

**SARAH WEDDINGTON  
EXIT INTERVIEW**

[This is an interview with] Sarah Weddington, January 2, 1981. This is an interview for the Carter Presidential Library in the West Wing of the White House, Emily Soapes interviewer.

**SOAPES:** I wanted to ask you first off how it was that you came to the attention of Jimmy Carter to be selected as Special Assistant. Now you were in the Agriculture Department.

**WEDDINGTON:** That's right, I was General Counsel at Agriculture. When Midge Costanza submitted her resignation, they were looking on relatively short notice for someone to assume her responsibilities. Evidently, Midge and Judy Carter and some others who were very interested in the women's issues and that aspect of the Carter Administration, asked a variety of individuals and groups whom they would recommend for the position. Evidently, my name turned up as a common denominator on those lists, so that I was in Little Rock, at one of the branch offices of the Office of General Counsel of Agriculture when I received a call from Rosalynn Carter, saying that they were filling the office and would like to visit with me about the possibility of assuming those responsibilities and asking if I would fly back that day to visit with some of the people here at the White House the next day about it. So, I did fly back and then did a series of interviews with Rosalynn and Hamilton [Jordan]-- I don't remember-- I'm sure there were a number of people.

**SOAPES:** That was probably a blur at the time.

**WEDDINGTON:** And then culminating with the President.

**SOAPES:** And particularly the President, Hamilton Jordan, and Mrs. Carter: how did they define the mission? What was it that they wanted you to do, basically?

**WEDDINGTON:** Well, I think there was some extent to which they defined the mission, but even more so they asked me for my ideas about what the mission should be, so that I actually ended up writing a brief synopsis for the President right after I took office. We visited orally first and then after I took office I wrote a paper for him about what I thought our goals ought to be and the way we ought to proceed. But general directions were, certainly, to advise the President on issues that have a particular significance to women, trying to see that women were included in all parts of the administration, assisting with the efforts to find women who were qualified and the best choices for various delegations, top government positions, and so on. And I think, generally, just being sure that women were included in every aspect of the administration.

**SOAPES:** Now, a couple of the other special assistants for a special group said to me that--had commented that the administration started out not having a special assistant for ethnic affairs, for black affairs, for women's affairs. Did you find, sort of, a new-found

awareness of a need for this on the White House staff? You came, what, September of '78, have I got that right?

**WEDDINGTON:** I think the situation in my regard was, perhaps, a little bit different. Because as I understand it, Midge Costanza was the Assistant for Public Liaison, but she had, as far as I know, been interested in women's issues particularly for a long time. So that I know she did have a lot of contact with women's groups and had worked with that constituency during the time she was here. So, I don't have the sense so much that the responsibilities I took on were so much new responsibilities, but rather that I had full-time to devote to those responsibilities for the first year I was here. Whereas, Midge had had a number of other responsibilities in addition.

**SOAPES:** Was one of the things that was stressed to you that was important about your job was getting the ERA extension passed, because that was something that came right afterwards?

**WEDDINGTON:** Certainly, you know, that was something from the very first meeting, in fact, in some of the sort of summaries that I've done for the President as we wind up the administration, I did note that that was one of the major things that we spent time on because that was one of the specific kinds of things he said in our first interviews as did the others, that they wanted someone who was familiar with the ERA and who could work for its passage, and, of course, in the Texas legislature I had been very instrumental in working on it, as well as at the national level.

**SOAPES:** This is jumping ahead a bit, but after the Camp David summit of the summer before last the newspapers noted that you were to take on more political duties. How did your duties change as a result of Camp David?

**WEDDINGTON:** In September 1979, Tim Kraft left the staff of the White House as the Carter-Mondale campaign was being established. So that the responsibilities he had been doing which were appropriate for the White House to continue then came to reside in my office, and I was promoted to the assistant level. I did continue my work on women's issues. Hamilton Jordan and I had a discussion about whether I should continue or whether we should go ahead and hire someone else for the women's issues at that point, but the feeling was that if we hired someone else at that point it would have such a break in the continuity of efforts and it would have meant three people in three years with those responsibilities. So it was decided that I would go ahead and continue the women's issues as well as the political for a period of time. And I think probably, that would have been changed in a new administration and there would have been someone again full-time on women's issues.

The political responsibilities I took on, then, were coordinating with the Democratic National Committee, putting on a series of briefings for people from various states who were politically interested and politically active. When we received mail from people who noted they were officers from the Democratic party of some kind, at the local, or county, or state level, that came to our office for handling and for information. And it

really was just, I guess more than anything else, a reference point so that those people always had some place to go for information and then to be referred on to the appropriate agency or person in government to handle the specific issue they were involved with. As it turned out, most of 1979, women's issues still took up the major part of my time because, of course, the campaign was doing the bulk of the straight political work. And then as we got into the campaign, of course, I was spending more time on leave and using my personal leave time to work for the campaign. But even so, [I] did a lot of work on the women's aspect of the campaign; for example, encouraging that we have a national deputy, a woman, and Geraldine Ferraro was the one selected; or working with pieces of literature in the campaign that focused on Carter accomplishments relating to women and what we hoped to do in the future for women. But, it's clear that the majority of the time I've been here in the White House, overall, has been devoted to working on women's issues. Another reason that I've continued the work on women's issues in September of '79 was, obviously, I do have a long-term interest.

**SOAPES:** I get the feeling that you genuinely enjoy it.

**WEDDINGTON:** Yes, I do. I mean I find it interesting, and it's, I guess, another one of those things that I think was a very important thing to be done. I think our office did it very well, and I would have been concerned if we hadn't been involved in it; about what the fate of those issues and that work would have been.

**SOAPES:** Yes, and continuity was a very good argument. Was the summer of '79 when Speakers Bureau and Presidential Messages were added to your office?

**WEDDINGTON:** Yes.

**SOAPES:** Okay, I'm unclear as to why those would be women. Is it political or--?

**WEDDINGTON:** In September of '79, then the Speakers Bureau was added. The Presidential Messages was added and a number of other special functions.

**SOAPES:** Which of the White House staff members or offices in your capacity as advisor on women's matters have you worked with the most frequently?

**WEDDINGTON:** I guess it's one of those things--it's a hard question to answer because all of them to some extent. For example, since Stu [Eizenstat] had the major responsibility on domestic policy issues, we often worked very closely with him, for example, on issues relating to women and the draft, [about] the decision to include women in our proposals to congress; the formulation of proposals regarding youth and unemployment; where we were trying to point out that there were a lot of young women who were included in those unemployed, not simply young men, as people always tend to think first. Or, for example, in formulating the health care policies, there were several things, through our work with Stu, that were specifically put in that looked at the impact of women's special interests in health. For example, the provision that there would be

full payment for the medical needs for pregnant women and children up to one year of age. So Stu's office--Ann Wexler, of course, did a series of issue briefings, and we were always working with her to see that a large number of women were included in the invitation lists for those events. White House Personnel, because, obviously, we were a major resource for them in terms of looking for qualified women to appoint to various delegations, boards, commissions, and so on. We worked closely with Ambassador Torres, with Steve Aiello, and with Louis Martin, because even though they have responsibilities for ethnics and minorities per se, of course, there are a majority of women who are included in those categories, and so we often coordinated a lot with them. To some extent or another, almost all of the offices, Frank Moore's office for example--when we were trying to get the extension for the ERA passed; he appointed Bob Thomson to work almost full-time with me on that regard. And there were a number of other legislative issues that we worked together on. Or, for example, if you think about OMB, the budget, obviously had things that were of great interest and impact to men and women's programs so that we worked closely with Jim McIntyre. So that the subject women and the goal of including women is so pervasive that we really ended up working with all the other White House offices as well as with many of the agencies. Because, often, the agencies and departments had far more resources in terms of people and money than we in the White House did directly. So that we often worked by having the agencies do special studies or special programs or encouraging them to alter regulations or programs, depending on the various needs.

**SOAPES:** I know when I was going through this printout put out in January of last year, Jimmy Carter's Record on Women's Issues, I was underlining various departments; there was HUD, Human Services, there was Labor, there was Education--.

**WEDDINGTON:** Almost all of them, I think in one way or another, did some things that were in cooperation with our office.

**SOAPES:** Well, that being part of your mission to make sure that women are included or a big part of some offices. Now, this interagency task force, would you tell me something about it? You, I believe, were the one who suggested that it be set up.

**WEDDINGTON:** No. The executive order which set up the Inter-departmental Task Force on Women and the President's Advisory Committee for Women was signed at the same time and that was while Midge [Costanza] was here. However, the President's Advisory Committee had actually been established and was functioning. But the Inter-departmental Task Force on Women was not actually functioning at the time I came. Midge had sent out letters to each of the agencies and departments asking them to appoint a representative to the task force. We were just beginning--well, we had to send out a new mailing to actually get those names in. So, the executive order had been signed and an initial mailing had been done by Midge. And then we came really into the formulative stages regarding task force work.

**SOAPES:** And the purpose of this was to get agencies working on what you saw as the problems, the issues concerning women?

**WEDDINGTON:** Yes, the theory was that by having a combination of one group, the Interdepartmental Task Force, that was composed strictly of people who worked in the federal government and for the federal government and also having a group of people, none of whom worked for the federal government or within the federal government (i.e. the President's Advisory Committee), then you would have the best of cooperation within the federal government to put focus on these issues as well as the best of outside citizens with a special interest and expertise to give advice to the President but certainly also to work closely with the Interdepartmental Task Force.

**SOAPES:** And did you find that really that did work out okay?

**WEDDINGTON:** Generally, yes, although I certainly think there are some improvements in the system that others can make. For example, trying to get a representative of each of the departments and agencies--and that was the list that Midge had originally used--results in such a large number of people that it's an almost unworkable number, and yet, trying to determine how you pick only a few to invite to work with you is a problem. Second, there were the representatives from the various agencies. Well, we attempted to divide it into two groups, and we asked each agency and department to appoint two representatives: one at the policy level, one at what I would call, the working level. So, our hope was by having people at the policy level, we would actually have people we could call on at budget time and where you really need someone to go directly through the secretary to get something done.

**SOAPES:** Right, with that kind of clout.

**WEDDINGTON:** With that clout, versus other people who actually had the time to put in on some of the programs and proposals. It worked better on some proposals than others, and often it was partly determined by the people involved. Of course, another problem with the task force as well as the President's Advisory Committee was that each of those groups had about three to five permanent staff members, and all of the other staff were on detail, sometimes thirty days, sometimes ninety days, sometimes longer, which meant that you had a constant turnover in staff; and therefore, much of the time had to look at shorter-term projects for them to do instead of a group of people who could be there for a long period of time.

**SOAPES:** Was this run out of your office, or was it one of these commissions headquartered across the street on Jackson place?

**WEDDINGTON:** The Interdepartmental Task Force, since it was a part of the Department of Labor, supervised by the Women's Bureau, actually had separate offices at 20th and L streets, so that, to some extent, the demands of supervising were increased because I had the immediate White House office, the OEOB office, and that was scattered in several locations as was true of other offices here, plus the 20th and L

location.

**SOAPES:** And is that something that will continue or is it a function of this administration?

**WEDDINGTON:** The executive order under which both the Inter-departmental Task Force and President's Advisory Committee [operator] was a function of this administration and ran out on December 31, 1980. Of course, the new administration will have the option of continuing those efforts by signing a new executive order. It is certainly my hope that they will follow a line of nine Presidents now who have had, at least, an outside advisory group on women's issues, but at this point I've not heard any discussion or indication from the new administration what their program will be.

**SOAPES:** Had you been here another four years, would you have kept a similar advisory group, and I'm talking about interagency one, going if no other way except informally?

**WEDDINGTON:** Oh yes, there's no question but that both groups would have been continued. I'm sure there would have been some people who had served on the President's Advisory Committee a number of years who would want to rotate off and other people might have been put on. For the Interdepartmental Task Force, I think we would have tried to restructure it somewhat but--.

**SOAPES:** Scale it down in size--

**WEDDINGTON:** In terms of the number of people who were theoretically involved, but I think both efforts certainly would have been continued.

**SOAPES:** What accomplishment of these groups are you proudest of? [What] do you think was the most significant?

**WEDDINGTON:** Well, I think, of my office in general, and I include the task force as a part of that, that the most significant was the number of women who were appointed to the judgeships, top positions of various kinds, and also the effort that was put into achieving--I think we did achieve our goal--that whenever any policy was being developed that the aspects of that policy that affected women were considered. That women were a part of the decision-making process and that many new programs that met the special needs of women were begun, specifically. There are now forty-six women who are serving on the federal bench; forty-one of those were appointed by President Carter. And I have no doubt that without the kind of dedication and devotion to that objective that he had, that simply would not have happened. Similarly, I think, appointing women to top positions in government was really a key accomplishment, more than just those individual women having had an opportunity they wouldn't have had otherwise. But, because it is impossible to exercise the kind of influence on decisions from the White House that there needs to be for women's needs to fully be considered. But if you have women in those top positions in all of the agencies and

departments, they can help fill that role, and it becomes much more a part of the natural process that women's issues should be considered and the aspect of issues that affect women [should] be considered.

There was also a very determined effort within the White House and therefore often emulated by the agencies and departments that when there was a briefing, if it was on SALT; if it was on foreign policy; if it was on energy; if it was on whatever subject there might have been; to consciously look at the guest list to see that women be included. There was, similarly, an effort in doing publications to look and see what visual images were represented there and whether or not women were included. So that in every way we tried to meet a goal of bringing women into the mainstream of American life and showing in everything we did the women's aspect and the involvement of women in those areas.

**SOAPES:** I get the feeling that the appointments which you pointed to on the record of the accomplishments; number one, this was not something you had to urge upon President Carter it was something that he had--.

**WEDDINGTON:** Oh no, in fact, that was a thing he had committed to a long time ago and was one of the things he was already working on before I got here. He had sent a memo out to the various agency heads, cabinet officers, urging them to include women in their appointments when they were first making appointments, etc., etc. He had, on the various committees, commissions appointed by the White House, on one specific instance--I don't remember which committee it was--but I remember someone sending a listing out of something like seventy-seven names and I think three or four were women. And he wrote up in the corner of it, "See Sarah." And that there were several instances as where he picked up on the fact that women were missing from a recommendation made to him and sent it to me and it was something I hadn't even known that was going on. So that he was very good about that and very conscious of it.

**SOAPES:** On the ERA extension and passage of the amendment by the states, can you give an evaluation of the effect of the Carters collectively--their support--?

**WEDDINGTON:** On the extension, of course, it was up to Congress to pass that. And between the President and Vice-President they changed about seven no votes to yes votes, which did make the difference in the final passage. Both those people and their families were very much involved in it. Joan Mondale, for example, gave a coffee for Senate wives and asked them to ask their husbands to vote correctly. In fact, we even invited the husbands; let's see, we invited--no, I think there were no husbands in that group. But other things we did when we had spouses, we always invited the husbands of women members of Congress. But they were certainly an important part, that is not to say they deserve all the credit. Certainly the women's organizations, labor organizations, civil rights organizations were also very, very active on the Hill. But the President and Vice-President played a key role in turning some crucial votes, particularly at the last minute.

In the broader ERA sense, of course, the President was very active during his whole term in working for the Equal Rights Amendment. Not only did he include it in his State of the Union addresses, the major announcements of those kinds, he constantly emphasized it in speeches he gave around the country. For example, right at the end of the campaign, he gave a speech for the ERA in Abilene, Texas, which is not your prime audience. But they responded well. We had a series of briefings for business leaders, civic leaders, so on and so forth, here in the White House. The President himself came up with an idea of sponsoring [an] ERA fundraiser to raise money, and he was the principal guest at the event which raised, I believe, about \$115,000 clear, net, and was the largest single event to benefit the ERA that anyone has ever had.

So, there were many, many things he did and I think he certainly regrets that that is not a real accomplishment we can point to. But I think some who expected the President to be able to pass it were trying to pass on their own frustration that it had not passed up to them. The state legislators are simply not the natural constituency of the President, even as Congress really is. And those state legislators felt far more a sense of concern about what the people in their district thought than they did the President of the United States. And, in fact, a couple of times after the President made phone calls, some of those legislators went out on the floor of their respective houses and said, "I got a call from the President of the United States, but he doesn't live in my district and I'm voting for my people." And his influence certainly had to be used carefully, but he did try to use the influence, the persuasive ability, and the platform that being President gives one for the benefit of the Equal Rights Amendment.

**SOAPES:** Now, coordinating, if that is indeed what is being done, of the effort to secure passage by more states; has that been something that your office has specifically done, I mean, would you be the one advising the President that you need to call delegate X in the Virginia house of delegates?

**WEDDINGTON:** Yes, we've been active, very active, now. We did a series of things; for example, last year we were having, every Thursday, meetings with representatives of the various groups that were very involved in the ERA effort. So that certainly they were often the ones who made suggestions about what needed to be done. The President met monthly with the presidents of national women's organizations, the largest ones, and they often had suggestions to make about ERA. The President's Advisory Committee specifically came and had a meeting with him on the ERA and made some proposals. So that while our office was certainly involved in formulating suggestions and certainly carrying them out, it was very much a coalition effort with all the other groups who were already working in here. We were trying not to, as they say, re-invent the wheel time and time again, but seeing that each of the resources various of us had could be effectively used for ERA.

**SOAPES:** Would you say that you've been able to do a great deal on any economic issues that I know you had talked about at one point as being one of the major missions you saw of your office? There was a whole raft of things there.

**WEDDINGTON:** It does seem to me that the economic issues are going to be key ones for women--employment, pension, social security, health care, many others. We did have some improvements in that regard. First, during the time the President has been here we had a consolidation of equal employment functions under the EEOC [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission] with about a 40 percent increase in their budget and a thousand new positions so that EEOC has been able to wipe out much of the backlog on complaints and has been able to be far more responsive to women in enforcing equal opportunity guidelines. EEOC is currently looking and having hearings on the concept of, not only equal pay for equal work but equal pay for work of equal value, which is a more frontier issue. But, at least, trying to look at how some of the work that women have traditionally done has been undervalued; what could be done about it. Guidelines have been put out on sexual harassment on the job. There have been a whole series of things that relate to--CETA has changed its regulations so that displaced homemakers are eligible for job training and job re-entry programs, a whole series of things there. The President, as one of the proposals several months ago, had proposed changing the marriage penalty tax under the tax system so that people who, if they were single and earning, would pay less than they do married and earning would not be subjected to that difference.

[The] social security system is being re-examined. We have made some changes that are beneficial for women. For example, it was previously true that if a woman who was older remarried, she would often lose part of her social security benefits and that is no longer true at a given age. We have also changed--the President when he took office the law was that a woman had to have been married at least twenty years before she got any credit or benefit under her husband's social security entitlements--that's now been changed to ten years. So there are a number of changes that we've made in social security and, frankly, more that need to be made. In terms of divorced women, one of the bills passed provides that foreign service officers' wives will have rights as against their pension in the event of a divorce. So there were a number of things that were done, others that were begun, but certainly there are many issues that will be left for the next administration, unfortunately.

**SOAPES:** Has it been a help in your work since so many of the barriers for women are legal, to be a lawyer by training?

**WEDDINGTON:** I think it's been helpful, far more though in the sense that much of what we've been doing is helping to formulate legislation, so that an understanding of the legislative process, which I had out of my Texas legislative experience, was helpful as well as being a lawyer. And then, I think, in terms of the regulations, those kinds of things. The being a lawyer has helped, but certainly is not a prerequisite for doing a successful job in this kind of position.

**SOAPES:** Your work, can it be summed up as a communications job?

**WEDDINGTON:** There certainly was a part of it that was communications-- both communicating to the President the concerns of individual and groups of women and also communicating to them what was going on within the administration. One of the things our office began was a series of publications. One of them was called White House News on Women, which was a monthly newsletter, and at this time the mailing list is about 14,000. We also did special publications on the ERA, our work for the ERA, social security, the problems there, some of the employment problems, the number of women who had been appointed to office, a directory of women's organizations as resources, a directory of black women, a directory of appointees, a directory of Hispanic women appointees, a directory of top women in government, and a number of other special publications. So that there was a large part of it which was a communications job.

**SOAPES:** And is most of your work personally done in seminars and workshops? I know you do a great deal of out-of-town speaking, on the phone, in letters--

**WEDDINGTON:** [It is a] combination of--we do get an awful lot of mail which we tried not to just send back as, I think, you so often get out of government the letter that says, "Thank you for your letter. It was very interesting. We'll send it on." But you try to give people the specific information they were asking for as much as we could. Certainly there was a lot of phone contact. A lot of it was putting on briefing sessions, here in the White House about what was going on or arranging for women leaders in various areas to meet with the agency decision-makers in the same area for a dialogue between those groups. Seeing that women were included, furnishing the names of people to be included in different things, doing the written publications. So, it was really trying to use all of the various forms of communication, both to receive their input and to express the administration's position and for women to have the information to be able to act when things were happening that they might be interested in and what to express themselves about.

**SOAPES:** Now, your title is Assistant to the President. It's essentially an advisory role. How much feedback is there with the President himself? Most people say they very rarely see him personally, one-to-one, to talk to him. In what form has your feedback been?

**WEDDINGTON:** Mine's probably a little bit different than the special assistants; since I have assistant status, I probably would see him a little bit more and have a little more contact than some of them have. However, people like Jody and Hamilton have certainly had far more personal contact than I have. The President is a person who likes to work by memo so that some of it has been in memo--"Mr. President, here is the problem. Here's what I suggest. Do you agree or disagree? [Do you] have other ideas?" Much of it, of course, is done among the staff so that many things are worked out at the staff level that he never has to make a decision about. Certainly, I've always been able to meet with the President any time I've felt the need for his personal guidance. He has had a number of meetings that I've recommended and where I always, of course, did the staff work and organized an agenda. So, it's been a variety of

things, but the President's personal time, you know, has certainly been spent in the sense of formulating policies on such issues as the budget, the economic problem, the Iranian situation, foreign policy. Things that, really, only he could do; whereas, many of the issues in the area I have worked are things where the President's positions, the President's inclinations were well-known to staff internal to the White House, and to government and to people outside as well. So that while he often had to sign off on the final decisions, much of it, frankly, was done at other levels.

**SOAPES:** That's a good point.

**WEDDINGTON:** On the ERA he did more--personal phone calls and having people personally to the residence for meals and that sort of thing. But much of the issues, because you knew where he would come down on the issue, you didn't have to go ask him again. You just did it.

**SOAPES:** Right, I mentioned if you had had another four years, are there other things that you could point to that you would have targeted for 1981 to 1985?

**WEDDINGTON:** Because our work the last year has been so demanding within the White House and then extra personal time has been spent in the campaign, we had not begun the process of planning for the next four years. That would have happened on November 5th had the election gone differently. It's obvious, though, that the economic interests are ones that should have been continued. The work on the ERA, certainly, for at least the next two years. The appointments, there would have been a number of people who would have been leaving government and the more opportunity to appoint others would have been there. Domestic violence, the bill to provide funds to the states for domestic violence shelters failed at the end of the last Congress. That effort certainly would have been coming up again. The Supreme Court will probably be hearing several cases that impact women, including the one on the draft and certainly there would have been a role in that regard. So that there would have been a large and satisfying agenda, but it's not one that we formally had laid out because our time was just being spent on other things.

**SOAPES:** Will you be remaining active in women's and political issues, I take it?

**WEDDINGTON:** Certainly. I am currently going to be a visiting professor of government but teaching a course on leadership. And particularly looking at women in leadership positions. What are the characteristics that women have which can help them as leaders? How can we develop young women to think of themselves as leaders and to plan how to acquire the skills they would need as leaders; a whole series of questions in that regard. I'm going on the board of a national corporation headquartered in Texas and will be doing some extra work on the corporate side.

**SOAPES:** Will you teach at the University of Texas?

**WEDDINGTON:** No, the teaching is going to be at Wheaton, which is a small women's college outside of Boston.

**SOAPES:** I know two but that one's in Illinois, okay. I didn't realize there was one in Boston.

**WEDDINGTON:** There's also one in Norton, Massachusetts. I'll also be doing a number of speeches and writing and those kinds of activities.

**SOAPES:** So that being on the White House Staff has not killed your interest in politics?

**WEDDINGTON:** Oh no, no, it was only a continuing part of it.

**SOAPES:** Thank you for spending some of your time here today and I thought here we could have talked [for] 30 minutes on women and the draft but we will do that some day. Thank you so very much.

**WEDDINGTON:** Okay. You're so very welcome.