

Interview with

ROGER B. PORTER

by

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FINAL EDITED Transcript of an Interview with Roger B. Porter who served as Executive Secretary of the Economic Policy Board and Special Assistant to the President during the Ford administration

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Q: You describe two camps within the administration on the \$30 billion package of energy conservation measures. One camp favored slow implementation because of a recessionary economy while the other wanted to move quickly. Can you describe the basic approaches of the key energy actors in the Ford administration? Who developed the energy program? How was it staffed out and how involved was the Economic Policy Board?

A: “The key entity with regard to energy proposals was the Energy Resources Council which was chaired by Rogers Morton with Frank Zarb serving as its Executive Director. The groundwork for the energy proposals contained in the 1975 State of the Union address was done by Zarb and two of his chief aides, Eric Zausner and John Hill. The divisions which you speak of can be traced to the meetings of December 27-28, 1974 in Vail. The meetings lasted two days and the entire first day was devoted to discussions of the energy proposals. Those in attendance were Rogers Morton for Interior, Frank Zarb, Eric Zausner, & John Hill for FEA, Russell Train of EPA, Bill Seidman and myself for EPB, William Eberle and Tom Enders for the State Department, Bill Simon for Treasury, Roy Ash and Jim Lynn for OMB, and Don Rumsfeld, Milton Friedman, Kenneth Cole, Ron Nessen, and Alan Greenspan from the White House staff. These discussions were an attempt to follow through with the Project Independence proposals developed under Nixon. Our goal was to reduce dependence on foreign sources of oil. Morton and Zarb wanted to see the President act quickly. It was Roy Ash who took the position that our proposals had been developed without necessary concern for their economic impact. He was convinced that these energy ideas would have an adverse affect and that there was no assurance that they would prove capable of achieving energy independence.”

Q: You have described three organizational models in your book: adhocracy, multiple advocacy, and centralized management. The Ford White House appears to have operated on all three levels with the Domestic Council, the Economic Policy Board, and Kissinger's domination of foreign policy as examples of each of the three models. Would you care to speculate on the reasons for this variation in staffing structure within the Ford White House?

A: “I think that much of what becomes the staffing and support structure in any particular administration is the result of the interplay of personalities. It so happens that in the Nixon and Ford administrations you had a dominant personality in foreign policy. Henry Kissinger cultivated his relationship with Ford from the early days of Ford's service as Vice President. Therefore, when Ford succeeded Nixon it was in the cards for Kissinger to continue his domination over the conduct of American foreign policy. His central argument was that any major structural change would be perceived as a sign of

vulnerability during crisis by our enemies in the world. In the Ford White House, there was no similar dominant personality in domestic policy. The absence of a dominating personality in domestic policy allowed a collegial structure to emerge. In the beginning you had a structure which was designed irrespective of the individuals who came to fill the slots. The transition team recommended the spokes of the wheel structure. The changes and modifications to that structure resulted from the way that individual personalities were able to work with each other. Any system on paper must inevitably yield to the realities dictated by the individuals who set out to create working relationships within which they will have to operate.”

Q: In your book you make reference to Ford’s style of decision-making--a preference for collective collegial give and take from trusted confidants and advisors. You also mention the use of options papers similar to the the system utilized by Al Haig in the Nixon White House. What was Ford’s decision-making style and how did it evolve? Most importantly, how much of what he did in the White House was the result of habits developed in his quarter century career in the House?

A: “I don’t accept any black and white distinction between a collegial system based on the verbal interplay of group meetings and a system of written options papers. The Ford White House operated on both levels with both types of information and interaction. Ford was comfortable with recommendations and advice which came from a small group of advisors who addressed issues across a broad spectrum. The group didn’t change much but was assembled on a largely ad hoc basis as a particular issue reached the top of the political agenda. What you need in such a system is an institutional memory. You need people who were involved in the last set of major decisions and who can remember what the administration decided last year or even last week. The participants need to come from different backgrounds and loyalties. You don’t always want to have consensus because that probably means that the President is only getting part of the

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the OMB, and the Council of Economic Advisors got quite blurred in practice. We didn’t have 35 or 40 professional staffers like the National Security Council. The staff of the EPB consisted of Seidman and myself. We were over in the White House isolated from those individuals in the departments and line agencies who we depended on to develop options papers. We ran the EPB through a series of executive relationships with people at the assistant secretary level in the bureaucracy. They staffed the task forces. We chose not to duplicate the expertise available from the periphery. We decided to have a small staff in the White House in order to reduce the threat to those economic decisionmakers in the remainder of the executive branch. We didn’t operate unilaterally. The EPB had the function of quality control in drafting final statements. We would circulate these

drafts for comments and go around the table in our meetings and solicit constructive input from every conceivable participant. It was certainly the case that the EPB fulfilled the goal of cabinet government par excellence.”