

Maureen and Mike

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**Oral History Number: 396-034**  
**Interviewee: Tom Rolfe**  
**Interviewer: Bob Brown**  
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**Project: Bob Brown Oral History Collection**

Bob Brown: We're interviewing Tom Rolfe at his home in Helena, Montana, on September...What is it? Twenty-eighth?

Tom Rolfe: Twenty-seventh.

BB: Twenty-seventh, 2005. Tom was a member of the Montana House of Representatives from 1972 to 1974 and also a leader in the conservative movement in the state of Montana. Active in the nomination of President Ronald Reagan. Also involved in the Goldwater movement of the 1960s. Tom, you grew up in Bozeman and you were active as a leader in the Teenage Republican Club and also, importantly, as a leader in the conservative movement. What got you interested in politics?

TR: Well I've often said that I had a couple of young friends that were probably older than their age would indicate. They started talking to me about politics. One of them, Blair Strong, was always far too serious for being 10 years old. I remember the conversation we had when he finally convinced me that I should be a Republican and a conservative. Then his next task was to convince me to do something about it. I'll never forget the words that he said. He said, "We're in fifth grade, Tom. We are ten years old. It's time we get serious about this."

BB: (laughs) Blair was what? Was he the grandson of Dean Chaffin?

TR: Right, he was the grandson of Dean Chaffin, who was a member of the Montana House of Representatives, Speaker of the House, I think, and then later a candidate for lieutenant governor. Dean was also the only Montanan to be the national president of the Automobile Dealers Association.

BB: So Blair had this family connection to politics and you were a personal friend of his in grade school. So he convinced you. Was there anything about conservatism and the Republican Party philosophy that you remember when you were—

TR: Well, the thing I remember more than anything else is just the whole idea of freedom and that it seemed like more rules and more controls took away freedom and that got in the way of people making good decisions. I think the whole thing just centered around what made the most freedom for the largest number of people. That's what sort of made sense to me.

BB: Were you involved at all, do you remember anything about the Kennedy / Nixon campaign in 1960?

TR: The only thing I remember about that campaign actually was more related to the governor's campaign when Don Nutter...It was probably the first thing I ever did in politics. Another friend of the same age, his father was very active in the Nutter campaign and they talked me into going on a torch light parade, probably one of the last ones ever held in Montana, in 1960, for Nutter. We started over on the east side of Bozeman and wound our way up Main Street and wound up at the Emerson School, where Nutter made a speech and then there was a reception afterwards. I got to go up and shake his hand, but I really remember meeting the Galloping Swede that night for the first time, this great big (unintelligible) of a man with a Swedish accent who was currently governor and he was trying to pass the medal on over to Don Nutter, who also became governor. I think that was probably my first political act, was to be in that torch light parade just before the election of 1960.

BB: Do you remember the impression that Nutter's speech may have left?

TR: I remember the man being just kind of tense and full of energy. I don't remember a lot about what he said but—

BB: But he was forceful, dynamic?

TR: Yes, to me, and you could tell he really believed what he was talking about. He again reiterated that theme of freedom and less government and more freedom for the individual, which really resonated for me.

BB: So you continued your interest in politics. You were excited by that experience in 1960 and then the focus of conservatives in the Republican Party in Montana was on nominating Senator Barry Goldwater in 1964. What do you remember about that? Of course it was a contest between Goldwater and Rockefeller for the Republican nomination.

TR: Yes, in late '63 my friend (unintelligible) Strong, again, talked me into joining a new group that was starting up called the Teenage Republicans. We got involved in helping that effort and most all my friends were very strong Goldwater supporters. It was an interesting thing in Bozeman because during that same election Governor Nutter had died and Governor Babcock had become governor. The president of the college in Bozeman, his name was Roland Renne, was running as the Democrat for governor.

BB: In 1964.

TR: In 1964. So there were quite a few people who were pretty conservative that were supporting Reagan but because of...Not Reagan but Goldwater. Because of knowing Renne so well from being in the community, we were also supporting Ray. I couldn't understand that because everything I'd read about Renne and everything I knew about Renne is that he did not believe in freedom for the individual. He believed in more government controls and bigger government solving problems and getting in the way and taxing people more and everything.

So I couldn't understand that idea but I think it was through personal friendship that that was happening. When I got very involved during the general election campaign after Goldwater had been nominated, I remember getting all excited and putting out yard signs. I had to have three or four yard signs in our yard for Goldwater and then for Governor Babcock.

One of our neighbors, who really as far as I knew didn't have much involvement in politics but had worked at the University with Renne and he came over to try to convince my father that it was the wrong thing for us to not support Renne. My dad would not change. I think my dad probably voted for Babcock because that's where his leanings were, but he wouldn't make me take down the signs for Babcock and put up the Renne signs like the neighbor was really pushing him to do. That neighbor happened to be Hugo Eck. He made a concerted effort to promote...Of course his wife, his widow Dorothy, has been real involved in Democrat politics.

BB: State Senator Dorothy Eck from Bozeman, a Democratic state senator for many years. Tom, do you remember the Young Americans for Freedom? Were you involved with that group at all?

TR: Not really too much. I remember hearing about them. I remember reading some of the things that came out around when they organized what they called the Sharon Statement and whatnot from Sharon, Connecticut, meeting. I was never really involved in that. I was so involved with the Teenage Republicans. That that took up all my time.

I just happened to think of something that happened. I worked on my folks' ranch in the summer and I really wanted to be at the Republican Convention in 1964 because I just knew that Goldwater was the answer to all of our problems, you know. So I remember I was driving a tractor from one piece of ranchland to another during the nomination speeches. I had a little transistor radio up to my ear so that I could hear the speeches for Goldwater. I was just elated to be able to hear what was going on.

BB: And you would have been about a what...high school?

TR: I was 15 years old. I suppose that—

BB: Sophomore?

TR: Yes, something... Well, I started my sophomore year that fall, yes.

BB: Was there anything...When you think about it, Republican nominees for president in the '40s and '50s and '60s and so on had been people who perhaps weren't necessarily westerners or weren't in touch with the west. I'm thinking like Wendell Willkie and Governor Tom Dewey and General Eisenhower and to some extent even Richard Nixon, who later went on to be president, even though from California, was I think not considered so much a westerner like Goldwater. Goldwater's conservatism was something he was proud of and something that resonate with grassroots Republicans. Do you suppose that there was somewhat of a feeling on

the part of heartland and perhaps western Republicans that it was time to throw overboard the country-clubbers and the eastern establishment?

TR: Yes, I remember that very clearly that there was a group of people that just felt like everything had been run from the east, the population centers of the country. They'd kind of run roughshod over the folks from the west. I think it kind of went along with the feeling that many times the big corporations were from the east that came out and dominated us politically in the west. And so there was a whole kind of a combination of things that made us sort of anti-eastern, I believe. We felt like we weren't being heard. I think that that was another reason why people that I was around, anyway, were so excited about Goldwater.

BB: And one of the important western leaders in the Goldwater movement was Frank Whetstone from Cut Bank, Montana. When did you first become acquainted with him?

TR: Well somewhere in that area, probably '65, '66, after Goldwater's defeat, I went on to become quite involved with the Teenage Republicans and got to know Frank a little bit. Seemed like I kept getting invited to meetings where he was a very important part of the meeting. You've heard the stories about smoke-filled rooms. I can remember as a high school student being one of the young people in these meetings where they were talking about strategy and how to get the conservative point of view advanced in the Republican Party. You'd go into those meetings and you could hardly see from one end of the room to the other because everybody in there was smoking except for me. You just, as a nonsmoker, I could never quite get used to that whole thing, but it was truly smoke-filled rooms and people were just fogging them up like crazy.

But Frank was at several of those meetings. He was kind of an interesting fellow. He was always encouraging new people, trying to make the tent a little bit bigger to get people involved. Here he was a man, a full adult. I was just in high school. But he took an interest in me and every once in a while I'd get a call from Frank Whetstone to let me know what was going on or to encourage me to go to a meeting that was coming up. He wouldn't just call me and talk to me because a lot of times in our home my mom might answer the phone. He'd take time to talk to my mother. My mother never met Frank Whetstone face-to-face but she always said, "A nice man like that who took the time to talk to someone's mother must be a very fine individual." That's the sort of guy he was. He knew that a high school student would need the okay of his parents to be involved in something like this, so he was going to pave the way. Frank always knew the secretary so that he could get in to talk to the important person. He made friends with the secretaries and the administrative aides and knew all of them and knew how to take care of them so he could get what he wanted to.

BB: And he was the classic example of the clinical activist. He was involved in Republican Party politics beginning when he was probably as young as you were when you became involved.

TR: Yes, his father, Dan Whetstone, was for many, many years the national committeeman for the Republican Party in Montana. Frank started going to Republican meetings I'm sure back in the '20s, maybe, or '30s.

BB: Well he told me one time that when Governor Joe Dixon was unable to attend a Republican, I believe, state convention sometime in the early 1920s, that Dan Whetstone, his father, was of course a close ally of Joe Dixon and so Frank had the honor of being able to carry, and even though I think perhaps a teenager, carry and vote Governor Joe Dixon's proxy at the Republican state convention. That might have been in like 1922 or '23 or '24, something like that. So his involvement went back a long time. He was involved as a Republican leader and a conservative leader for decades in Party politics and he had a real fundamental understanding of political organization and networking and that sort of thing.

TR: He was the consummate people's person. He knew people and he was friendly with people. Even though he might have disagreed with you, been on opposite sides of you once before, he was always there to try and bring someone back into the fold or get them involved in his group, trying to broaden the group all the time.

BB: And when Goldwater was nominated in 1964, of course Frank Whetstone was importantly involved as a leader in the Goldwater movement. After the Goldwater election in 1964, Whetstone was an important leader in keeping conservatives united and focused and that type of thing.

TR: You bet. One of the big things Whetstone was involved in was what they called the Draft Goldwater movement. The Draft Goldwater movement was just truly that. It's probably the last time that there was an honest draft movement to get somebody nominated for president. Usually these politicians now have their egos so far ahead of things that they're out there testing the waters all the time. Goldwater was a reluctant candidate. Frank was part of a group that was trying to get him involved and because of what they were trying to do to get a broad base of support across the country. Frank had made huge numbers of contacts all over the country in the Goldwater movement. After Goldwater was defeated in '64, Frank still had all those contacts and friends all across the country who he then called on to get involved working for another conservative candidate, which turned out to be Ronald Reagan eventually. It was those huge numbers of contacts, I think, that Frank made during the Goldwater effort. That was the beginning of his involvement. He was very involved with Senator Robert Taft running for president against Eisenhower in

1952. He was part of the group that was supporting Taft. Then he ultimately endorsed and worked for Eisenhower, but Taft was his man in '52. So Frank's efforts went back a long way, but the numbers of people that he met during the Goldwater thing, during the Draft Goldwater movement, was where he got this huge contact base so that a guy from little old Cut Bank, Montana, was very important, ultimately, in Ronald Reagan's convention victories.

BB: Then Reagan was, I believe, nominated for president in the 1968 convention. He had been elected governor of California in '66 and Rockefeller was vying for the Republican nomination in '68. Richard Nixon was a candidate for the Republican nomination. There were probably some others. I think perhaps Governor Romney and I don't remember for sure exactly who...Maybe Henry Cabot Lodge was still in the picture then, I don't remember. But Ronald Reagan also was nominated and I suppose Frank Whetstone was involved. Were you with him—

TR: Very much so. In fact, I had been brought into some of the meetings that Frank had to strategize, to get some delegates from Montana. The party structure was pretty much behind Nixon.

BB: I remember Tim Babcock was, I think, the first governor to come out in support of Nixon. In fact, he told me once that Nixon, of course, who had been defeated for president in 1960, defeated for governor of California in 1962, and considered a political has-been, decided he still wanted to run again in 1968 and he made a trip to Montana probably in 1967, and stayed at the Governor's mansion here in Helena. In fact, I think Tim said that they served him salmon loaf, which is kind of an un-Montana kind of a thing. He said he didn't know whether Nixon was serious about it or not but he complimented the salmon loaf. Anyway, Nixon asked Babcock to endorse him because he said Rockefeller, as a Republican governor, has most of the governors either supporting him or kind of feeling that they ought to keep their mouth shut if they couldn't. He was personally popular, apparently, among the governors. He said, "I really would deeply appreciate it if you could see your way clear to come out and publicly support me," and Tim said, "Well gosh, I'm governor of Montana. I mean, does that get anything significant?"

Nixon said, "Yes, I think so, because I need a governor and I think if I had one stick his neck out, the rest of them, or some of the rest of them may follow." So I think there was a feeling of loyalty to Babcock and Montana that probably helped keep the Republican delegates to the national convention in line behind Nixon.

TR: Right, there was a lot of effort there. We knew from our group that there were three of the delegates committed to Reagan. It was kind of a matter of personal pride, you know, that night when they were announcing delegates the press was saying who they thought was going to vote and they were saying, "Well, Montana is probably going to have two delegates vote for Reagan and the rest will vote for Nixon."

I turned to my folks and I said, "No, there are going to be three delegates voting for Reagan."

My parents said, "Well how would you know?"

I said, "Because I know." Sure enough there were three delegates from Montana that voted for Reagan in 1968.

BB: Was Frank Whetstone a delegate to the '68 convention?

TR: No he wasn't. I'm trying to remember the three delegates who...I can remember two of the delegates who voted for Reagan. One was Werner Green.

BB: From Bozeman.

TR: From Bozeman. Now lives in Helena. Another one was Lowell Torkelson from Great Falls. I'm trying to remember who the third was, and I can't remember right off hand. But there were three.

BB: Now Reagan wasn't the Republican nominee in 1968. Nixon was and was elected. The conservatives, while they supported Nixon, I think probably felt that Nixon wasn't really a solid conservative like they'd like him to be. There were some things that happened like wage and price control, for example, during the Nixon administration that I'm sure gave some angst to conservatives. So Frank Whetstone continued to be a leader in the conservative movement, not necessarily a detractor from Nixon but someone who hoped still to nominate someone more like Goldwater or Reagan. In the process of doing that, how did he keep the conservative flame alive? What did he do?

TR: Well Whetstone, again, he was just always calling people. I don't know what his phone bill was but even back in those days he must have had a phone bill beyond anybody's imagination because he was always on the phone. As I talked to some of my friends who knew Frank, you know, Frank would typically call after dinner and he might be up as late as 11 o'clock at night, but he'd be always checking in with his friends just to see what was going on, encouraging people to stay involved in politics. The times he would call me, I was transitioning from Teenage Republicans to the College Republicans. I'd get a phone call from Frank every once in a while encouraging me to keep up the effort and asking me what I was doing and how could he be of assistance. "Is there something that I can do?" I couldn't imagine that this older man—I think at the time Frank had to have been in his 50s—this older fellow had any really sincere interest in me, but he did. He would call up. I probably, all during my college career, I probably averaged maybe a phone call a month from Frank Whetstone. I'm sure that there are hundreds of people around the western United States that got a similar call.

BB: And this was going on. He was keeping the flame burning during the period of the Nixon presidency and the Ford presidency. And then obviously Nixon was re-nominated in 1972 with virtually no opposition. But in 1976 Gerald Ford, who had been Nixon's vice president and replaced Nixon after the Watergate scandal, decided to seek the Republican nomination in his own right in 1976.

TR: That's right. Just a minute here, let me turn this thing off.

Anyway, Nixon went, or rather Ford was running to retain the presidency. Reagan, I think by this time, was pretty serious. I remember the first time I heard Reagan speak was a famous



speech he made for Goldwater in '64, as a member of the Teenage Republicans. I was so excited about that speech.

BB: Did you hear Reagan give that in person?

TR: No I didn't, but I heard it on television. It actually played twice. It played earlier to a smaller audience and then they gathered up a bunch of money and played it just I think the week before the election. I remember being so excited about Reagan after having heard it the first time that I got a bunch of the kids in our Teenage Republican club together and I grabbed the phone book and we tore pages out of the phone book and we passed them around and we were all going to call everybody on that page in the phone book to make sure that they listened to the speech. That was kind of the beginning of my enthusiasm for Reagan. I was so sure that if everybody heard that Reagan speech that nobody of any intelligence at all could possibly vote against Goldwater if they heard that Reagan speech. I was sure that was the answer.

BB: Tom, our light's blinking on the tape recorder here. I think we're recording, but I want to make sure. Let me just stop.

[Break in audio]

BB: We're continuing our interview with Tom Rolfe. We're leading up now, Tom, to the Republican National Convention of 1976. You were a delegate?

TR: I was. It was my first time at a national convention. Had been elected a delegate and it had been quite a struggle in Montana because we wanted to send a completely solid Reagan delegation to the convention in Kansas City and there had been quite an effort by the Ford people...I guess you were on the Ford—

BB: I was one of them, yes.

TR: To split it up according to the primary votes that the two candidates had gotten. If I remember right, it was like you guys were pushing for seven and thirteen, and we were pushing for a straight 20.

BB: We had 20 delegates from Montana to the Republican National Convention. This was probably the last convention as we're doing this interview now that was really contested. Reagan had won some primaries, Ford had won some primaries; Reagan had won some conventions, Ford had won some conventions. The outcome was in doubt as we headed up to the Republican National Convention. Even in Montana, as late as our convention occurred...I think this was probably in June, wasn't it?

TR: I believe so.

BB: So we had the Republican state convention in Montana and I remember Ford's surrogate to the Republican National Convention was his secretary of Interior, who had been a congressman from North Dakota. His name was Tom Kleppe. Kleppe then was appointed by Ford to be the Secretary of the Interior. He was a personable guy and the secretary of the Interior is a major figure in politics, and so he came to the Republican convention and there was a reception and those of us who were for Ford were thinking, well, this was a real coup on our part to have a member of the president's cabinet to be there and actually attend the convention. After all, we were just thirteen to seven for unity.

TR: For unity, I remember that. (laughs)

BB: The idea was that in the primary election, which wasn't binding, that that's how the percentage worked out. If you followed the percentage of Republican voters then the Reagan people would be entitled to 13 and the Ford people would be entitled to seven, and so we thought, "Well, that's what we'll do. We'll go that way." But the Reagan people, you may remember, pointed out to me...I mentioned this to one of them. I said, "This is just a unifying kind of a thing. Let's just be fair with each other."

He said, "Well, just recently the Republicans in Minnesota were in a similar kind of a situation where Reagan won—rather, Gerald Ford won—the non-binding Republican primary in Minnesota and so there was a majority of Reagan votes that went to the Republican state convention in Minnesota and because the outcome on the national level was close and the Ford people realized they needed every delegate that they could get, they took the whole Minnesota delegation, so don't expect us to do anything different here in Montana."

I remember my reaction was the same as yours, I thought, "Yes, I can see where they're coming from." So I pretty much knew the handwriting was on the wall. Then it particularly was the case when Efrem Zimbalist, the well-known movie actor, and Ken Weaver, another well-known movie actor—

TR: Ken Curtis.

BB: Or Ken Curtis. He was Festus, I think, on *Gunsmoke*. Ronald Reagan himself came to the Republican state convention and so we went through a receiving line, myself included, the Ford people as well as the Reagan people, and shook hands with Ronald Reagan and that sort of thing. I realized, if I hadn't ever before then, that we were being absolutely blown away on that thing because Reagan's celebrity was so powerful, he was such a radiant and charismatic figure, that there wasn't any question about how that convention was going to turn out.

TR: Yes, it was an interesting thing. The grassroots efforts that went into our organizing our delegate hunt for the state convention was really pretty unique. In my home county, Gallatin County, we left our county chairman home and did not let him...It was kind of a hard thing for me because this fellow had been my dad's banker forever and was a very good friend.

BB: Monty Lochland?

TR: Monty Lochland. He was the county chairman and we didn't even let him have a delegate vote at the state convention because he wouldn't commit to Reagan. We got everybody who wanted to go as a Reagan delegate, who was willing to do it, to commit to support the Reagan slate, and when we put a slate together, the delegates, on a grassroots basis selected their own slate and whoever was on that slate got to go as a Reagan delegate. We just convinced everybody to hang tough and vote only for Reagan delegates and, by golly, it worked. I remember several pretty powerful people in the local community came and tried to get us to do a split (unintelligible) and it didn't work.

Then the effort in Helena, where the state convention was, did the same thing. We sent 20 delegates back to Kansas City that were all committed to Reagan. Now we weren't completely sure of everybody, but they'd all signed off and said they'd support Reagan, so that was a pretty big deal. We got down there and even as the convention started the convention was not decided. So it was really tight. There was a perception among the people who were working for Reagan that Ford or his lieutenants had promised the vice-presidency to several different people, with the idea of holding those delegations for Ford until after the nomination. So Reagan made the strategic decision to name his vice-presidential candidate early on, about a week before the convention. The gentleman's name was Richard Schweiker. He was a senator from Pennsylvania. It gave us a chance to break into an important block of votes.

BB: From an eastern state that might be inclined not to go with Reagan.

TR: That's right. Then the other thing was, we thought that if Ford then was forced to announce his decision of who was going to be the vice-presidential candidate, we might be able to pull enough votes away from disgruntled people whose hometown boy wasn't going to be named vice-president, that it would make the difference.

BB: Now your feeling was that the Ford people were sending out feelers to a number of prominent Republicans, making them understand that they were on the list, on the short list, maybe even at the top of the list—

TR: And if they'd hold their delegation, then—

BB: There was a good chance that governor so-and-so or senator so-and-so would be the vice-presidential nominee.

TR: That's right. So this was why, with a convention as close as it was, that if we could break through that and force President Ford to name his vice-presidential candidate—

BB: Before the fact.

TR: Yes, before the fact, that we'd get some falloff from that and people who might be inclined to vote for Reagan on the second or third ballot might move us up to the first ballot.

BB: So Reagan stepped forward and said, "If I'm nominated, my vice presidential nominee...not even if I'm nominated, but I just want everybody to know that my guy is Senator Dick Schweiker from Pennsylvania, and I think the delegates are entitled to know who Ford's is."

TR: That's right.

BB: Obviously the strategy was that if he said "Governor So-and-so," then Governor So-and-so, So-and-so, So-and-so, and Senator So-and-so would be mad as hell because they would then release their delegates, and it would greatly improve Reagan's chances.

TR: That's exactly right. And if you remember the dynamic was such because Nelson Rockefeller had been named president under Ford.

BB: Had been named vice-president.

TR: Vice-president, I'm sorry, under Ford. Rockefeller was not palatable to the majority of the delegates, no matter who they were for. So early on Rockefeller had taken himself out of the running as a vice-presidential candidate. He was a sitting vice-president but he would not continue to be vice-president, and that's why there was a hole there, not knowing who was going to be vice-president. So that set up the conflict around the rule that was proposed by the Reagan organization, rule change for the convention, which required the presidential candidates to name their vice-presidential pick before the election was held to determine the party nominee for president. As I remember, the name of the rule was Rule 51-C or 53-C or something like that. But that's what we were trying to institute, this new rule.

Obviously, everybody who was lined up for Ford would vote against that rule and everybody who was lined up for Reagan would vote for that rule. That's the way it was. That rule vote, the vote to change the rule, was to be held on the night before the nomination for president was concluded. The vote was taken and if 51 changed their votes it would have passed, but it went down by 51 votes, by the difference of 51 people changing.

BB: So the Ford people were actively trying to defeat the rule, obviously—

TR: Correct.

BB: —and the Reagan people were trying to get it passed. How would the Ford people argue against what you were trying to do?

TR: Well, it had never been done and it was putting the president in a situation he shouldn't have to be put into because that was changing a rule. If you wanted to change the rule from here on, fine, but the rules we've been living under are this so that's the way we have to live under it right now. But the argument was basically just a stall tactic because I think they knew too that this was a critical issue for them. They really put on the power. I remember sitting in our delegation—of course the Montana delegation with only 20 delegates didn't take up a lot of space—but right behind us was the Pennsylvania delegation. I had, over the course of the events of the first couple days of the convention, gotten to talk to a young man from Pennsylvania whose family was in the road construction business back there. He was really on fire to support Reagan and wanted to do that. So when it came time for the rule change, he was really somber that night.

I went to him and I said, "What's the matter? You've been kind of a happy-go-lucky guy."

He said, "I just received a call from my family and they're asking me to vote against this rule change because they've been told that if I don't vote the right way on this rule change that our family will never get another contract for roads in the state of Pennsylvania. So I have to, for my family's sake, vote against the rule change." The young man implied that the Rockefeller family had that much influence on what was going on in Pennsylvania that Nelson Rockefeller was directly involved with that decision. He was just devastated because he couldn't vote the way his conscience wanted to because his family's financial future was at stake. So I know the pressure was on really hard. There may have been pressure from our side that was equally as hard. I didn't want to think that our people would ever do something like that, and I didn't hear things like that about our side, that they were putting on that kind of pressure. But that was the case.

Anyway, when our delegation was organized, Werner Green and I had been asked to be the political co-chairs of the campaign, of our delegation. We were the ones to kind of be the whips, to make sure that everybody was voting the right way to support Reagan through all the efforts. So whenever any item came up like the rule change, we had to have somebody there, we had to check with each delegate to make sure they were voting the right way. We had been going to strategy sessions at the Reagan headquarters hotel, which was then called the Alameda Plaza Hotel.

BB: This was where?

TR: In Kansas City. It's now, I think, the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, but I believe it was called the Alameda Plaza at the time. We'd been going to strategy sessions over there just to make sure that everything was going the right way.

BB: Was Frank Whetstone involved in the meetings?

TR: Very involved, but he was involved a couple echelons up in the national campaign. He was involved with a fellow by the name of Andy Carter from New Mexico. He and Frank were kind of the convention headhunters for the Reagan effort in '76. So after we had lost that test vote, really—it was a test vote on the presidential nomination—those of us who were the political chairs of the campaign were asked to come back to the Reagan headquarters hotel and we sat around in very frank meetings. Our group was primarily the western United States, mainly the Rocky Mountain states. There were a couple people from each of the Rocky Mountain states in our meeting and we kind of sat there just realizing that the end was near, that we were going to be 51 votes short.

BB: The assumption was that that vote on the rule was the vote. That's how it was going to (unintelligible).

TR: That essentially meant the vote on the nomination for president. If you'll recall, Reagan, in 1976, was about 65 years old, so common wisdom was that this was his last shot at becoming president, this was the end.

[Break in audio]

TR: —to the Alameda Plaza Hotel to meet with the campaign people, the folks that were one up the ladder from where we were. The team leaders of the political directors for each state for the Rocky Mountain region were the folks that we were talking to. We walked back into that meeting and everybody was pretty downhearted because they knew exactly what that vote meant. The vote essentially meant that we were 51 votes short of getting Ronald Reagan nominated the next night. By the time we got there it was maybe eight or nine o'clock at night. So the guy said, "We don't have a good answer, but what the campaign wants you to do is to go home and think about it tonight and we're going to meet back here at six o'clock in the morning and see if somebody's come up with a way to pull this thing together because we've got to find those 51 votes somewhere or Ronald Reagan's not going to be nominated." Again, in the back of everyone's mind was the fact that he's 65 years old. This is his last shot to become president, and we're all very dedicated to this man and what he says and what he does and we think he should be president.

So I went back to the motel and a rather sleepless night. We got back in the cab the next morning at six o'clock. Judy was there as an alternate—my wife—and I told her I didn't know when I would see her but that we had to do something about the situation. So Werner Green got in the cab and we drove back over to the Alameda Plaza Hotel. We sat there in our group and started kicking around ideas. Our group came up with the idea that nobody could sell Ronald Reagan any better than Ronald Reagan and that somehow we had to get Ronald Reagan to speak in front of that convention. Just the power of his persuasive abilities, his ability to communicate—he was always called the great communicator—that ability to communicate would save the day. Certainly there would be 51 delegates somewhere that would change their mind.

BB: At least that many.

TR: Yes, and maybe more. We might be winning in a landslide! So how do you go about doing that? The order of the convention set, everything is pretty well lined out. To change the order of things in the convention requires a change in the rules, which requires suspending the rules in a vote of the entire convention. Well obviously the other side isn't going to be excited about having Reagan up there talking, so what do we do? So we came up with a plan that when it came time for nominations that we would ask the people nominating Reagan—and preferably it would be Senator [Paul] Laxalt—we would ask him to defer to the former governor for California. Our thought was that if we did it in a way to make it look like he was going to give a concession speech that it would slide through.

BB: So Laxalt goes before the convention, according to the strategy, to nominate Reagan.

TR: And he says something like, "I was coming here to nominate Ronald Reagan, but in the interest of party unity I'd like to have the governor come up and speak." The convention would demand that Reagan would get up there and talk and give one of his rip-roaring speeches and save the day.

BB: (laughs) Stampede the convention.

TR: Stampede the convention, because he had the power to do that, the power of communication to do that. We'd kind of worked out the details, we thought. Apparently nobody else had come up with a plan, or at least one that was viable, because pretty soon we were asked to present our strategy.

BB: Word about what you guys had been talking about had gotten up the—

TR: Up the chain of the campaign, and we were asked to present our idea to the next highest level of the campaign, which we did.

BB: That was who? You and Werner Green and some others?

TR: There were about ten of us from the Rocky Mountain states. We were asked to present our plan. They gave us a half an hour to kind of put some finishing touches on it and then we went and presented it to the next highest level of the campaign and pretty soon we were asked then to present it to the top strategists in the campaign. They all kind of looked at each other and the—

BB: So you were selected as a part of a group, started out with the Rocky Mountain region, went to a step higher, and ultimately you were a part of a group of about how many?

TR: Of about ten people that were presenting this plan for how we would save the convention for Reagan to the top people in the convention campaign group.

BB: Was Frank Whetstone there?

TR: I believe Frank was in the room. It was part of that—

BB: But Ronald Reagan was also in the room.

TR: Not at that point. Finally, the top people in the campaign looked at each other and said, “You know, this is the only idea we’ve got that has a chance of working. I think we need to show it to the boss.” And so they arranged a meeting for us to go to Reagan and to lay out our plan to Reagan. So about two o’clock in the afternoon, after really having been over there at the headquarters all day, about two o’clock in the afternoon we were ushered into the presidential suite at the hotel and Reagan came in and met us all and listened to our plan. He came in and says, “I hear you have an idea about a way to pick up some extra delegates.” And so we laid out our plan. We were all pretty enthusiastic. By this time we had been kind of moved up the ladder. In the back of our mind continually was Reagan should be president, this is his last chance to be president, and we’ve got to do something. We’ve got to do something to make a difference. We’ve got to find those 51 delegates somewhere because we’re that close to him becoming president and we think he can win and he needs to be able to win this convention in order to win the presidency.

So we presented the plan to Ronald Reagan and then we sat and he looked at us all and he said, “You know, it might work.” But he said, “There’s an element of deception in it, isn’t there?” We all kind of looked at each other. We had been so wrapped up in our goal of getting him nominated that we had overlooked the fact that there was an element of deception in what we were doing. The next thing that he said was just amazing to me. He said, “You know, the presidency of the United States is the most important job that I know of. It wouldn’t be right to start a campaign for the presidency of the United States based on deception. Don’t get me wrong. I appreciate your dedication to the things that we mutually agree on. I appreciate that and I want you to continue to be involved and continually to work for what we believe in. But I’ve got to tell you, the office we’re talking about is so important that it has to be done right and we just couldn’t start a campaign for the presidency based on a deception like you’re asking me to do.”

We all looked at each other because here we had come up with this plan to maybe change the course of history but the man who would have benefited by our plan believed so much in the office and had so much respect for the people of the United States that he would not cheapen the process. He wouldn’t cheapen the victory by doing it based on a deception. I’ve thought about this before since then. I’ve thought, “Well, maybe our plan really never had a chance.” But we were led to believe it did. But this man was of such high personal character that he



wasn't about to consider doing an immoral thing or a "skull-duggerous" thing or a back-handed thing in order to get the job.

BB: Even though he probably recognized, as you feared, that at 65 years of age he probably wouldn't have another realistic chance of ever getting the Republican nomination.

TR: That's right. The room went quiet and then he talked to us a little bit about the things that we believe in and how important it is to work for them. Before he got done there was only one set of dry eyes in the room and that was his. Everybody else was virtually brought to tears with the recognition that we had been so consumed with trying to get this job done that we had overlooked what was right but this man who had the most to lose by not trying the plan, was the man who was showing us the right way. Here was a man who obviously had the moral character to be the president of the United States, who obviously had the kind of respect for the people of the United States to do the job right, and he wasn't going to be nominated in the next two or three hours. He was not going to be nominated, we knew that. Reality was the man who we absolutely knew had the character that should be president was not going to be nominated. We walked out of that room and he shook each of our hands and once again encouraged us to go forward in working for the things that we believed in and that the principles of free enterprise and freedom of the individual and more efficient government and lower taxes and standing firm against the Communist threat. Those were all good things and they needed to be promoted and he encouraged us to continue. But it was like he kind of knew, too, that he wasn't going to be part of the process.

The other thing that kind of hit me about it was we found out later...I found out later through Frank Whetstone that after the nomination was completed that Ronald Reagan had personally called Gerald Ford, congratulated him, and offered his full support. To do anything he could—to go on his speaking tour for him or anything he wanted—and that Ford never once called him back and asked him to go on the campaign trail for him.

BB: You'd wonder strategically why Ford wouldn't have done that. It seems like that might have helped Ford.

TR: I don't know. I'm sure that there were hard feelings during the course of the thing because it got down to be a Ford v. Reagan effort. Maybe they couldn't really get over it. But it was a really sobering experience. Like I say, those of us in that room knew without a doubt that this man had the character, he had the strength of convictions. As I thought about it later, I thought, "And this man was comfortable in his own skin. He didn't have to become president in order to be happy with who he was. He was willing to give it up because rather than doing it the wrong way he wasn't going to do it at all."

BB: I remember a story in a history book about Henry Clay apparently taking some kind of a stand—I don't remember the details—that was destructive to his chances of becoming president and when he was asked about it he said, "I'd rather be right than be president." I

think you saw first-hand someone who—I don't know what exactly happened in Henry Clay's case, but in Reagan's case, from this experience that you had personally—Reagan literally made that choice. He might have been the Republican nominee and he might have won the general election but he felt that to do so based on a deception was the fundamentally wrong way to begin the pursuit of the greatest office in the land and he just wasn't willing to do it.

TR: That's right.

BB: Even when, in all likelihood, it was the last chance he had.

TR: That's right. He was comfortable with who he was. He didn't have to be president but there was no doubt in my mind when I walked out of that room in the just deafening silence as we walked out of there, with the knowledge that he wasn't going to be nominated.

BB: How did the vote come out on the floor then? Was Reagan nominated?

TR: Reagan was nominated, went through the process, but Ford was—

BB: Was it about 51 votes?

TR: It was a little bit bigger than that by that time. I think maybe people sensed that they knew that was the difference and a new strategy hadn't come out to hold people together. I don't remember the final numbers, but if you remember, in those conventions, once it's pretty well a solid thing, well then people start peeling off, the delegates start peeling off. But it was an amazing experience for me and I don't think I really fully understood the whole thing until I recently read a book entitled *God and Ronald Reagan*, which talked about his incredibly deep faith. I think that that probably had more to do with where he was than anything else. I think this man had an incredible faith in God and he was comfortable with who he was and his relationship with God and I don't think that he had to be president to be happy, you know?

BB: Tom, did you ever meet him at any other time?

TR: Yes, I did. About a year before that he had come to Montana to do a fundraiser for the Republican Party in 1975. It was in Bozeman. The speech was put on at the Field House and then there was a private reception at a country club before that to raise money. I had the good fortune of being his chauffeur the whole time he was in town. There were a lot of people that wanted to spend time with him, so every time we would stop the car somebody would get out and somebody would get in to spend time with Ronald Reagan. The thing that I remembered from the experience was that he was an attentive listener, he paid attention to people, and when he participated in a conversation he was an incredibly interesting conversationalist and probably the best story teller I've ever been around. He was trying to illustrate a point and he told a story about the horse cavalry units that were trapped in the Philippines when the Japanese took over. He told the story about how each officer went out who had been assigned

a horse and shot his own horse so that the Japanese wouldn't get the horse. He told it in such a way you could just feel the emotion of these people who are bonded to those animals they shot.

Another story he told was about the time that he told about when he was filming the movie *The Cattle Queen of Montana* with Barbara Stanwyck. They were up somewhere around Glacier Park where they were doing it and Reagan had been around animals when he was younger and the movie set director was having a terrible time. They were supposed to do a scene standing in front of a fence with a bunch of cattle in the background. These cattle had been moved around a lot and they were mooing and creating so much commotion that they couldn't record the scene. The director was getting all frustrated and finally Reagan climbed up on the fence and yelled real loud, "Shut up!" It caught the attention of all the animals for enough time that they could film the scene and record the words and go on. He laughed about that and he said, "After that I was referred to quite a while in Hollywood as 'The Man Who Talks with Cows.'" He would tell stories on himself and was a very engaging man and very sincere. It was quite a thing for a dumb kid from Montana to have the opportunity to spend those little times with him that had such an impact on my understanding of who the man really was. It was an amazing thing.

Then I think when you go back and you look at what Reagan did in 1980, when he finally was nominated—who did he choose as his vice-presidential nomination? His primary competitor, George Bush. He chose the man who he'd been competing against. His ego wasn't in the way. He was able to bring the party together to work in concert to win the election by his ego not being in the way. So I think he was a guy, like I say, who was just incredibly comfortable with who he was and was very sincere about trying to do the right thing. Of course, I'm biased with the experience I had and as long as I worked in a small way for his nomination, but I think character-wise, he's one of the leading people that have held the office. I don't think there are very many people that have had that strength of character that he had. It's been an interesting experience to be involved in politics and see the changes over the last few years. You think back to when I first got involved in politics. When I went to school and I argued as a conservative and told people I was conservative I got ridiculed for being a conservative. Now everybody wants to be a conservative. Whether they are or not, they want to imply that they're conservative.

BB: When we were younger, it was okay to be a liberal, in the '50s and '60s, and now it's more okay, or at least in the '80s and '90s it was—I don't know if that's changing now or not—to be a conservative. Most people didn't want to say they were liberals. They were either conservatives or moderates. Certainly Ronald Reagan was critically important in that change in the political culture of the United States. Thank you, Tom.

TR: You bet.

[End of Interview]