

Event Transcript

Political Animals Club of Little Rock

Thomas F. "Mack" McLarty III

August 9, 2007

[00:00:00]

[Introductory music plays]

[Conversations in background]

Steve Ronnel: We have a very special person here today. I can't call her a guest because, frankly, we're all guests in her home. Ladies and gentlemen, please help welcome the First Lady of Arkansas, Ginger Beebe.

[*Applause*]

Ginger Beebe: Oh, thank you. [*Applause*] Thank you. Thank you. You're not really a guest in my home. This is your home. This Governor's Mansion belongs to the people of Arkansas. And Mike and I have the privilege of being able to live here for the next four years. As I say, welcome to all of you. I also want

to say welcome to David and Barbara Pryor, welcome home. Recently in the news, there was some stories about how we had lowered the fees here to groups that were using the Mansion. We'd had a lot of phone calls and some criticism about that. We lowered the fees so that groups like the Alzheimer's Group, the Rice Depot, Domestic Violence, that they could use the Mansion for their functions. And one of the things that Mike and I decided when we moved into this historic landmark was this was the home of the people, and the people needed to use this home. This is not only the Mansion, home for the family, but it's for the people of Arkansas. And the Huckabees did a wonderful job in seeking the funds to build this great hall, so you all could come here and enjoy it. So, since we've been here and since we're seeing a few things going on here for good, I think this is where I get to do a sales pitch, and that's really why I asked to come up here. As you know, there's an association who raises funds. And this year they have taken on a project of putting together an arts calendar book, and the proceeds

from that book will go into a fund, so that we can purchase some pieces of art that will become permanent works of art for the Governor's Mansion. And I want to show you a little bit. Now this is a book from another state, and I don't even want to mention what state, but it's a book like this, and as you will see, there's art, oh, and then there's a calendar page on it. There are 88 artists who are represented in this book. They are all Arkansas artists that have been chosen from outside of the state artists. We had 277, I think it was, Arkansas artists who submitted their work, only 88 could be chosen. We are so fortunate in our state to have so many talents. So this is my pitch for selling this book. It's being printed right now. It's \$20. It's \$25 if you want us to ship it to you, but what a great way to showcase the many talents that we have in our state and also be able to put some permanent works of art in the Governor's Mansion. I want you to look around while you're here. Mike and I have tried to include a lot of the talented people of Arkansas, their work in here, not only what's on

canvas but whether it's wood, glass, pottery, bronze. Also you will notice the gardens. And I know the last time you were here, it was more of a muddy mess out there, but now you can see in this area, the Parterre Garden, it's almost near completion. And it's going to be another area of the Mansion grounds that we can entertain. So again, I want to say welcome. Thank you for choosing the Governor's Mansion for your event. And we look so forward to hearing Mack speak to us. Thank you.

[Applause]

SR: I'd like to thank everyone who contributed on your way in to help offset the cost of videotaping and preserving this meeting for the archives and the Special Collection at the University of Arkansas Libraries. It's called the David and Barbara Pryor Center on Oral and Visual History. Today's meeting and our conversation with Mack McLarty will be preserved for students, historians, and the general public to enjoy for years and years to come. It's a fantastic, fantastic program that the Pryors envisioned and have now created and brought to fruition. If you did not make a donation, it costs about \$2500 to have this videotaped in high definition. If you'd like to make a

contribution, please stop by the sign-in table on your way out, and I thank you in advance for your contribution. I'd like to ask former senator David Pryor to please come up and make some comments about the Pryor Center and to introduce our guest.

Senator Pryor. [*Applause*]

David Pryor: Thank you, Steve. [*Applause*] Thank you, Steve. About, gosh, it was almost 10 years ago when Barbara and I were leaving Washington and moving back to Little Rock. Senator Russell Long asked us to come to Louisiana to LSU to, for the event as he would, as they call it, open his official papers. And we went to the Old State Capitol. I was one of the speakers there that day at the luncheon, a huge crowd. We toured the LSU libraries, and we became very, very inspired by what LSU had been doing with preserving oral histories, not visual but oral histories. Most of those oral histories had been done about the Long family because they had dominated Louisiana politics for so long. And I've always been absolutely fascinated not only with the Long family but with Louisiana politics. In fact, one little Russell Long story, it used to be very prevalent in Washington,

Mack remembers this, one day someone gave Russell Long a \$5,000 campaign contribution. A very, very wealthy man. Russell looked down at the campaign contribution of \$5,000, which in Arkansas's a lot. Louisiana may not be quite as much or doesn't go as far, let's say. And Russell Long looked down at this check for \$5,000, and he handed it back to the donor, [*unclear word*] and he said, "I'm sorry, I can't take this check." And the man says, "Senator Long, why is that?" Said, "We want to support you in your reelection." He said, "This is tainted money." The man says, "Tainted money. What do you mean?" He said, "It t'ain't enough." [*Laughter*] And so that might be a guide for some of you folks running for office out here today. I noticed several of you were introduced. But Barbara and I were driving back to Little Rock from Baton Rouge, and we got to thinking about some of our old campaign funds that were still languishing in one of the local banks. And we said, "What effective use can we put to these funds?" And we decided before we hit the city limits of Little Rock that a good thing to do was to attempt to find some

way to begin preserving the authentic voices of Arkansas. That for some reason other, we had not done that. And so we gave roughly about two hundred and twenty or so thousand dollars to the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. It went to the history department. It is now located in the library, under the library system. And now that Don Tyson and his family have recently come forward with a wonderful gift of two million dollars, we are kicking this thing off full steam. And it's embarrassing, but they've named it for Barbara Pryor and David Pryor. And don't let that impede your giving. *[Laughter]* In fact, I hope that will help in some way. But we're going to record the authentic voices of Arkansas. We've already started. And we have today three people, we have Kris Katrosh, who was with the Dempsey Group and here in Little Rock for a long time. He is the director. We have Scott Lunsford, who is helping us today, who is associated with the Pryor Center for Oral and Visual History. And we have Trey Marley. Trey Marley is a wonderful artist in his own right with his camera. And we are now

beginning to record and to transcribe and to film the authentic voices of Arkansas. One, let me tell you about just one. Y'all all know Frank Thomas, his father is Floyd Thomas Sr. down in El Dorado. Very few of you might know that Floyd Thomas was picked out of the entire FBI contingency when he was 29 years old to infiltrate the Ku Klux Klan in Louisiana, Arkansas, and Mississippi, and east Texas. He became a Klansman, and for four or five years, he went to the Klan's meetings. And, of course, he was the informant for the FBI. We have Frank Thomas's story on tape now. And I can tell you, it could be a national documentary. It is wonderful, it is moving, it is real, and above all, it is authentic. We're going to try to come to every neighborhood and every county eventually with this program. Hopefully, someday we'll have something like a bookmobile, but in that bookmobile won't be books. It'll be a film crew. It'll be cameras. It'll be audio equipment. Where people in Lonoke and Mount Ida and Camden and Magnolia and El Dorado and Horatio and wherever can walk into a booth, into a

portable or a traveling booth, and tell their life story. And we think that this is a wonderful way to preserve and wind the social fabric of our state together. So you're gonna be hearing a lot about our center. We're so proud that they would come from Fayetteville today to film our very distinguished guest as he makes his presentation. Finally, I have been asked by Steve Ronnel if I, by the way, I have jetlag, I was in Honolulu until yesterday, so I'm a little mixed up, but I have been asked to present our program today, and they don't need a introduction, but I would like to present them. I'd like to say a word first about Steve. When he took over the Political Animals, I didn't think it could get any better, but I can tell you he has recruited so many people. He has expanded, and he is carrying on in the same tradition that his predecessors did. In fact, we're making it better. We want to thank the First Family [*applause*] for having us here today at the Governor's Mansion. It doesn't get any better than this. It just doesn't get any better than this. So to Steve Ronnel and your young presidency of the

Political Animals Club, and by the way, there's nothing like the Political Animals Club in any other state. We have a chapter in Fayetteville and a chapter in Jonesboro, I believe, and Fort Smith perhaps, but it does, this is a very unique gathering and wonderful to bring, a thing to bring us all together once a month. Steve, thank you for being a wonderful president. Thank you for your vision and your commitment of the time that you expend in putting these programs together. His guest and our guest today is Mack McLarty. I met Mack when he was 12 years old. He was at that time, aspiring to become a Hope Bobcat. He became not only a Hope Bobcat, but he was the Captain of the Hope Bobcat team. Before long, he was not only a student at the University of Arkansas, he was such a renowned student and such a personable individual on campus he became president of the student body. At 23 years of age, Mack McLarty became the youngest member of the Arkansas General Assembly. When he was leaving the General Assembly, I came to Mack one afternoon, and I said, "Mack, I want you to

be the new chairman of the Democratic Party in Arkansas." I was just going into the Governor's office, about to move into this smaller building right over there, and I said, "We hope that you will be our chairman of the State Democratic Party." He said, "No, I can't do it. I'm taking a recess from politics for a while. I have a family to raise. I have businesses to establish. I'm going to take a leave of absence from politics. I said, "Mack, I'm sorry, you're too late. I just announced to the press [*laughter*] that you're going to be the chairman." And he did it, and he did a beautiful and wonderful job as he does with everything else. That tells you a lot about Mack McLarty. Mack McLarty eventually not only in establishing his well-known and very successful businesses, he became, of course, ultimately the president's chief of staff after he had served as the president of Arkansas Louisiana Gas Company. He went to Washington with his boyfriend, boyhood friend, Bill Clinton, and did a remarkable job in that position as chief of staff, then president of Kissinger McLarty. He is now, recently

the recipient of the State Department's highest honor, their Distinguished Service Award. But above all of these things, he and Donna are here tonight with Franklin, and let me just say to Mack personally, it would be so easy for you never to come back home to continue in your duties all over South America and Washington and New York and all over the country, but Mack and Donna never have forgotten Arkansas. They're here constantly. They just did a program at the Arts Center. Barbara was there yesterday. She said it's wonderful, and we hope that all of you can go to the Art Center and see the art exhibit that Mack and Donna are sponsoring there, which is in place at this time. We're honored, Mack, that you would come back home once again to be with the Political Animals Club, and to be among us once again. Mack McLarty and Steve Ronnel.

[Applause]

SR: Well, that was quite an introduction. Are we done now?

Thomas F. "Mack" McLarty III: I think we are. David Pryor just went through my entire life.

There's not much else left to say,

and this exploring my life, Steve,
I'm a little uneasy about that.

SR: Well, let me start by just saying welcome home to you and to Donna. It's always great to have you back in Arkansas, and I just want to open up the floor for you to just make any opening comments you'd like to make.

MM: Well, I'll be very brief, Steve. First of all it is great to be home, but it's even more meaningful and more special to see so many friends of long standing. And I'm already anxious about this conversation, but I will be even more anxious if I start to name anyone because there's just too many people here who have been too special and too unfailingly supportive. I do want to acknowledge Ginger Beebe for opening not only her and the governor's home, but indeed, the people of Arkansas's home to all of us and to Political Animals. So it's a great honor, a great privilege to be here with all of you. You know, there's nothing worse than a former White House official who pontificates about the past, and I will make every effort not to do too much of that today and respond as succinctly as I can to Steve, but suffice it to say, was a great privilege to serve, but it's even more special in so many ways to be back here, and of course, with Donna and Franklin, and I used to call Franklin my domestic policy advisor

when we were in the White House. He was a little more down to earth, shall we say, and linear than his brother, Mark, who was my foreign policy advisor, and I only wish Mark was here today, who's in China, that was a little too far. So, Steve, I'm delighted to be here. I'm honored to be here. David, you and Barbara have been special. I was indeed, Steve, sitting here in this Governor's Mansion. I had the rare opportunity at 12 years of age to meet two governors in Hope, Arkansas. Little did I know that I was meeting two future governors at the time. Francis Cherry, who was running for governor, had been on a Presbyterian Church Board with my father, and he had little support at that time in the state and came to Hope and wanted to see my father. And David Pryor was driving him around the state. Well, I was much more interested, as a twelve-year-old, playing football in our front yard with a Camden Panther all-district quarterback [*laughter*] than I was meeting any future governor. Little did I know I was meeting two future governors at one time. Dave and Barbara have been special, special friends, and, David, thank you for your very warm words but more importantly for your example and your friendship over the years, Barbara, you as well. Mr. Ronnel, reluctantly, the floor is yours. Now, I know Steve really, I was talking to Jennifer, really

wants to kind of use this as a launching point for the Bravo interviews, you know, with the actors and so forth, many of you may have seen that. So he hopes that this will be a pathway to that, where he can go on to future heights, but I'm not sure that will be the case.

SR: I don't think have the hair, the beard for it, but [*laughter*] Okay, Mack, let's dive right in. You're tenure in the White House was about five and a half to six years of a long, distinguished career in both politics and business. But let's rewind, let's go all the way back, and let's go down memory lane for a minute to Hope, Arkansas.

MM: All right. Special place.

SR: And, I have to ask you, you were born a baby boomer in the wake of World War II in Hope, Arkansas. Was there something special in the Kool Aid down there at that time? [*Laughter*] And just kind of explain to us what life was like in small town south Arkansas at the middle of the twentieth century.

MM: Well, it's easy to reminisce with great feeling and a great sense of gratitude. And there was something special, but not just in Hope, Arkansas, but in many other cities of its size. Some a bit larger that are represented in this room today. It was a wonderful time to grow up. It was kind of a Normal Rockwell

existence. And we hear a lot about sense of community, and indeed, there was that sense of community in Hope, Arkansas. That's not to say everything was perfect. It was not. Joe Purvis, I think, once commented that if you did something wrong, your mother knew about it before you got home. That was true but that also suggested there might have been some small town gossip as well. In those days, we did have segregation. And that was an issue, but having said that, there was a sense that both my parents and so many other people in Hope, and again, I think this could be said for so many other cities and towns in the state of Arkansas and the South and perhaps more broadly, but there was a sense of respect and recognition of the worth of each individual, and that was imparted to me. And I think it was imparted to President Clinton, Walter Smiley, and others. And that has stuck with me. My parents were unfailingly supportive but never pushed me to do anything. So it was a special place. We did have Friday Night Lights. That was an important part of high school, the football, I think I still lead the league in interceptions thrown as a quarterback during that period, but remember it fondly. We had great teachers, and they had a profound influence on me as well. But that sense of community, that sense of valuing each individual, if I had to take away one

point, that would be it, and I have said rather maudlin, but mean it, that my soul will always be in Hope. And as many of you know, we have our family home still there, which is special. We have tried to convince Mark and Franklin that that is the place to go at Christmas time when other people are going to Colorado to ski. That has gotten to be a little more difficult with each passing year.

SR: I'd actually heard of the David Pryor as a Camden Panther held the interception record until you came along. *[Laughter]* But, Mack, your family was in the automobile business. Tell us how you got, how your family got started in the car business.

MM: Well, not only have the Pryors and McLartys had a generational friendship, it really started in the automobile business because David and his family, Edgar Pryor, were in the Chevrolet business in Camden. We were in the Ford business in Hope. And my dad acquired that dealership in the 1950s, a typical greatest generation, World War II entrepreneur to buy a local business and build it. It's been a great tradition in our family. We're now a fourth generation in the automobile business with Franklin and with Mark, so it's been good to us. We're grateful for that. It's special. And my wonderful late father, who was bigger than life, was just right out of Hollywood casting as a

typical car guy, and my elegant and beautiful mother kind of smoothed those rough edges, [*laughter*] which he needed from time to time.

SR: Mack, you got interested in politics at a pretty young age. Can you remember, was there one individual or a speech you saw on television or a politician you met who kind of lit the fire in your belly that made you say, "Politics is something that I'm interested in and would like to be a part of?"

MM: I'm not sure, Steve, there was any one moment or one person. You know, our state has really been fortunate and, indeed, blessed as a small southern state to have a series of very aggressive and outstanding leaders, starting with Dale Bumpers, whom I had the privilege to work with in the legislature. Dale and Betty were always so thoughtful where Donna and I were concerned. David Pryor, Bill Clinton, and even going forward a bit more with, of course, Governor Huckabee from Hope. But Senator Fulbright, Senator McClellan, Chairman Mills, right down the line, Judge Fogleman, just on and on. We have had so many distinguished people in this state that it was easy to look up, respect and admire those people. And, of course, growing up in high school, it was the Camelot years of John F. Kennedy. And I will always remember as all of you in our generation will

remember as well, the principal at Hope High School calling me to the office as student council president to make the announcement on the loudspeaker that President Kennedy had been shot in Dallas. So it was that era that did inspire me. And I still think, I believe the statute of limitations has run, I think we had the most posters ever displayed in Hope High School because we broke into the school early in the morning to get the best spots in the high school. *[Laughter]* And I think I can still tell you those wonderful classmates that made those posters. I think I can still go down the list and tell you exactly how many posters they made to this day.

SR: Mack, you went to Boys State as a high school student representing Hope High School, and you were reunited with your childhood friend. Before we talk about that, I actually want to go back a little bit. You went to a rather famous kindergarten in Hope, Arkansas, Miss Mary's kindergarten class.

MM: It was.

SR: Bill Clinton was in that kindergarten class, was he not?

MM: He was, indeed.

SR: What do you remember about Bill Clinton as a boy?

MM: Well, he broke his leg in kindergarten, which has been reported as well. It was not my fault. *[Laughter]* I want to underscore

that. [*Laughter*] You know, you do have some memory of that time, and indeed, we have been lifelong friends, which has a special quality, more so every day. He was bright. He was curious. He was outgoing, easy to get along with. I don't think any of us quite predicted that he would be president of the United States from Miss Mary's kindergarten. [*Laughter*] We did stay in touch even when he moved to Hot Springs, and I do think the influence of his grandparents in Hope, when his mother was going to nursing school, I think he would see middle-class and other families with even lower incomes coming to their store and see their struggles, see their hopes, and I think that empathy that he is really famous for, I think those were formative days. But we did stay in touch, and we were reunited in Boys State. That's correct.

SR: So you went to Boys State. What happened there?

MM: Well, I campaigned pretty hard.

SR: You ran for governor. The rumor is that President Clinton did not run for governor because you had it locked up. Is that right?

MM: I think that may be a reconstruction of history. [*Laughter*] It was a great honor to run for governor of Boys State, and we did work hard. We were fortunate to win. President Clinton was elected to Boys Nation, which is the senatorial spot. And I had

the privilege to have a similar type experience with the Hearst Foundation Program, that was a separate program but very, very much the same, to go to Washington. Met my first president. President Johnson was in the State Department with Dean Rusk, and so forth, and that was a formative time. But it was a tremendous honor to serve as Governor of Boys State, and one that I'll always be grateful for.

SR: So you became governor, and Bill Clinton ran for Boys Nation delegate, went to Washington, and got that memorable photo with John Kennedy in the White House, didn't he?

MM: He did, indeed. It's been a famous photo, and when I was chosen for the Hearst Foundation, President Kennedy was still president, so it was real, a real sad day in more ways than one, when we lost him.

SR: So you picked up and moved on to the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, and as Senator Pryor's already stated, you ran for and were elected student body president. I would say that was second by a long shot to your greatest accomplishment.

MM: Yes, it was.

SR: That occurred at that time. That was, I would say, and I don't think this is a stretch, is the greatest accomplishment of your life, meeting a young, attractive woman from Texarkana by the

name Donna Kay Cochran. [*Laughter*] How did you and Donna meet, Mack?

MM: Keep going. Well, we, I have often said when I've been in northwest Arkansas [*unclear word*] that many of the good things in my life happened there with the opportunity for a wonderful education and the first time being exposed to large companies like Tyson's and Walmart and Hudson Foods and others that we later had the opportunity to do business with in our family business endeavor, but you're right. The most important accomplishment not only of that period but of my life was meeting Donna. We had a very, very romantic meeting. We met at a, I think, a Beta Gamma Sigma dinner, which was a business school honorary society, as I remember it. That's the first time we met, so I wish I could report something a little more colorful, but that's the truth. That's the truth, and she's been a wonderful partner and friend and advisor and a wonderful mother to both of our children, and that is the highlight for sure.

SR: I concur with all that. In fact, if the Grand Hall looks a little brighter here today, it's because Donna McLarty's in this room, and she has that effect on a lot of rooms she steps into. Mack, you and Donna were married on your birthday. [*MM laughs*] Is that right? Was that right out of college?

MM: We were. We married right as we graduated on June 14, my birthday, on Flag Day. So I'm reasonably good about remembering our anniversary. *[Laughter]*

SR: And you picked up and moved back to Hope to enter your family's automobile business and to start a run for office. Tell us about that campaign.

MM: Well, one quick PS on the student body president, and I would be remiss, you kind of know that when Bobby McDaniel was the key person that you went to when you ran for president of the student body and his son is now attorney general, and you had the privilege to work with then Governor David Pryor and his son is senator, you kind of know the torch has been passed.

[Laughter] But Bobby and so many others were great supporters, and a number of those people are here, and I still remember all of their help to this day. We did return to Hope. We had a family business that my dad had started not only in the automobile business but in the leasing business. And we kind of in a weak moment, as I remember it, Donna, decided to run for state representative, thinking no one else was going to run, and people in Hope were so supportive, and I had been involved in student politics, student government politics, and then all of a sudden with this formidable opponent who then got

in the race at the last hour, truly, it dawns on you at 23 that your life is passing before you. [Laughter] That if you are defeated in running for state representative in your hometown, this does not bode well for your future. So we worked exceedingly hard, campaigning in every house. Many of you have told, heard me tell the story. It's a true story. People were kinder and gentler in that time, and they would generally tell you they were going to vote for you whether they were or not. [Laughter] And so I got accustomed to hearing that. And I went up on this front porch, gravel road, outside of Hope, I said, "Sir, I'm Mack McLarty. I'm running for state representative." He said, "I know, I can't vote for you." It kind of took me back a little bit, and I said, "Well, sir, I appreciate your honesty." I kind of gathered myself. "Can you tell me why you can't support me?" He said, "Yes, son, for the last four miles, you've been campaigning in the wrong county." [Laughter] True story, absolutely true story. Donna went out to campaign the first day, came back so excited, she thought she had a great day. I asked, "Well, how many people did you see?" "I went to three homes today." [Laughter] I said, "Donna, you're going to have to kind of pick the pace up a little bit here." But she did, and later in the campaign, it was Cal Ledbetter was in the legislature

when we served, and many other people here were involved in that period of politics when Dale Bumpers had just come on the scene, but Donna started getting vegetables, and we even got a dog given to us during the campaign, and we won that race going away, and it was important. Senator Pryor's memory is not fading. He's got it mostly right that we did serve, but our business was growing. We had our first son, Mark, and I really did step out of politics 'cause I was driving from Hope to Little Rock almost every day as we started our business here, and they were just doing the interstate, I-40, and I would leave about six in the morning, and I'd wave to the workmen as I would get on the interstate that was completed, but they hadn't opened it up yet for traffic, and I'd wave at them in the morning, and then I'd come back in the afternoon, and I'd wave at them again. And this one fellow, you could kind of see, "who is this crazy fellow driving back and forth from Little Rock to Hope?" So we stepped out of politics, and then David Pryor ran for Governor, and kind of the rest is history, as they say.

SR: Well, I wish I had a nickel for every person who's come up to me in the last 10 to 15 years to say, "I sure wish Mack McLarty would have run for higher office." That election would be your first and last election to public office but certainly not an end of a

distinguished public service career. But it was really a crossroads in your life, Mack, was it not? And you made a decision to pursue business, and why, tell us why?

MM: Well, it just seemed like the natural path, and it is hard to serve two masters, and many of you have done that. Many of you, done it successfully, but I was, real deep feeling about our family business. I enjoyed it. I found a lot of satisfaction in what we were doing in building things and the people that were part of the organization that were dependent upon you. And once you kind of get committed, you don't have much choice but to move forward, and we owed a lot of money, and we had to pay it back.
[Laughter]

SR: Well, you stayed with your family business, but it didn't take long for you and Donna to get dragged to Little Rock. And at the age of 28, you were given a couple of really amazing opportunities to serve on corporate boards, Commercial National Bank at the age of 28, and ARKLA Gas. I can't imagine what I was doing at 28, but I wasn't serving on bank boards [laughter] and natural gas company boards. Most of us weren't. Tell us about the evolution of your career at ARKLA, that started from that board membership.

MM: Well, I was very fortunate to be given some opportunities with people like Bill Bowen at Commercial National Bank at that time, that was before it was First Commercial, who had a lot of confidence in me and maybe a lot more than he should have at that early age. And our family had known ARKLA and the company there for many years, so I was fortunate in that regard as well. Those were rare opportunities. It was before Sarbanes Oxley, so serving on boards was a little easier task back then. But you learned so much from people that were on those boards that were older, Herbert McAdams, and I could just go on and on and on of people that really were just great examples, so it was a tremendous opportunity, and I, again, will always be grateful for it. Of course, the Stephens family had been involved with ARKLA as, and then Sheffield Nelson, of course, had joined the company early and ascended to be president, co-president with Don Weir at Shreveport, who's a wonderful, wonderful man as well. But I remember, David, when you were running for governor, I was your campaign treasurer. And Pryor put out this edict that he was going to follow the national guidelines of not accepting more than \$1,000. So kind of like that Russell Long fellow, Witt Stephens sent us a check for \$5,000. So I sent \$4,000 back, adhering to the guidelines. And I think Mr.

Stephens called Dave and said, "David, I think you better talk to that young McLarty boy. You're not going to win the race doing this." [*Laughter*]

SR: Well, Mack, let's fast forward now to 1992, the year that changed the landscape of Arkansas political history forever. And I would venture to say that perhaps no one in the state of Arkansas more than you and Donna felt firsthand the impact of that change. Mack, when did you learn that you were going to be President Clinton's chief of staff?

MM: [*Laughs*] Well, it was a big change. I had been at ARKLA for almost a decade as we moved through a period of deregulation in the natural gas industry. Had had the privilege as French Hill and others know to serve on two Presidential Commissions appointed by George Bush 41, the National Petroleum Council and the Council of Environmental Quality, which I was very honored to do and think very warm and highly of President Bush to this day and will always appreciate his appointing me. Of course, I had been strongly supportive of a lifelong friend, and a home-state governor, and a fellow centrist Democrat. Bill Clinton and I had worked, you mentioned the Harold Ford speaking to help establish the Democratic Leadership Council, the New Democrat movement, the centrist movement from a

national standpoint. And Governor Clinton had visited with me right out on the patio here in the shade because the air conditioning was out in the Mansion, during the August period, about this time, about his thoughts of running for president. And of course, President Bush was almost at 90 percent after the first Gulf War. It looked very unlikely that he would win. But he got into that campaign, and I had the opportunity to offer my best thoughts along with many others on economic policy and other policy matters. And Donna and I both were strongly and appropriately supportive, and you know, all of a sudden he gained that momentum in the nomination and chose Al Gore in our neighboring state to be his running mate and kind of never looked back from there. But I had never worked, as many of you know, who I've been friends with for over the years I had never worked for Governor Bill Clinton. I had been his campaign treasurer following my time with David. I had been with him the night he was elected as a young governor, and the night he was defeated two years later, and that was a long drive from the campaign headquarters to the Camelot Hotel. It took about three minutes, and it seemed like it took three hours to get there. But I had never expected to serve. Franklin was a senior at Little Rock Central, and Mark was a sophomore at

Georgetown. Well, fast forward, of course, Governor Clinton won that election. It was a great night at the Old State House, as many of you remember, and we had a transition meeting the next day here, in the Mansion, which I attended. Warren Christopher was chairman of that group. And President-elect Clinton said, "I'd like to see you a little bit later in the day." And I said, "Well, we got this meeting this afternoon. Can I maybe come see you tonight?" He said, "That will be fine." So I came in the day after the election, the night after the election, congratulated him on his win, and he said, "Well, I want to talk to you. I'd like you to be chief of staff." And I really just took a deep, deep breath, and I said, "Well, I'm very honored, but let me think about that. There are a number of considerations. Why do you want me to serve in this position?" It obviously had been a lightning rod position and kind of deemed the "chief javelin catcher" by former chief of staff. And his explanation was pretty straightforward, that he wanted somebody he knew he could trust to help get things started. Be sure from a reality check he was seeing things properly and wanted a new Democrat, somebody in the same, had the same philosophy he did. So Donna and I had been at a natural gas meeting in Chicago about six weeks before the election, and there was a

couple there that said there was a home in Washington that we might want to consider. It looked like our Governor might win. We paid no attention, thinking there was no likelihood we would serve, nor did we aspire to. I went home that night, I said, "Donna, what was the name of that couple in Chicago? [Laughter] We need to call them." Well, we talked about it. Franklin assured us he would be just fine here living in our home by himself. [Laughter] And he's a great salesman like his grandfather, and he assured us he was going off to college. This was only a few more months later, and he just, we had no problems. And all I could think of, Steve, was Tom Cruise in *Risky Business*, [laughter] and so there were a lot of considerations. Eventually I did accept the post obviously. It was a great privilege but a demanding one to the say the least.

SR: Well, it, whatever you can tell us, we understand there are certain things you can't tell us. But you were at the president's side when he was getting his orientation as . . .

MM: Mh-hmm. Yeah.

SR: . . . you know, "Congratulations, you're president of the United States, and here's what you need to know."

MM: Yeah.

SR: You were there.

MM: Yeah.

SR: What can you tell us about that?

MM: Well, the transition period in our political system is a very, very accelerated one as all of you know. And you not only have to choose a cabinet, which we did in the Governor's Mansion here, 12, 14 hours a day with President-elect Clinton, Vice President-elect Gore, Bruce Lindsey, who many of you know, and Roy Neel, who was Al's chief of staff at the time. So you have a cabinet selection. You have White House selection. But again, the Republicans had held the White House for 12 years with Ronald Reagan and George Bush 41. So you had a tremendous transition to get a government in place and a tremendous challenge to do so. But, Steve, you're referring to the National Security Briefing, that every president receives the day before he or she takes office, at the Blair House, which is of course the living quarters, right across the street from the White House, where foreign heads of state stay when they make an official visit to Washington. And that's where Hillary Clinton and President-elect Clinton, of course, stayed before the inaugural. Colin Powell, General Powell was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and he came in that night to give us the National Security Briefing and to talk about the transfer of the football, which, of

course, is the nuclear code that the President or his National Security Advisor has. And this has been publicly reported, so I don't think I'm telling state secrets here, but I may be telling it with more personal feeling because the real point is when you get that briefing and you realize what a short period of time the president, secretary of defense have to respond to a national threat or a nuclear attack, it underscores that the first responsibility of any president of the United States is as commander in chief and the security and well being of the people of the United States. And that is a very sobering, solemn moment. And my real point is, all of you or certainly most of you remember, there are a few here I think that may be too young to remember, but not too many, the 1992 campaign was largely a domestic campaign. It was "the economy, stupid." Of course, after 9/11, the landscape has changed. National security has become personal security. But you could see instantly that security issues, foreign policy issues were going to take on the appropriate importance that they should for any president of the United States. So that was the night before the inaugural. You have all the festivities, and then the 18-to-20-hour days start, and you try to get a government in place. You try to get a legislative program, particularly a economic plan to the

congress, and you try to pass it. And, of course, then you have thousands upon thousands of people who work their hearts out to elect a president, either wanting to talk to the president personally or wanting to be appointing an ambassadorship to some point in the world. [Laughter] And that was kind of how some of our days went.

SR: Mack, there's not a single policy decision that a president of the United States makes without getting the advice of the chief of staff. What was the toughest decision you ever had to help President Clinton make?

MM: Well, Harry Truman had that great phrase, "the buck stops here," which means that there are no easy decisions that get to the Oval Office. They're all pretty difficult decisions. Some are clearer than others. I think one of the most important decisions we made was to get our economic plan developed, in place, fully understood, and fully communicated. I think without passing that plan as really the pillar of the Clinton presidency, I think that it would have been a different kind of presidency. And I'm not going to cite all the statistics, but we had a pretty good run at it. Even Alan Greenspan said it was an extraordinary time, and Alan's not given to overstatement. [Laughter] And, you know, there was a lot of factors that contributed to that,

including businesses large and small and hard-working men and women of our country. But I do think we had sound policies, and I assure you, if the economy had not gone well, we would have gotten the blame, so I think it's proper to take some of the credit. Steve, I think the hardest decision that I recall was when we made a decision to bomb Iraq for the first time. Many of you recall that there had been a assassination attempt, or at least it was felt that it was relatively certain there had a assassination attempt on President Bush 41 during a visit to Saudi Arabia, and we felt we had to respond. And it, somebody must have talked to Rob Reiner, who made the *American President* because Michael Douglas in that movie, some of the dialogue and script was pretty close to the discussions we had. It was not me, I assure you, but the real toughness of the decision was not whether it was the right thing to do because it was pretty clear it was. General Powell was still head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and we had an able security team, and it was pretty clear that's what we needed to do, and we had strong support from all of our allies. But you knew that if you bombed at midnight, which would result in the least amount of loss of life that, frankly, it was almost certainly that some innocent people would lose their lives. And that is a very, very difficult decision, so I think, you

know, while some of these policy decisions, some of these political decisions can seem to be very important at the moment, I think they pale in comparison with those kind of decisions.

SR: Much has been said, and written, and made over what the true legacy is of the Clinton years, but you were on the inside. What's your take?

MM: I think history will be pretty kind to President Clinton. I think it will begin with the first Democratic president reelected since Franklin Roosevelt, which is a feat in itself. I do think the prosperity of the United States' economy and the world economy will be part of that legacy. You know, almost every president, even with the advent of the Internet and Blackberries and cell phones and all of these modern technologies, if you look through history, every president, really, at the center of their platforms and goals has been prosperity and peace, those have been the two real cornerstones. And if you look at the time that President Clinton was in office, there was generally peace around the world. Bosnia, we were able to finally work through that. Haiti and other hot spots around the world. There, not to say it was all perfect, it was not. We certainly had prosperity here, and I think the welfare-to-work program that helped move millions of people from welfare to work was critically important. And for the

baby boomer generation, I think most of us had frankly accepted that we would always have a federal deficit. I think we had really come to feel that was just something we couldn't avoid, that the real issue was could we slow the growth of it. And I think the fact that we changed that momentum and were able to move to a surplus will be a real important point in the history books. I think the general philosophy, also, which I think is quite relevant now, we felt before we went to the first G7 in Japan, which was our first major foreign policy trip, that to be strong abroad, you had to be strong at home, which really went to the deficit and the health of our economy and the well being of our people. But four years later, we also felt that to remain strong at home, we had to remain and be engaged abroad. So the period, you know, circumstances of any president are dictated, or the tenure is dedicated by circumstances. It really was a time of change in terms of the interconnectedness of the global economy, in terms of the speed information and capital float around the world. And so I think President Clinton was well suited to deal with those issues. And I think the fact that we set up the National Economic Council, which some criticized early in the administration. Day one, Bob Rubin was the chair before he went to Treasury to help coordinate economic policy, that's kind

of a policy-wonk point, but it's an important one because you had to coordinate economic and foreign policy together because the two had merged. And so I think those will be some of the hallmarks. There'll certainly be some negatives there as there are with any president, but I think they will be put in perspective, and as I say, I think history will judge President Clinton's tenure kindly.

SR: We're bumping one o'clock, but we're goin' to go into about a 15-minute overtime. If anyone has work commitments, we certainly understand.

MM: Well, sounds like we're running on Clinton time to me. Go ahead.

SR: Absolutely, absolutely. Very, very fitting. Talk a little bit about the trappings of the White House that you and Donna may have gotten to enjoy, the flights on Air Force One, the trips to Camp David [*MM laughs*], the Secret Service interaction.

MM: Yeah.

SR: Any interesting stories from those times?

MM: Well, real quickly, I think it's, you know, you're certainly in awe at the White House. One of the most embarrassing moments I had was the first day we were there, First Lady Hillary Clinton called and asked that George Stephanopoulos and I come to the

living quarters to see President Clinton. Of course, I had not been a part of the campaign. I had been in the White House before. I'd had that privilege and met with President Bush and President Carter, but I had not been to the living quarters. So George and I go through the Rose Garden, we're going over there to get the elevator, and it all of a sudden dawns on me, we don't know where we're going. [*Laughter*] And I said, "George, you certainly know where we're going. You were part of the campaign." He said, "No, I have no idea." And I said, "Well, George, we're going to have a really affirmation of authority. You're going to go ask that security guard over there how we get to the top floor." Which we did. Steve, you really are a, you first get there, it's much smaller than you might imagine. The Oval Office is quite majestic, as is the Cabinet Room, but actually the offices in the West Wing are much smaller than you might think, much more crowded. The phone systems only work pretty good, at least during our first couple of years. We got them a little better after that. But I think when it really hit me, and Donna knows this, we had been working so hard, and I went home and saw a special on President Kennedy, *The Kennedy Years*. And there was Robert Kennedy and other senior advisors, including Ted Sorensen, Kennedy's great speech writer, standing

in about the same place that I had just been an hour and a half ago. And it really sears through you that this is a remarkable privilege, and that it's truly history. Not that you're not fully dedicated, but that really underscores what you're trying to do in a larger sense of self and a larger sense of purpose. But you do work hard. There's great moments not unlike *The West Wing* of great highs when you have a legislative victory, or, and great lows when you have a setback. There are humorous moments. There are sad moments. The difference in *West Wing* is, and I had the privilege to be on the set with some of the actors when the Democratic convention was in Los Angeles, they're not quite as articulate without a script. [Laughter] And we didn't have a script every day. Air Force One is, of course, a great joy. Everyone there, of course, makes it so easy. You can call, of course, anybody in the world from Air Force One. We'd had a great meeting with President Yeltsin in Vancouver. And during that meeting, President Clinton had talked about a certain group, saying, well, sometimes they say "yes," they really mean "no," and vice versa. It was meant really in a very positive, kind way. And somehow, one of the local press, as good journalists do, had gotten the transcript from the Russians and run this story that President Clinton had been critical of a particular leader. And

Secretary Christopher and I were asleep on Air Force One going back from the summit there, and of course, I had to wake Chris up. We had to call a particular country, which was three in the morning. So the point is, it's not only a majestic airplane, but it has enormous capability in terms of communication and safety. The most, one of the most embarrassing moments, and one I'll always be grateful to the people of Air Force One and the president and others is we were to leave for Denver at nine o'clock, which was what was on the schedule, for a meeting there. And I came into my White House office at seven, plenty of time to get to Andrews. So we were driving to Andrews about eight o'clock, and the phone rings, and it's Bruce Lindsey. He said, "Mack, where are you?" And I said, "Well, I'm on my way to Andrews." He said, "Well, didn't you know that we moved the time to eight o'clock to take off, and president's here, the one time Bill Clinton's on time [*laughter*]. And I just, you know, wanted to die. And so we got there, and I had to walk through the entire plane to get to my seat there, and I, of course, saw President Clinton. He says, "Well, this is role reversal, isn't it?" I said, "Yes, it is." So we took off for Denver, and I'll always remember the chief pilot of Air Force One came on called my seat there, he said, "Mr. McLarty, you'll pleased to know we've

got a tailwind. We're gonna be there on time." And so it had a happy ending. Happy ending.

SR: That's great. Well, Mack, before we go to open it up to audience questions, give us kind of a brief description of your role as a shuttle diplomat for President Clinton in Latin America and other parts of the world, and how that when you left the White House, how that involved, evolved into your current work around the world with Henry Kissinger and Kissinger McLarty Associates.

MM: I'll be real quick. I really did have some remarkable opportunities after my time as chief of staff that were not as confining, and they moved much more to the international side, which was great, a wonderful experience for Donna and for me. I think on Latin America, I think we made 52 trips in two and a half years to Latin America. And of course, it's always good to have your former press secretary interview you. That's good, good advice to any of you, particularly when he's been trained by David and Barbara Pryor. *[Laughter]* But Steve, of course, accompanied me on many of those trips. But I really do believe that much of the values that you are taught in Arkansas of mutual respect, ability to communicate with people, straightforward demeanor, they serve you so well in any diplomatic discussion, whether it's positive, a positive subject or

a challenging one, and particularly well in Latin America. Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the great writer, has said if there weren't an ocean there, that the northern part of Latin America would be just another part of the South, and how he has been influenced by the writings of Faulkner and other great southern writers, and I think there's a lot of truth to that. The trip to the Middle East, where you met with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait, within a 72-hour period was obviously a memorable trip, and one that I'm, was pleased to have survived and been reasonably successful. The Atlanta Olympics, the 1996 Olympic Games, which Steve was a big part of, were a great moment. It was before the election, and you know, kind of how the Olympics go kind of influences the mood of America, kind of Ronald Reagan's morning, a new morning, a new dawning in America. And we were hosting the Centennial Games in Atlanta right before the elections, all around the world, and the President asked me to coordinate that. The first crisis we had is Delta Airlines calls about two months before the Olympics and said, "We've got the Greek soccer team, they've had a little too much to drink, and they're playing soccer on the airplane, and we're gonna have to land." [*Laughter*] And that was kind of a foreboding of other things to come. But you're coordinating all

these agencies. And of course, that night in Atlanta when the tragedy occurred, Franklin was there with the founder of the games, Billy Payne, or the head of the games' in Atlanta son. And Franklin called me, 'cause you could hear these sirens, you didn't know what it was, and he said, "Dad, there's been a bomb and don't know how serious it is, but it's serious, and I think some people may have been killed." Five minutes after that, the White House situation room calls, said, "Mr. McLarty, there's been a bombing in Atlanta." I said, "I know, our younger son just told me." And I had the script right there. But the real point is of the games, the people in Atlanta and Georgia were so determined the next day for those games to go on, and we had an all-night call about whether or not they should go on. And I think, "Thank goodness we made the right call for them to continue." So there were a lot of really unique and wonderful moments on the international side, Steve, in addition to some of the domestic, domestic politics.

SR: I'd like to open it up to questions. If you'd raise your hand, and we'll try to get a microphone to you so your question can be projected. Anyone? If you're up front, I can pass the microphone along. Not in the back.

Unidentified Speaker: Good evening or good afternoon.

MM: Good evening.

UI: Where do you see the world going in relationship to geopolitics, global corporations, and how that's evolving and becoming almost one mass in some respect. You have countries acting like corporations, and Russia taking over the petroleum industry, and stuff of that nature. And so the evolution of geopolitics, and global corporations, where do you see them evolving to in relationship to the world?

MM: Well, it's a timely question, and one we could have a class on but will not. And I had already noted in some of my comments about the globalization or the interconnectedness of the world during the time that President Clinton was in office. And I think that will continue and intensify. And you can just sense the tectonic plates of history shifting when you're in a country like China or even a country like Brazil. There's no doubt with higher energy prices, with the emerging growth of China and India particularly that the geopolitical balance is shifting. And I think what that means is not that America does not have great days ahead. We do. But it means we're going to have to perhaps deal with and relate to our friends, our allies, our potential adversaries, and certainly our competitors in a different way than in past years. And there's no question we will see US

companies increasingly invest in emerging markets around the world, where there's faster growth, and you will eventually and already are seeing even here in Arkansas recently with Governor Beebe announcing the new Indian plant here in the pipe business, foreign investment coming into the United States. I generally think that's positive, if it can bring forward economic growth, good paying jobs for our people, and lift standards around the world. But the world's clearly going to be much more interconnected. There's no question about that.

Stacy Sells Pittman: Mr. McLarty, Stacy Sells Pittman. And I have two quick questions. I'd like for you to tell us about the first day that you met Hillary Rodham Clinton. And the second question, and because you and I both are fellow Methodists, what is it, and where is it, and how is it that your faith plays a role in some of those very heavy burdens and those very heavy decisions that some of us cannot even imagine?

MM: Well, I think we all have decisions and situations that require a deep faith and a centeredness whether it be in the White House or in our business or in our personal lives, so I don't think it's

any different in many ways than in the White House than really our living our daily lives here. I think what's important in Washington, and I know David and Barbara and others would agree with this 'cause they've lived it, you really do have to remember, as kind of trite as it may sound, kind of who you are, where you came from, and why you went to Washington in the first place. And that really evolves back to your values, and, of course, evolves back to your faith. And it evolves back to examples that have been set for you of people trying to live the Golden Rule over the years. And, of course, particularly as chief of staff, when I said it was the chief javelin catcher, Howard Baker, who was chief of staff to President Reagan, called me and said, "Mack, congratulations. You just got the worst job in Washington." [*Laughter*] And so you, there are those days that you do have to remain centered and have a belief and a faith in a higher being and a longer perspective than what you might have otherwise. And in that case, both growing up in Hope and then in Pulaski Heights Methodist, that's obviously meant a great deal to Donna and to me and our family. I think, you know, in the White House that you just have to maintain some sense of equilibrium, some sense of evenness, and just know that the

kitchen's going to get hot from time to time. Steve, I think we're getting . . .

SR: Hillary, Hillary Rodham?

MM: Excuse me, sorry. Better not leave out the next president of the United States here. [*Applause*] I should let Donna tell this story. [*Laughter*] Bill Clinton called Donna and me, we were married, and said that he wanted us to meet this woman that he felt he was quite serious about. He was running for Congress, David, as you'll remember, or getting ready to run for Congress, and he and Hillary came to our home on Shadow Lane, and that was the first time we met now-Senator Clinton. She was obviously, you know, very, very smart. We found her not only smart but warm and engaging and funny. It clearly was a major decision and an unexpected one for her to have fallen in love with someone from Arkansas. [*Laughter*] And that that person was not going to be part of a larger law firm in New York or Boston or San Francisco but was coming back to Arkansas to run against an extremely popular Republican congressman, in John Paul Hammerschmidt. And of course, Bill Clinton didn't win that race, that first race. But despite that, it was obvious that she had made that decision and commitment, and then, of course, the rest is history. But as First Lady, of course, we worked

closely with her. Donna worked perhaps more closely in many ways than I did, and, of course, I worked closely with her in the White House. I think this campaign has demonstrated really her depth, her character, her leadership, and her experience. And this election, in my judgment, will be a much more serious election in many ways because of the international situation and even the, perhaps the anxiety about domestic issues, and I think that, frankly, will serve her well. I don't want to be political in my comments, but I think she has certainly handled herself quite well to date, and I think she does have the prospects of being the first woman president in our history.

SR: Well, Mack, thank you very much for being here. Ladies and gentlemen, Mack McLarty. [*Applause and conversation in background*] We are adjourned.

[*Silence*]

[01:09:58]

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