dynamics of staff meetings and decision making—did it change over time?

PR: Yes. The more successful Clinton became as governor, and the closer he came to having an opportunity to run for president, the tighter it got in the office.

MP: What do you mean by tighter?

PR: I mean fear of making mistakes. But they were in the staff. I didn't hear anything like that from Clinton. Betsey was really more and more observant of everything that was said or written out of that office during that time because she saw the chance that he could be president. [She wanted] to make sure no one in her office fouled up and took that chance away. I agreed with that. I didn't have any argument with that at all. I may be overdoing that. I'm not sure that is exactly true, but I think it is.

MP: One of the things I wanted to ask you about was home school.

PR: Yes.

MP: Clinton signed a law allowing home schooling in Arkansas. Could you tell us some of his thinking—what supported his decision?

PR: First of all, let's go back to the basic notion that Clinton believed in freedom of discussion. People came to him about home schooling and that's something that he hadn't dealt with much, so he gave them to me, and they came to me to talk about home schooling, to get me to get him to approve and to support [making] home schooling legal. Well, I had been working for ten years in the desegregation program, so I saw home schooling as a way to escape

desegregation. I immediately was against it, but I worked with them and I listened to them and they talked about what all they could do with their children. As a teacher, I was aware that one parent well-prepared with one or two students four hours a day could teach more than a teacher with that same student in a class of thirty. So, first of all, it's hard to argue against [home schooling] from that standpoint. But I took the other side and I said, "Do you understand that there will be people who won't send their kids to school at all? There are people who simply won't get up to get them on the bus?" And they said, "That's not our concern. We are responsible people, and we want to be able to teach our own kids at home." It didn't affect my thinking at all. I knew they were just trying to get out of desegregation. We said, "We'll meet again. We'll talk some more in the next week or two." Then I got a call and I had another meeting just a day or two later. There was a couple, an elderly couple, and they brought their pastor with them. They were upper-middle class white folk, and the pastor was black. So I thought, "Wait a minute, this doesn't fit my pattern here." I talked to them a long time and it was the same thing: "We want responsibility." I had to back off the desegregation thing because it wasn't working out. Then a preacher came in a few days later from way up in the hills of Arkansas. He just had a small church of about twelve to fourteen people. He was home schooling his [children], too. I said, "You don't need a new law. All you have to do is form a school in your church." He said, "I'm not responsible for the kids in my church; I'm responsible for my own." He read me a scripture about raising up your kids, and he said, "I can't abandon that responsibility and I can't take responsibility for their kids." I

was running out of arguments. [Laughs] The first thing I found out was fourteen other states already had home schooling, or maybe it was only fourteen who didn't have it. Something like that. Anyway, a lot of states had made home schooling legal. Most of them required a teacher certificate for parents. We weren't going to require anything like that because private schools in Arkansas don't require certified teachers and private schools in Arkansas don't require [certifications]. Now the only thing left was that, first of all, they notified their local schools that they were going to home school, and at the end of the year they [the children] would take the same test—a test that the local kids took. Well, there were a little over 400 [home school students] that year. Today there are over 6,000. There was a day in the Department of Education where the home schoolers brought in kids—kids maybe from eight [years old] to fourteen—to make presentations to the Department of Education, and they were sharp. Man, they were sharp. I was standing next to a preacher that I had been dealing with and I said, “Man, how, as a preacher, can you consider taking this kind of influence out of public schools?” And he said, “They won't let us pray.” But home schooling has nationally turned into a major thing, and I thought, at first, it was to turn away from desegregation. Maybe a lot of it was, but most of it was not. A major part of it is religion. Every time there's a story about public schools you hear people say, “I don't hear any students praying.”

MP: Any other education [issue] that I have forgotten about? I think—I'm looking at my notes—I think we have covered just about everything. Again, anything you want to ask?

PR: I can't think of anything else. Can I take a minute?

MP: Sure.

PR: When Don Ernst had just left the governor's office [and went] to the University of Washington to work on an education project and to work on his doctorate, he left things to me that were on his desk that he hadn't answered. One of the them was an invitation from Washington, [DC] from the secretary of education under [President Ronald] Reagan to come to a rural education conference in Washington. The people who were running that were from Ohio State [University]. What they wanted was somebody from the governor's office, somebody from the education department, and several rural school superintendents all together in a meeting. I suggested that we do that, and Clinton gave me the okay to organize it. I got a couple of women that I had worked with in the Department of Education, and I found a couple of superintendents that were willing to go. Now, everyone had to pay their own way. So we took several superintendents and two people from the Department of Education. I sent the form in that we would be coming. A week later I got a call from Ohio State, from the guy who was putting the program together. He said, "We had originally scheduled for the last day of the conference and he [President Ronald Reagan] has just canceled on us." I hung up and got hold of Betsey, and then we looked at the schedule and called Clinton. Two hours later I called him back and said, "He'll be there." They were really pleased with that. We went up on Sunday night and the other people from Arkansas went up. We started the program on a Sunday night. The first three days every teacher was about sixty-two-and-a-half years

old. He had been raised in a rural area, attended a small rural school, but hadn't seen one for about forty years, so he just talked about the good old days and how great it was back there in that rural school. Then late about Wednesday of that week they had a couple of people in who really study rural schools today, not yesterday, and talked about the problems they had and those kinds of things. Every day at 5:00 [p.m.] I called the governor's office, and I gave her [Betsey] a list of topics that had been discussed that day—what people were saying about them, who said it, and what was in our standards to deal with that. She took notes and everything and gave them to Clinton. He came up on Thursday at noon. He went through the entire week-long program talking about problems that had been identified by people earlier in the week and then gave the answer to what we were doing in Arkansas. He left there with a standing ovation. People gathered around me and said, "When can we vote for him?" [Laughs] They were already thinking he would be a responsible president. Another thing I didn't mention here before is I attended a lot of out-of-state meetings in Little Rock. People from out-of-state coming to conventions in Little Rock where Clinton would speak. He got greater ovations always from out-of-state people than he did from in-state people. [Laughter] In state—there were always those who opposed him, and then those who were like, "I don't know what to think," because he was changing so much [in Arkansas]. He carried about—this is from memory, not research—I recall he carried about [a] thirty-seven percent negative rating during the time he was doing the most work. People were thinking about running against him and they [would] take a poll and it would say a thirty-seven percent negative. They would say,

“Man, all I have to get is fourteen percent and I’m in.” Then they’d spend all the money they had and all they could find and work hard day and night for a year and they’d get thirty-seven percent of the vote. It was divided always. There were those who were against him and those who were for him. The ones who were in the middle he could always convince.

MP: I think it was like that in his presidency.

PR: Yes.

MP: High positive, high negative.

PR: Right. I think so. It was the most interesting part of my life. It may not be the most important in the things I tried to do in education. It was the longest hours [laughs] and the hardest work, but the most enjoyable, I think.

MP: Were you disappointed that he didn’t run for president in 1988?

PR: Yes. Although I hadn’t gotten into that top three, four, or five people who were making decisions and suggestions. I hadn’t thought through that he might be ready, but the night before he made the decision not to run, it was understood by everyone on his staff that he was running. The next morning we all got in and Betsey called a staff meeting. She said, “The governor has decided not to run for president.” And she just stopped. It was just quiet. She said, “Isn’t anyone else disappointed?” And I said, “Well, I certainly am because I promised my uncle in Florida a job in the White House.” [Laughter] Then people started laughing and talking about it. I think everyone was disappointed, but I’m not sure that everyone was as confident as they were in 1992 that he could win at that time. I think most of it was about the belief of the world just didn’t believe a governor

from Arkansas could become president. I know, when he called us at a meeting, that he was seriously thinking about running.

MP: When was this?

PR: This was—when did he announce—it was in the summer before he announced.

MP: He announced, I think, late spring 1991.

PR: Well, I guess it was a little earlier in the spring then because we had a meeting in Little Rock—all his people coming together. He said he had been getting so many requests and so much money that he was thinking seriously that he would run. He was answering the question, “Why I would run, although I promised I was going to do four years in the governor’s office,” and he wanted to explain that to his regulars first, I guess. There were people in that group that day saying, “Oh, I hope he doesn’t run,” because they thought he would lose and it would be crushing to him. They could not see somebody from Arkansas becoming president. You know, I had been to so many of those meetings with so many people from all over the country that I said, “I believe he could win.” I had outlined, starting one day when we were just arguing, “things you can’t do” to win an election. One of them was adultery and the other one was anything related to truth. He was accused of both of them during that first campaign. I didn’t think he could come out of that after those accusations hit in New Hampshire. I thought it was lost then. But I wasn’t involved then so I wasn’t there to see if he was pushing on or—I was just looking at it from a distance.

MP: Reading the same newspapers as the rest of the people.

PR: Yes.

MP: Do you have an overall assessment of Bill Clinton?

PR: No. Yes. He's a—he's what the right-winged family would call a "secular humanist," but that doesn't mean he can't be a Christian. One of the things that struck me on one of my last trips to Washington was he had just come back from Japan from a funeral—who was it? I don't know, but it was a high-flashed official and he was in attendance. He just had a moment telling me about the funeral, how beautiful the funeral was of that person.

MP: The prime minister?

PR: Yes. Now, a right-winged Baptist wouldn't enjoy a funeral like that I don't believe. But he sort of saw [it] as [being] full of respect, full of compassion, full of—you know. I believe he's a Baptist as I am, as many others are. But he's a Baptist of a much broader religion than anybody else I know. I see him as one of the most caring people I've ever known. I think he cares about people out there that he will never know and he worries about hurting people while trying to help other people. I just don't know, you know—I'd rather he hadn't done some of the things he apparently did, and I didn't believe it until he confessed. I just wasn't ready to believe that. I wrote him a letter one day after he was trying to do some things about desegregation and that at the national level. I said, "Lincoln did all that he could do at that time. I see you as an extension of the things he started."

MP: Thank you very much.

PR: It was good for me. It was enjoyable, and I'm just pleased to be chosen to do this.

[End of Interview]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]