

ROBERT J. DOLE  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with  
KIM B. WELLS  
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Interviewer  
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Wells: This is an oral history interview with Kim B. Wells for the Dole Institute of Politics at the University of Kansas. We are in the Institute, and today is Wednesday, April 18, 2007, and I'm Brien Williams.

Williams: Kim, give us a little background on your family's political connections.

Wells: My father was somewhat involved with politics. We lived in Garden City, in southwestern Kansas, and he had been involved not in elective office, but in helping candidates from time to time. I first probably thought about it back around the late fifties, early sixties, when I was about ten or eleven years old, and knew the name Bob [Robert J.] Dole from 1960. I remember it then, although he wasn't our congressman then because Kansas had six congressional districts back in 1960. I hope my dates are right here. The reapportionment after the '60 census, Kansas lost a district, so our congressman was a Democrat. Senator Dole was in northwest Kansas, in Russell, obviously, and then the two ran in the new what became the big first district in 1962. That's, I think, when my dad's first involvement with Senator Dole came, and I don't remember exactly what his role was. He might have been county chairman or something like that, but later on did other things with Senator Dole, including he was state chairman in 1968. I hope I have that right. Might have been '74. '74, I guess. But he had worked for Senator Dole for several campaigns and other politicians, so that's how I got interested in politics to begin with.

Williams: What were some of your own personal early experiences?

Wells: I didn't do that much when I was really young, in high school. I wasn't like a teenage Republican or anything like that, although I certainly had that affiliation. I guess the earliest I was actively involved in a campaign, I remember a state Senate campaign, maybe in '68, might have been '66. I came here to K.U. [Kansas University] in 1967, so it might have been the summer between one of those two years. It was a state Senate candidate that I helped. I didn't do a lot of door-to-door. I didn't start out just doing like kids normally do, because I worked at a radio station because my father was in the radio business. By the time I was thirteen on, I was not on the air yet, but working at a small

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radio station, and I loved that. I loved radio. So I didn't go out and do a lot of partisan political stuff, although in a small town the rules aren't quite the same. It's not like you're the anchor of the NBC "Nightly News" and then go to a rally for a Democrat or Republican that night. The rules aren't quite that strict.

I was always interested in politics because of the interest in the media. I loved the news. All my friends wanted to listen to rock and roll music when we were in the car. I wanted to turn over to the news, to find the news. Part of the news that always fascinated me as much as anything was the politics. I remember listening to the conventions in '64 and '68. I remember waking up in 1968 and hearing that Bobby [Robert F.] Kennedy had been shot the night before, in June of '68. So it's something I've always liked, and even as I've gone on to another career, I can't help but check the Internet every day, check on politics.

Williams: When did you first meet Senator Dole?

Wells: I don't recall for sure, but I would assume it would have been '62—I hope my years are right—when he ran in the combined district. I was twelve, thirteen years old.

Williams: You don't have any distinct recollections.

Wells: No. One thing about Bob Dole, from my first remembrance of him—and I don't remember exactly when it was—till today, when Bob Dole walked in a room, you knew there was somebody there. I mean, he has a presence about him. I knew this wasn't just some local yokel running for the school board. This was a serious politician, not just your ordinary politician from Kansas or anywhere else. I wish I could tell you I knew exactly the first time I met him.

Williams: Talk a little bit about that '74 campaign. Your father was more active than you were.

Wells: As a matter of fact, I had been away from '71 to '74 in law school, University of Virginia, so I came back to practice law in Kansas City in the summer of '74, so I was a

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brand-new associate at a big law firm and I didn't have a lot of time, so I was not that involved. I certainly followed the campaign closely. I think I even helped, as I recall, on some radio spots they were trying to do, to customize some spots, because I knew how to run the equipment, but did not have a lot of involvement in the campaign. Of course, that was a fascinating campaign. It was so close. But I can't say that I helped Senator Dole in any meaningful way in that campaign.

Williams: What about your observations of your father at work in that campaign?

Wells: Again, he was the state chairman, not the campaign manager, which depends on the campaign how active that is. He was involved in hiring and firing people, but generally day-to-day involvement, I don't know, because remember he was in western Kansas, I was in Kansas City. You didn't make phone calls every ten seconds like we do now and don't think about it. Certainly was involved in a lot of the meetings, but day to day, I don't know. I really was not there, even though I was not that far away.

Williams: So you established yourself in law practice here.

Wells: Right.

Williams: And then you made a move to Washington [D.C.].

Wells: Yes. I had just moved back from—graduated in, I guess, May of '74, came to Kansas City to a large firm, and then after Senator Dole did win the election, Dave Owen, who had been very active in the campaign, who I knew, came to me and asked if I'd want to go on the staff. I said, "I've just moved back." I was just there in Charlottesville and I'm going to move all the way back. But no kids, no furniture, it wasn't that hard a move, so I went to the law firm and said, "This opportunity has come up. I'd like to go do this for a couple of years," and they were fine. So I did. I moved back then, I guess it was right after Christmas of 1980. So I started in '81, moved back to be on the senator's staff.

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Williams: On his personal staff.

Wells: Senate staff, yes.

Williams: What was your role?

Wells: Legislative assistant. At that time he was a rather, obviously, more junior member, although becoming prominent already after one term in the Senate, and was assigned technically to the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs, which was the committee that Senator [George] McGovern chaired. Of course, I had grown up, being a partisan Republican, thinking George McGovern, '72, this is not the guy, and got to know McGovern's staff pretty well and somewhat Senator McGovern, and realized Senator Dole had a lot of respect for Senator McGovern.

Although I worked on other things too, including tax policy and things like that, because he had gone on Senate Finance Committee, the first thing of any significance I did was, this being '74, I guess our problem then was inflation or recession. Anyway, there was a high unemployment, and the Food Stamp Program, which the Agriculture Committee and the Nutrition Committee, both of which Senator Dole served on, there was a lot of action on what we could do. People were waiting in line to get food stamps because there had been a lot of disruptions in the economy. There was a proposal made by Senator McGovern's staff, "Maybe we should do something to make it easier, at least get people initially certified."

I went to Senator Dole and I said, "You know—." The Republican line back then was that we don't want to help the greedy; we want to help the truly needy. That was always the line, the lip service the Republicans gave, and I think largely believed, because at that time the welfare state was even greater with the FDC and all that. I said, "Looks like, from what I can tell, this is the situation where there really are some people who probably could use help temporarily because of the administrative backlog and the paperwork. Maybe we should try to do something that would show you are concerned about it." He thought about it and decided, "Let's try to work something out."

So that became the first of many collaborations between Senator McGovern and Senator Dole, the Dole-McGovern or McGovern-Dole food stamp reform legislation

[McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program], the first of which was a so-called instant certification so people could get certified and then you'd have to check their backgrounds later, to at least alleviate immediate need. That may have been the first time Senator Dole got a nice editorial in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*. I don't know for sure, but it's the first time I remember one, because, of course, it was unusual that he had been this rock-ribbed conservative, at least in reputation, who now was taking the more liberal position on a social welfare issue, even though you could argue (well, I argued) it really wasn't. It was an example of "This is a true need. Let's try to address it."

So that was kind of, I thought, the breakthrough, and also it helped start changing, I think—and I take no credit myself 'cause he's the one who made the decision that it made sense—started changing, softening his image somewhat from the gunslinger image, which I think was largely undeserved. The thing that I remember before, I mean obviously in '72 he had been chairman of the Party. Let me get my dates right. He's the one that had offered the repeal of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and infuriated Senator [J. William] Fulbright, which was wonderful, actually. But people saw a different side of Dole, and I think to this day that's the one single event from my involvement that I remember that didn't change him into some kind of a bleeding-heart liberal or anything, I think put a face on some kind of compassion in the Republican Party.

Williams: I want to delve a little bit more into this because this is such an important piece of legislation and he's so known for it, for the reasons that you've just given. I want to explore this a little bit more. Can you give me the texture of his relationship with other senators around this issue a little bit more, about McGovern, maybe, and then others?

Wells: The various pieces of the Dole-McGovern food stamp legislation carried over a period of time. There was this initial instant certification to eliminating the purchase, some technical things, eliminating the purchase requirements, so instead of giving \$100, getting \$160 worth of stamps, you just paid 60, got \$60 worth of stamps, a little netting-out thing. Those things took place over time, and I think he really enjoyed the role of

being a little bit against the grain of the Republicans, because he'd been pretty a down-the-line Party guy.

I remember at one point we had a hearing. The [Gerald R.] Ford administration—this would have been probably '75—the Ford administration proposed an alternative bill to one of the Dole-McGovern reform bills that was much more restrictive, and Senator [James L.] Buckley from New York and Congressman [Bob] Michel from Illinois had another bill, almost much more restrictive, and I remember there was a hearing at the Senate Agriculture Committee on several proposals. Of course, the chairman of the committee at that point was Senator [Herman] Talmadge from Georgia, a conservative Democrat. But Senator McGovern was on the committee, too, and most of the Democrats were liberal. They had a hearing, and Senator Buckley, who was testifying on his bill, I remember Senator Dole at one point asked him, “Does your food stamp bill have a burial allowance for those who starve to death?” [laughs] Showing that kind of biting wit. Of course, the mainstream media loved that because they love Republicans going after other Republicans. He said it with a smile. Actually what happened, some of the final reform legislation of food stamps happened after I really was not involved directly. Other people on the staff had taken over and I had moved to different duties with Senator Dole.

But it was interesting for me, growing up as a Republican, because of Senator Dole to work on this food stamp legislation. When things would go to the floor, I would be helping staff Senator [Jacob] Javits from New York, a very liberal Republican, and at one point Senator Dole couldn't make it to the floor, there was an amendment to his bill being proposed and he was tied up somewhere else, so Senator [Hubert] Humphrey, the lion of the Democrats, said he'd take care of the amendment. I remember briefing Hubert Humphrey, which I could never imagine five years earlier that I'm briefing Hubert Humphrey on a bill to carry the amendment. I began to see then the respect that had developed, if it wasn't always there, because I wasn't there from Senator Dole's first steps into the Senate, between Senator Dole and all the people in the Senate, both parties. There were a couple of rough edges. Senator from Ohio, [William Bart] Saxbe, made some bad comment, but for the most part, I saw that there was genuine affection for him from people on the other side of the aisle, and growing up—it's almost like it is now

much more, I thought that's the way it was. Then, no, there really was some collegiality, even if they didn't agree on issues.

It became apparent more and more later in his career as he became Majority Leader that he could work with it, he could work with other people, and they actually liked him. He could go on "Meet the Press" and take a shot at them, but when it got to be serious legislating, he was in there and people on both sides, even the Republicans, when he was off on one of his more liberal things, like on food stamps or nutrition, things like that, still everybody liked him. You could see then this was not just an ordinary senator. He was clearly already in the first part of his second term or even probably in his first term, when I wasn't there, starting to emerge as a serious national figure.

Williams: So you didn't see him, then, having to backtrack in some other area to sort of recoup his—

Wells: I don't recall that, no. Tax policy and things like that, economic policy, when President Ford was president, the first two years I was there, he wasn't some maverick Republican. He had an issue or two. I remember at one point some of the national media would explain his support for the Food Stamp Program, try to explain it away not as something that he felt from a passionate standpoint or a good public policy standpoint, but it was because of the *farmers*, there would be more food sold, which was total nonsense. The Farm Bureau didn't have any interest in the Food Stamp Program. People like that. It had nothing to do with it. When I'd see a reporter that had written that, I'd tell him, "That's not even close. You don't have to trust me. Go look. Go ask. Call the Farm Bureau. Call the farmers in Kansas whether they're real happy about Senator Dole's food stamp position. They either wouldn't know about it or care about it or be against it."

Williams: Tell me how the same bill going through two committees, how does that work?

Wells: Actually, the Nutrition Committee did not have legislative oversight. It was strictly—you could have hearings and you did not mark up a bill in the Nutrition



Committee. A lot of the same members who were on Nutrition were on Agriculture Committee, and it was a committee actually created for McGovern by the Democratic leadership, to give him a platform on poverty and hunger issues. I believe there was a big CBS documentary in the early seventies about hunger in America, which was kind of a seminal documentary, and it led to a lot of—so Nutrition Committee, when you get right down to it, was a media vehicle for Senator McGovern, which he used quite well.

Williams: So characterize the McGovern-Dole relationship after that particular legislation.

Wells: Again, there just seemed to me, and to this day, a genuine affection between the men. They had a lot in common. They grew up in the Midwest, they grew up without a lot of means, they went through the War, they were both war heroes. One turned out to be part of the Left, one turned out to be more to the Right. But it didn't seem to matter. It's the same relationship he had, and I could see this with Senator [Daniel K.] Inouye, Senator Phil [Philip A.] Hart, who shared this common experience. He didn't share much of their political viewpoint either. Obviously I wasn't there, but it's obviously a powerful bond, that common war experience.

Williams: That's an interesting concept, of course, and I'm sure you're right. Any other comments you can make about that, the shared World War II?

Wells: I don't remember. Again, Senator Dole wouldn't talk about that a lot. He was sort of drawn out in later presidential campaigns to talk about the War, but, no, I honestly have no personal recollections of him discussing it.

Williams: So then you moved on.

Wells: I moved on, actually, to come back to Kansas in the middle of '77, to try to redo the Senate offices out here, because I really frankly thought I needed to get back. I was going to go back to my law firm originally, but I needed to get back. I didn't want to live

in Washington forever, although I loved Washington. It was fun, a great job for a twenty-five-year-old.

Of course, intervening--before I moved back was the vice presidential campaign in '76, so that obviously was a unique experience.

Williams: So when did you come back?

Wells: I came back in '77, shortly after the '76 election. I came back in, I believe, the spring of '77. So most of these early involvements on nutrition and food stamps were '75, '76, then '76 the Republican Convention in Kansas City. I thought I was just going to go to the Convention, and then ended up being on the plane for the next two and a half months.

Williams: Let's start with that. You mentioned Ford's involvement in the food stamp issue, so you must have seen the White House a fair amount.

Wells: No, I didn't, actually. I wish I could tell you I was down there at high-level meetings, but, no, I didn't. I never met President Ford until Vail, Colorado, three days after Senator Dole was nominated for vice president and we went out there for meetings. So, no, legislatively I didn't have anything [unclear].

Williams: So from the perspective of the staff, did you see that nomination coming?

Wells: No. I remember, as a matter of fact, in summer before the convention of '76, I was in the office in Washington, had the radio on and heard that Governor [Ronald W.] Reagan had selected Senator [Richard] Schweicker to be his running mate if he got the nomination, which was very unusual. That had never happened before, where a candidate who might not even get, probably wasn't going to, at that point it was close. I went into the senator's office, immediately went in there and told Senator Dole that. I could tell he was surprised, like everybody was. Schweicker had been more of an Eastern liberal Rockefeller-type Republican. I told him that, and he told me later that he thought that was the last chance he had to be on the ticket. He thought the best chance he

had to be on the ticket, being a Ford man, was for Reagan to get the nomination and then Reagan to reach out to one of the Ford supporters. He thought at that point, “That’s the end of that.” He didn’t say anything at the time, but obviously it worked out okay. Ford selected him. But that was very interesting when he mentioned that to me. He probably mentioned it to me on the plane in ’76 as we were flying around.

Williams: So the Convention occurred. Why Kansas City?

Wells: I don’t remember why they chose Kansas City. Midwest. I don’t know. The last time it was there was in ’32 when they nominated Herbert Hoover, so the omens were good. [laughs] I don’t recall how it got selected. I remember I was excited it was going to be in Kansas City.

Williams: So then you were here.

Wells: Yes. I came back with Senator Dole to help him, because he was on the Platform Committee. He was temporary chairman of the Convention, I believe, and just a couple three of us came out here as staff people to help. I worked on some of the platform drafting, I remember, doing some of the staff work behind that. It’s not like it is now where it’s all written ahead of time. We actually waited till we had hearings and actually had people testify and write a platform. I think it was probably sanitized by whoever the nominee was when it got through all that process.

Williams: Were there some hot issues during the platform debates?

Wells: I’m trying to remember. I don’t recall. I wish I could tell you. I don’t recall anything really too volatile. I’m probably forgetting something huge, but I don’t recall it at this point.

Williams: So he gets the nomination and you go on his—

Wells: Right. Actually, we flew back to Washington. This is an interesting story. Flew back to Washington. Convention was over on a Thursday. He was going to do some of the morning shows, the Sunday morning shows that Sunday, which he did. As a matter of fact, I got to go with him. I think he did “Meet the Press” or “Face the Nation.” I remember, being brought up in the media business, that was really cool for me to be there right on the set of those shows, which I’d watched or listened to since I became aware of politics.

Then Monday, the following Monday, we were in the office and the operator buzzed me and said, “Senator McGovern’s on the line for you.”

I said, “You mean he’s on the line for Senator Dole.”

“No, he wants to talk to you.”

I said, “Okay.” Picked up the phone.

He said, “This is George McGovern. I’ve got a couple ideas on how Bob can get under Jimmy Carter’s skin.”

I thought, this is great. I’m hearing this history. The Democratic nominee for president from the immediately preceding election is calling me to give me some ideas on how the Republican vice presidential nominee, his friend, can get under Carter’s skin, because he did not like Carter. As a matter of fact, he revealed here in the last year he voted for Ford. George McGovern said this. I think he said it in the context of when Mrs. McGovern died last year, that both of them had voted for Ford and Dole; they did not like Carter, which was very interesting. Of course, I distinctly remember that was—I’m twenty-six or seven years old by this time. I distinctly remember the conversation, him calling me. I don’t remember what the things were. [laughs] I knew you were going to ask me that. I don’t remember exactly what it was that he told me. A couple of little things, you know. Needling. But I thought that was pretty good. I passed them on to Senator Dole.

Then we went on the next day to his first big speech was in Seattle for the VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars] convention, on a Tuesday. We didn’t have a plane. There was no campaign plane. This wasn’t thought out as well as it is now. We flew out commercially to Seattle, and I remember we got there, we left in the afternoon for the five-hour flight to Seattle from Washington, got there, had his speech. Noel Koch, who had done some work for Senator Dole, a very good writer, had written a draft speech and

we tweaked it a little bit. The issue was amnesty. Carter proposed amnesty for Vietnam War draft evaders. I remember Noel, who could write—I'm not a speechwriter. They're far and few between. But I remember I edited a line that was what made the "CBS Evening News" the next night. It was not amnesty; I don't even remember the line.

But we got there, that speech was ready, but he was going to speak at the State Fair in Iowa the next day, so they had faxed—faxing was the six-minutes-a-page fax. That was faxes early on. They'd faxed his speech to the, I believe, the Governor's Office or to the hotel. Anyway, we get there, and it's on agriculture policy, which I basically know nothing about. I mean, I grew up in western Kansas. I can't identify crops, okay? We get there and Senator Dole takes the speech. This is like ten o'clock at night, so it's one in the morning East Coast time. He takes a look; he calls me in, and has written up in the upper left-hand corner, "Disaster." The speech was no good. So I'm back on the phone with people in Washington, trying to rewrite. When I say rewrite, this is how things are different. Rewrite means the press secretary was there, Janet Bradbury, Janet Anderson, and I. By rewrite it means edit and retype myself on a typewriter—no computers—this agriculture policy speech and be talking to people—Bill Taggart and Bill Wohlford in the Washington office, who knew something about it. I tried to put it into words. We got it done and we flew back to Des Moines then after the speech in Seattle, and he gave the farm policy speech. But that's how that campaign started. Then later that week I think we actually had an airplane, a 727. But up till then it was just flying by the seat of our pants. Larry Speakes was on the plane, too, because Larry was assigned by the Ford White House to be the spokesman for the Dole campaign. So he could help a little, but he knew about as much agriculture policy as I did.

Williams: So you were a three-person—

Wells: There were three of us. Maybe there were a couple of others, people to carry bags and stuff like that. But the first outing was very small. The press, they must have gotten reservations on the same flight. I don't even remember how they got there. But by the end of the next weekend, they had a plane at that point, and we were on the same plane for the rest of the time.

Williams: What kind of a security detail was there?

Wells: There were agents, not a great number, maybe three, four agents on the plane, and we obviously had ground people. As a matter of fact, to go backwards in time, when he was chosen for vice president, the word came on that Thursday morning in Kansas City and he was staying at the Muhlbach Hotel in Kansas City, and the way you knew you'd been selected, he got the call, I was in a room next door and we had a connecting so I could go around the back and an agent showed up with a car, one agent, I think, to drive him back to the other hotel in Kansas City where President Ford was, and we tried to sneak him out the back door. But there were reporters. His name had been floated. They knew then that he was maybe one so there were reporters in the hallway just on the eleventh floor of the hotel. But that was the first time we encountered the Secret Service, which, for me, I'd never really been around them before.

Williams: As you describe this telephone call and you're typing away, where were Ford's people in that mix?

Wells: They weren't. This is what's interesting. Looking back on it, the first vice presidential campaign I'd been on, so I didn't know any better. It didn't even occur to me at the time, wait a minute, this isn't a Senate campaign. Now, he knew what the Ford administration policies were on agriculture. Senator Dole was intimately involved with the issue, and so were the people that worked on the senator's staff, but other than Larry being there, who was a press guy, he's not the ag policy guy or domestic policy advisor, there was nobody there. We were just saying what we wanted to say, which I'm confident that does not happen now in the vice presidential campaigns, at least not on purpose. The same with the speech at the VFW. It may have been the Legion.

No, there was very little coordination. As a matter of fact, throughout the entire campaign, I was the one that was carrying the issue stuff around on cards. Senator Dole is not good with a prepared text unless he has a lot of time. He's much better off-the-cuff. So we'd try to get away from the written speeches other than when it was a really formal speech and use notecards with issues we could shift around from issue to issue with. I made them. I did them. We had White House briefing books that the president

would use for debates or something like that. We'd get them. But never did I have anyone from the White House call me and say, "Now we want him to say this." They may have talked to him about some themes or something, but they didn't talk to me, and I was the one that was giving him some of the things to say. Of course, most of what he said came out of here, not any cards I wrote.

Williams: Acknowledging that Ford-Dole came real close to winning that election—

Wells: Right. Amazingly so, considering.

Williams: Where they started.

Wells: Right.

Williams: Do you explain the defeat in any particular way?

Wells: I think Senator Dole—it was Watergate. They just couldn't quite overcome it. As he said after the election that Gerald Ford was the last victim of Watergate, and that's basically it. Could the campaigns have been run better? Yes. But it's a little hard to criticize a campaign that starts thirty points down and gets within a whisker of winning. I mean, just like coming back in basketball, getting behind thirty points, you couldn't quite get over the top. Coming back is hard. You get twenty points down and you pull in three, and it's hard to get over. You just can't dig yourself that big of a hole. But it was just the time. If the election had been held six months later, I think that would have made a difference, too, get a little further away from Watergate, because it was such a wrenching, wrenching thing.

That was Jim Baker's first big national campaign, who to this day I've never met. But they did okay, but I look back on it, when we did the debate in Houston, there was nobody there from the White House. They let him try to practice, but he wasn't really good at practicing in front of cameras. The afternoon of the debate in Houston, which I think was October 15<sup>th</sup> of '76, he finally said, "Okay, why don't you ask me a few questions." So it consisted of me and Senator Dole sitting around a coffee table at the

hotel in Houston and Alan Greenspan just sort of throwing questions at him and how he might respond. That was the debate prep. I mean, that was the last-minute debate prep. He did fine other than people remember a couple of lines that everyone thinks now—I always laugh about that. We talked about it. [Walter F.] Mondale had—George Meany was his makeup man, he said, and the “Democrat wars” line, which everyone remembers. I mean, you think of stuff people say now, anyone who ever thought Bob Dole was a hatchet man, he was so tame, so much more respectful than what goes on day to day, banter every day now.

But the striking thing, looking back on the campaign, was how little coordination there was with the vice presidential candidate, and Senator Dole was sort of deciding where to go. We’d decide where to go, instead of the White House saying, “No, you will go here,” which probably is the way it ought to run.

Williams: Was there much chatter between Dole and Ford personally during the campaign?

Wells: I think there was, but again, phone conversations. They’d get together now and then. I wasn’t privy to that.

Williams: How would you characterize any changes in Dole when you knew him just as a senator and then as a vice presidential nominee?

Wells: I don’t think much. He was under a lot of pressure, doing four or five stops a day. You get tired, although his stamina is legendary. I was twenty-six, he was fifty-some, younger than I am now, and he had as much energy or more than I did. So I didn’t notice much change, really. Just day-to-day demeanor and how he conducted himself, I didn’t—maybe I’m forgetting. Maybe there was something in the heat of the campaign, but I don’t remember.

Williams: What was he like in between events, just traveling around in down time? What was that like for you?



Wells: We'd be on the plane, he would always come back and chatter, go back to the press. He was good with the press because he was always good for a quote. I believe most of the people in the press actually ended up voting for him. I'm sure they're not Republicans; I was pretty confident of that. I'm not sure about the reporter for the *New York Times* or someone, but I think a lot of them, the ones that didn't know him already from covering Capitol Hill, the ones that got to know him, I think he got along very well with them. The plane was—my memories of it were pretty good. The last stop of the day, he'd come back with his shoes off and just shoot the breeze. It was a pretty good atmosphere.

Williams: So, "shooting the breeze" meant talking about what?

Wells: Talking about the event or what's coming up next. I don't know. Maybe talked about the Kansas City Royals; they were kind of good then. He was not a big sports banter guy, although he always knew more than he thought he did about other things that you were interested in. He'd pop something out. Where did that come from? How did he even know? But, no, I think if you had a good stop, it's like anyone else, wherever you were and you had a great rally, especially if you're the candidate who's made it good, you're pumped up, everybody goes through that kind of swings. He very seldom was really down or anything like that.

Williams: Have you thought about the source of his humor? I've read a lot of speculation about that, some that it comes from bitterness because of the blow, the World War II wound.

Wells: Certainly I wouldn't attempt to analyze that. I just know it's always there. It's always been there.

Williams: I had an uncle who was quite a humorist, and I was always aware that he was enjoying his humor as much as the people—

Wells: I think most comedians or humorists do. They enjoy entertaining themselves as they go along.

Williams: Did you ever, after some event and some particularly pointed quip, see him sort of chortling to himself about it?

Wells: I don't recall. His humor, it was never off color, even in private. Just funny little observations. What the wellspring of it is, I couldn't tell you. I really wouldn't attempt to—

Williams: And you would say that the majority of it is spontaneous?

Wells: Absolutely, yes. He's got a few canned jokes. As a matter of fact, during the campaign there would be one joke he would tell about a bear in a bar, and at one rally it was clear he was wrapping up and wasn't going to tell it, and the press corps in the press pen started screaming, "Bear joke!"

For the most part, the funny stuff he did was off-the-cuff. I saw him one time, Saturday night, we had a banquet in the Disneyland Hotel in Anaheim towards the end of the campaign, and it was Saturday night, West Coast. Unless you say something crazy, there's no news; you've missed all the deadlines. He just stood up there and had an audience, including some Hollywood people, just in stitches. I don't even remember any particular observations, jokes he told. I just remember Lloyd Nolan, the actor, was the emcee. He had that group eating out of his hand. I don't even think he talked about policy one time; it was just one-liners or observations. He was on that night.

Williams: My guess would be that one of the reasons the press found him attractive was because he was not giving the same speech at each location.

Wells: Right, which he needed to. You look back on it, you don't need to keep the press entertained; you need to have a message. It must be horrible for the press that has to travel, to hear these disciplined candidates today, especially with the twenty-four-hour media, just the same thing over and over again. He'd get bored doing that. He'd say

some of the same general things, and he'd have some good wrap-up lines, but it wasn't a disciplined—I don't think President Ford was either, a disciplined message. There wasn't. Again this gets back to the White House. "Here's our message this week. This is what we're trying to push," tax policy or something like that. Didn't exist.

Williams: Going back to your time with him in the Senate, describe the ambience of his Senate office. What was that like, working there?

Wells: Hectic. The amazing thing about Bob Dole was, not only was he a national figure, he was also wanting to make sure that Kansas—with no disrespect to the other members of the Kansas delegation, which I had the most contact with, there was just an entirely heightened level of getting stuff done, making a difference, and there were times it was just absolutely hectic, trying to do two things. He's trying to catch a plane to go somewhere and you're trying to get something done on the legislative battles, and there were times when he could occasionally be short-tempered, but just briefly and then you just learned that "Okay, that's fine," and he'd come back later and everything would be okay. But because he was trying to juggle eight balls, he was trying to do something with food stamps and work on an amendment on a farm bill, get to the Finance Committee, give a speech, and catch a plane at two, have someone get him to National Airport in time. So it had to be much more active than most Senate offices. I mean much more active.

I remember at the time other Republican senators that I had contact with...he ran much more of an office, more like some of the national Democrats, always looking for something to get ahead, get a good story, and that was my focus. I got there, I remember telling the press secretary, "We just want stories of Kansas. We can do anything you want." I was ambitious for him, which I think he probably sensed and appreciated. It started with the food stamp thing and things like that. So he was always looking for a way to get involved, plus he'd come up with his own. He was a very good legislative—he didn't need a strategist for the most part in terms of how to cut through the crap in the legislative process and make a difference and be a key player in various legislation, even long before he was in the leadership. But you knew he was always on alert for that and made the office—it made it kind of hard because he'd keep a lot in his head. Partly

because of his handicap, he just didn't write a lot of notes. Till the day he left the Senate, it was all up here, knowing that that Democratic senator really likes this issue. That's why he was so popular, which meant that you didn't always anticipate or know what he was thinking about, which meant sometimes it was hard to keep—someone would come in to be an administrative assistant and find that they were being cut out. It wasn't because they were being cut out; it was just that he was sort of doing it himself.

It changed over time as he got more and more responsibility and he, frankly, had a better staff. As he got to the leadership, he got to be chairman of the Finance Committee, I was there and helped hire some of the top people that stayed with him then on through his leadership office, that were just a cut above the people in our office. Our office were mainly—they were great people in the office that worked hard, but some people are just more gifted in thinking ambitiously for the candidate or thinking about policy or thinking about media, how this plays in the national media, and those people came on board. Most of them were not Kansans; they were other people that were there on their merit, just very, very extremely bright people.

Williams: When he would come into the office in the morning, what effect did his presence have on the ambience?

Wells: It was an office. He was the boss. If you were sitting around goofing around, he really wanted to get to work. But even though he knew you may have been there till two in the morning with him on the floor of the Senate, so he knew you weren't a goof, but as I got around him more and more, I got less and less worried about that. If I was talking to someone on the phone, I might finish my conversation real quickly. It's like the military. I wasn't in the military, but the senior guy comes in, it's time to snap to. And if you've been working hard for three hours and you're just taking a two-minute—you know, he wasn't one of the guys. He didn't try to be one of the guys. He could have a good personal conversation, but you didn't call him by his first name. I would never have done that. So he was an important person.

Williams: He would mainly operate out of his office, so you would go to him rather than his coming to you?

Wells: Both. If I had something, as long as he was there and his door was open, you could go in there. I mean, not anybody would, but I felt like I always could. I didn't go in there to bother him about something silly. But he'd come back. He'd be back, doing something, working. He'd float back there. Worked both ways.

Williams: So after the '76 campaign, then you—

Wells: I moved back here to redo his Kansas office. I thought I might want to run for office, which I never did. That's no place to run from, Washington, so I moved back. Then over a couple of a couple of years there where he had trouble keeping an administrative assistant in Washington, personalities didn't work, a couple of false starts, so I ended up, even though I was living here, I would go back to Washington at least a week or two a month and sort of, de facto, do some of that job back there. I used to call him and say, "Do you want me to come back this week?" or, "I'm thinking of coming back." Then before long I'd just show up and he'd see me just like I had never been out of the office. I talked to him on the phone a lot even when I was out here, and I was still helping him on speeches and things like that, again while I was in Kansas. Half of what I did had nothing to do with the Kansas office; I just happened to be located out here.

Williams: So you weren't closing the loop with Kansas; you were dealing with national issues.

Wells: I was doing more of what should have been done in Washington, even though I had hired and fired all the staff out here and that kind of thing. So we were making sure the constituent services worked well, but actually I have to admit my interest was not in answering letters from somebody who had a Social Security check lost. It's just not interesting to me. I was more interested in policy, so I should have been in Washington, probably, but for other reasons came out here. But we had some good people. We had some good people that came in, who started coming in at that point, that were really topnotch people.

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Williams: Out here?

Wells: Here were okay, but I mean in Washington we started getting, that's when we started getting.... Rich [Richard Lee] Armitage was there for a year as administrative assistant, was a very interesting guy. But some of the other people that then stayed with him for a long time after that.

Williams: One more Washington question. Did he have a special relationship with the House delegation from Kansas? Was there any connection there?

Wells: Not so much. He was always very careful that you did the niceties.... If he was working on a grant or something like that, he'd want to make sure that the House member from the district knew what was going on, especially if it was a Republican, as most of them were. But as to his involvement with the other House members on legislation, I didn't have much involvement with that, conference committees or things like that.

Williams: What about the other Kansas senator?

Wells: They got along fine. The senator when I was there, for the most part, was Senator [James B.] Pearson, who was a smart guy, a little more liberal than Senator Dole, but they got along fine. Pearson just was much more laid back, like night and day, frankly, between the two offices in terms of activity level. I suppose they voted alike most of the time when it got down to it. There were a few things that Senator Pearson probably didn't quite agree with him on, but their relationship was always good. Senator Pearson, I think, nominated him for vice president when he was chosen.

Williams: For how long were you doing this once-a-month—

Wells: Pretty much did that through '80, and then I think I went off the staff in '80 and became campaign manager for his reelection in 1980. I'm pretty sure that's right. It was not a tough campaign. I'm a little Type A on elections, and he was always ahead and no one ever thought he would lose, but I was always convinced that—we didn't do polling,

and I was always convinced, and I knew that last poll was coming out the Sunday before the election, and suddenly instead of being a twenty-five-point lead, was going to be three. I remember getting up and going to the 7-11 here in town like five in the morning that Sunday to get the first edition of the paper. The last poll was up by forty, so I thought, “Oh, okay. I guess we are going to be okay.” [laughs] And he was out quite a bit for that campaign, but he also did a lot of campaigning for other Republican senators and candidates around the country, so he wasn’t here that much, even though he was up for reelection.

When he came to the state, he made sure he covered the state. I remember—Scott Richardson may have told you, I remember one time one Friday just driving around northwest Kansas on a fall night, looking for lights, which meant that’s where the football games were in a small town. Just go over there, show up unannounced, shake a few hands. You know the [unclear] is as flat as this table out there. Go find the next game, which was kind of fun.

Williams: What influence did his presence have on the game? Did they stop playing?

Wells: No, they didn’t stop playing, but just like I said the first time I saw him, when he walks in a room or a crowd, even if you didn’t know who it was, it looked like it was somebody important. Well, they knew who he was. This was home. This was northwest Kansas. He was always greeted very warmly.

Even when he’d go to a hostile audience during the late seventies when the American Agriculture Movement, the farmers were really upset and they were getting a little more militant, I remember he went to one town hall meeting and there were four farmers sitting in front—he tells the story better than I do. Four farmers sitting in front in overalls with hats on that said “Dump Dole.” He always told the story that he immediately said, “Put them down as undecided.” [laughs] Then afterwards one of the guys came up and Senator Dole called him by his first name and he hadn’t seen him in fifteen years. The guy said, “Bob, I know you’re trying.” He got him turned around, with the “Dump Dole” hat on.

But that was an amazing thing about Senator Dole throughout his career. We’d be going to a county, like in the ’80 campaign, some small county, and he’d say, “Now,

who is the chairman here?” I’d look it up, of course. Then he’d get in there, he’d see some elderly woman he hadn’t seen in fifteen years, he’d call her by name. It’s astounding. Again, it’s part of keeping everything in your head. I was going to ask him once, did he have that good a memory? Was he that good with names and detail in his head before his injury, or did he use the crutch of notes and things like that or writing things out like most of us do? Or did that make him become so good at it? Whatever it was, he was absolutely phenomenal. As you know, as anybody knows, if somebody important calls you by name, that makes you feel good, makes you feel very good.

Williams: Talk about the farmer revolution. What was that about?

Wells: That was a little testy. It was all about prices were horrible, farm policy wasn’t good, their target prices—I mean farmers were hurting. There were several nasty rallies. Of course, the farmers never like the Secretary of Agriculture, no matter who it is, for the most part. I’m trying to remember who this was in the late seventies. It had been Earl Butts up until ’76, and, of course, he self-imploded with an off-color, racist joke. I don’t remember who it was, but anyway, they were always mad. They really demanded—tractor barricade. Wasn’t that Constitution Avenue? Remember the big parades and all that? A lot of these people were people he knew, and they’d gotten a little radicalized, not in a terribly radical sense, but by comparison to the Farm Bureau, which is pretty establishmentarian. There were times he got some criticism. They wanted it solved. They wanted the government to solve their problem.

Part of it, in fairness, personally I’m not as sympathetic to farmers. I’m reading more and learning more about this, but I don’t understand why agriculture is treated differently than other people, why the government has to support it, but then what happens, what had happened there were big issues with President Ford and later with Carter, with the grain embargos, where we wouldn’t sell grain to the Soviet Union. Senator Dole was not in favor of that, embargos. That made them mad. Then they started having a beef. If they’re growing a product and then the government says you can’t sell that product to a huge market and it hurts your prices, it hurts your income, then you start understanding why they’re mad at government.



As a matter of fact, I was thinking about it the other day. I'm reading a book now, it's about corn, and I was wondering how did that finally get resolved. I guess the supply went down and the prices got up again or something? I don't remember how the agriculture—after the mid-seventies, we really haven't had any radicalized activity since. But he handled it well, always, even though it was sometimes uncomfortable.

Williams: That selling corn or wheat to the Soviet Union was a difficult issue, wasn't it, because on the one hand, you're helping the enemy.

Wells: Right. I think Senator Dole started out being opposed to it. He was a strong anti-communist. But I think he later adopted Senator Humphrey's view that he would sell the Soviets anything they couldn't shoot back. It was farmers, it was clearly a large market and it helped the farmers. Clearly in '76, when he ran for reelection, one of the things he'd always say is, "No more grain embargos." That was an issue that in any agriculture rally, which Carter said the same thing, then imposed one after he was elected.

Williams: So, of course, in '80 he'd already tried a run for the presidency, and my understanding is that that affected some Kansans by saying, "Does he represent us or has he moved beyond Kansas?" How did he handle that?

Wells: I always worried about that here. As a matter of fact, we used a campaign slogan in '86—I was chairman of that campaign, I guess. Chairman means you don't get paid. [laughs] What we came up with, the slogan was "Bob Dole Works for Kansas," because even though he was always ambitious nationally, doing other things, he clearly was still doing more than all the other offices in the state combined for the state. He was more important for the State of Kansas, clearly, than all the others. But you know, the problem is, people see him on the news in New York or L.A. or Chicago, and they think, "Well, he must not be helping me any." So it was always an issue, but it was never really an issue ultimately, because he never had a real close election after that. It was something that I always worried about. I always looked at the dark side of how things could go wrong. But, I wouldn't say, "I wish he'd spend more time out here." But he knew. He had a feel for it.

Williams: How much time did he spend out here?

Wells: Not that much. In the '86 election—you make the illusion of seeming like you're spending more time. Just got to make sure you hit the right markets, make sure you get on TV, get on Wichita, cause that goes to western Kansas, so it looks like you're here, put out press releases on local issues. Then you can go campaign for somebody in Minnesota or Vermont. And apparently I overestimated how much people—I mean, there was a thought, "If he's that busy with other people, he doesn't care about us," but it never showed up ultimately at the poll, and part of it was that he didn't have strong opposition. But that's also part of the reason he didn't have strong opposition. If he needed to, he'd have been there forty straight days, you know.

Williams: I was going to ask you how you account for there not being strong opposition after Roy.

Wells: Yeah. The Democrats didn't have a good match, for one thing. Dr. [Bill] Roy is a formidable candidate. But after that, they just didn't have—there were a couple of governors that could have run, that might have given him a race, chose not to. I think sort of the same reason when he first ran for the Senate in '68, why did the other Republican congressmen from Kansas just sort of let him—there was no opposition at the primary. Why did this guy from western Kansas get a free pass through the primary? Because he wasn't just another guy. They knew who he was. They knew how determined and what an attractive candidate he was, so it scared off the Republicans there and it scared off the Democrats from then on out for the general election.

Williams: So anything else about the '80 campaign or the '86 campaign? What about '92?

Wells: '92, again, not much. '92, we didn't know for sure if he was going to run. That's the campaign he didn't even tell me. He came out here to have a press conference, I remember, in Topeka. He didn't even have an announcement, nothing to write down. He

said, “Well, I’m here.” He opened the press conference up. Someone asked him, “Are you running?”

He said, “Yes.” That was his announcement. So those campaigns were pretty noneventful. I don’t remember much of anything. Again, I was not a full-time person; I was practicing law. But we had campaign managers, not a very big staff, and he got out enough to do what he needed to do.

Williams: And, what about your participation in ’96?

Wells: In ’96 I was not that involved, because I was just too busy. ’88, I was quite involved. ’88, when he ran, almost but for a few votes in New Hampshire, things could have changed a lot. Starting July of ’87, I took a leave from my law firm and was on the campaign with Bill Lacy. The basic week was I’d go in Monday morning and come back here Thursday and try to keep things going in private practice on Friday, then go back to it every week, then towards the end I did some other things. But I was pretty involved in that campaign in Washington, in Washington or on the plane.

Williams: Anything stand out in particular about that?

Wells: The parts you remember the most are the end. You remember how much fun it was to be with him when he won Iowa, and immediately thinking, “This doesn’t mean anything if we don’t win New Hampshire,” and knowing you were starting out way down to Vice President Bush there, and being with him in the studio when he told Tom Brokaw, telling him to quit lying about the record, which was interesting, which was actually true. They did kind of lie about his record. I remember we won Iowa, Senator Dole won Iowa, and that was on Monday. Eight days later was going to be New Hampshire, and immediately the polls tightened. He was actually ahead in New Hampshire, just the bounce from Iowa, and the Thursday before, my wife called me and said, “These kids are driving me crazy.” We had three kids under age six. “You’ve got to come home.”

I said, “I have to stay this weekend.”

“No.”

They were killing us with this flipflop TV ad, Bush people were, on taxes. They were trying to get another ad done, and I'd written this thing he was going to give—said, “We've got to get this done.”

“You've got to come.”

So I said, “Senator Dole, it doesn't matter if I'm here. I've got to go. Here I've written it. You've given the speech. They're working on it.” So I left Thursday night and came back Sunday, but then there was a snowstorm, a blizzard Friday, and they couldn't get the copy change to the TV stations, couldn't get the ad off. They had to counter the Ford ad about—“the Ford ad.” The Bush ad about Dole being a flipflop on taxes. I don't think it made any difference. It might have, but I think he knew after that, that it was probably over.

I remember a week after that, a week or two after that was the South Dakota primary, which Senator Dole won. I remember I talked to him that night. I was in Washington and he was in San Diego. I said, “Congratulations.”

He said, “Yeah, I can be president of South Dakota.” [laughs] So it was pretty much over after that. I can't think of anything else particularly.

Williams: What's the last contact you've had with him?

Wells: I was home maybe a couple of months ago. The last meaningful thing was getting Bill Lacy hired. Bill was looking for a career change, and they'd ask me to consider doing this. I said, “You can find someone better than me.” He'd been out here several times. I'd seen him when he's out here, but nothing—and I haven't been to Washington in a few years.

Williams: We've come to the end of this tape.

[Begin Tape 2.]

Williams: You were starting to tell me a little bit about the importance of Dole.

Wells: Yes. He is such an overpowering figure and someone—I started working for him full-time when I was twenty-five years old, and on and off involved in all of his campaigns, really involved all the way up through '96, and especially '88 and prior, every campaign, either the chairman or on the campaign plane, and people, to this day I'm still identified as—I'm Dole's guy. I think about all the most interesting experiences I've had, and nothing compares to having worked for him. I don't think it'd be that way if I'd—maybe it'd be that way with any senator or prominent person. But I don't think so. I think it's something unique about him and his drive, his ambition, his involvement in issues. That I was able to go from, at age twenty-five, being in the middle of major legislative battles in Washington. Something that, you know, you just, most people who get to be a legislative assistant in Washington, they're working for just another senator. They're not involved in anything; they sort of go along for the ride. I'm right in the middle of it. I'm thinking nothing could be better.

All of the most interesting experiences of my life, save the birth of my children or something like that, absolutely they're all Dole experiences. They're not at the law firm, you know. They're things that either because of him or through him I've been able to enjoy. You look back on that, even though I appreciated it at the time, I appreciated that, hey, I'm twenty-six and I'm writing speeches for the vice presidential nominee of the Republican Party and on the plane meeting national press people that I used to listen to on the radio, you know, growing up. I remembered it was neat, but looking back on it, it was amazing that I was able to do that at age twenty-five. My father wasn't in Washington, some hot political star. It was fortunate.

It was absolute luck of where I was, and hopefully I had something to offer that he saw. There were other people on the staff that didn't have as good an experience as I did because they couldn't get involved in these national campaigns, but to this day I still—Dole says something, people ask me what I think, even though I may not have talked to him for three or four months, you know. Yeah, and in Kansas, being from Kansas makes it even more pronounced, because he is, he defines, the whole era, the Dole era. Other people came and went on both sides of the aisle in various offices, senators, governors, but he was on a such much higher plane, such much a bigger-time politician than anyone that we've ever had.

With all due respect to all the others that have served, he towers over them. He towers over everybody he served with from the state and anyone we'll have probably forever. I mean, forever is a long time, but he is unique. He's a unique individual, and I was just absolutely—look back on it, I really treasure the chance I had to work for him and hopefully helped him along a little of the way. We didn't get all the way where we wanted to get, obviously, 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, but like I said earlier, I think I was as ambitious for him as he was ambitious for himself, which I think is probably why he liked me.

Williams: I was going to ask you why you were the chosen one.

Wells: I don't know. I've always felt I was. First of all, I did have something to offer—I do have pretty good political instincts and communication skills and I do care about policy. As a matter of fact, I'm not interested in Karl Rove's job. I really don't care about—I mean, I care, because I'm interested in the game, but the game was not—I loved the policy. But I understand the policy has to be interwoven with the game. No one understood that better than Senator Dole. I don't have nearly the political skills. I could not do what he does. I could not ever be him as a candidate, but I think I sort of sensed what he was good at, and I wanted him to succeed. Usually you think of these believers as young, adoring college kids who love some liberal Democratic senator, you know. I was just dedicated to making him—it was fun for me. It wasn't like selfless. I was absolutely having a great time doing it. I don't think there will ever be another Dole, not from Kansas, and certainly no one I see anywhere on the horizon now that will ever rise to his level.

Williams: What was your most difficult time with Senator Dole? Did you have a bad moment?

Wells: Yes, a moment or two, but nothing significant, you know. I'm sure I disappointed him once or twice, but no scars. Like I say, he could be short, he was busy, and be difficult for half a day, you know, but I never—certainly all my memories are, for

the most part, very, very, very, very positive, because I think I did some good work for him, but, boy, I got way more back than I gave.

Williams: Think about how badly he wanted to be at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

Wells: He did. He wasn't like obsessed, not to a level of obsession, but he was driven. In American politics, if you get to a certain level, that's where you want to end up. If you're at the county commission level, you're probably not too worried about 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, but if you get to where he got, it clearly was in his mind all the way up to the end of his career, at least from the time I was there. I don't know when he was a freshman congressman whether he was thinking about it.

I think it's good. I think ambition in the right format—I think today the ambition and the need to be on television, on both sides of the aisle, there are people who are clearly just saying something so they can be on television. I don't think he did that. There was a little bit of that. You've got to be honest about it. They're not just a bunch of philosophers out there getting on TV. You have to have a shtick and you have to know when to strike, and that's a good political instinct that the best of them have, but it seems a little more crass and opportunistic. Not to pick one out, but I think today of Senator [Charles] Schumer of New York, who's tremendously bright. I mean, he's so smart, you can tell, but you can't believe half the stuff he says when he attacks President [George W.] Bush. I never saw that in Dole. Occasionally he'd take a shot that was clearly just a political shot, but not like it was day to day, every day now with some of the people who know how to get on television. I mean, in the worst case, Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, just clearly pandering.

He was ambitious, but I don't ever remember he crossed the line. One time I remember a pander from Senator Dole was the Crown of St. Stephen, which was a crown that was taken—I can hardly remember this. Was it Hungarian? The Hungarian government, back when it was in the Soviet bloc, hadn't returned it to the people, and he got a bit excited about getting it back. That was clearly just a ploy. Couldn't have been that big a deal. But that was just a minor thing for a couple of weeks. For the most part, the things he talked about, he would do his criticism of—he didn't call people. I remember he was going to have to take Ted [Edward M.] Kennedy on something. I

remember he called him. “I’m going to have to take a shot at you on this.” He called him on the phone. I mean, it wasn’t nasty or anything, just kind of a political jab. I don’t remember the issue. I just remember I thought that was pretty cool he’d give him a heads-up.

I don’t think it happens now. It happens the other way around. This is an anecdote totally out of context, but it just reminded me of one. In ’88 we’re in his Senate Leadership Office having a meeting. I think Bill Lacy was there and Dick Wirthlin [phonetic] and some of the people were having a meeting. Senator Inouye pops in and they’re having the Iran Contra hearings, and he said, “Bob, we’ve found this cable that we’re going to release tomorrow,” something that kind of implicated Vice President Bush, something like that, “and thought you might be able to use it.” [laughs] I don’t know if that happens now, you know. They go back to the hospital, right, after the War? So even though some people probably still had the impression that Dole was some partisan hatchet man, here’s a liberal Democrat who clearly had affection for him, and I’m sure there are some cases like that now. But I just thought he had the right mix of ambition that went up to the line but never, maybe a minute or two over the line. I don’t see that now. I see a lot of people who get attention to get attention they have to just be pretty harsh. Both sides. I don’t mean to pick on Senator Schumer, but it happens on the Republican side as well.

Williams: It’s interesting how long the perception of Dole as this sort of fiery, melancholy character persisted. When talking to almost everyone who worked closely with him, they describe a very different person.

Wells: People don’t pay attention. They remember “Democrat wars.” They remember that. They remember the rough campaign in ’74 here. But people in Washington knew better. The press knew better. I mean, one of the most telling things was when they did a poll of the elevator operators in the Capitol, which senator they liked best. It was Dole. Or the Capitol police. They liked Dole.

As David Broder wrote one time, if we’d had a parliamentary democracy instead of a republic, Dole would already have been prime minister. I mean, there’s no question he would have been. Partly it’s probably why he wasn’t the greatest presidential



candidate. He was perfect. He was perfect in the parliamentary system. He was great with his colleagues. He'd always keep track of some obscure liberal Democrat, some little favor he could do, something important that he made sure he knew. Or if they were going to offer an amendment they knew he didn't like, he'd make sure he knew it was coming. Things like that. He'd have been a great parliamentary leader and prime minister. I remember reading that from Broder. It's a different game when you go out there in retail politics. Reagan was much better at it, giving a speech, better than everybody, practically, but Reagan would have been horrible, probably, as a Majority Leader or the prime minister in a parliamentary. He'd been terrible to detail all that kind of stuff. Doesn't mean he wasn't a great president.

Williams: Let's go back to Democrat wars for just a second, because you were there in the control room, probably, listening to this.

Wells: Yes. I don't know where I was.

Williams: (A), how did you think he intended it, and (b), what was your reaction?

Wells: I think the way he intended it was that it's just as stupid to blame the Democrats for every war in this country as it is to blame the Republicans for whatever they were blaming them, the bad economy, recession. It didn't come out that way. I remember when he asked somebody, "How many people were killed in Vietnam?" I remember he asked that before the debate so he had the number. He wasn't suggesting that World War II was not a bipartisan war. I mean, that would be insane. And again, it's one of his weaknesses. He got better over time, saying something—Vice President Mondale, who he worked with well, they were on the Finance Committee together, I remember not a month before they were both nominated, we did a Dole-Mondale Amendment I remember. He said something about George Meany was his makeup man, which that might be fine at a dinner party; it didn't work on a national TV debate. And Mondale knew better, too. Mondale was just here a couple of weeks ago.

Williams: Sitting in the control room, were you hitting your forehead?

Wells: I don't remember. I remember "This is not probably good." It was a Friday night debate. I knew that would be probably what they would pick up on, because it's a simple story, you know. You don't have to understand anything about policy or anything to see he walked into a partisan attack. I don't think it cost the Republicans the election by any stretch, didn't have anything to do with it.

Williams: And what about the "Stop lying"?

Wells: I knew that wouldn't come over well, but I didn't worry about that. It was over. It was over. You had to win New Hampshire. That was after we'd lost New Hampshire.

Williams: Going back—I know I'm jumping here like a tennis game—back to '76 where you said that he resisted any kind of preparation for the debate—

Wells: They had a mock debate setup at Vice President [Nelson] Rockefeller's house on Foxhall Road, and he went over once, looked at it, wouldn't do it. Just didn't want to practice. He just felt awkward practicing. Should have. I think he did later for later debates, but he would do a little more [unclear].

Williams: Is that true?

Wells: Yes. In '88 I mean. Not '76. There was only one debate in '76.

Williams: And do you know about '96?

Wells: I assume they did. I'm almost sure they did, but I don't know. Bill can tell you about that. I don't know.

Williams: Go back to the matter of how much he really longed to be president. What kind of a president do you think he would have made?

Wells: I don't know. I don't know. I think he'd have been good. So much of how good a president you are is dictated not just by what your demeanor is, but sort of what happens. Events seem in this day and age just to overtake you. Reagan turned out to be a great president. I wouldn't have necessarily predicted that. Maybe it's because I didn't know enough about him. I should have seen that coming. Jimmy Carter was a disaster. Where would Dole have been? Rallying people in an emotional speech, prepared speech, not his forte. So I don't know. I used to try to think about that, what happened from '88 on with President Bush, had Dole been there, how would things have been different, and I don't know. Of course, I think those guys were a lot alike, really. He's also not a gifted speaker in terms of prepared text. So I don't know. It's hard to say. Neither one of them are Clinton, off-the-cuff; he was the master.

I think he would have been okay. I think he would have been good. I think he would have been sound. He would have been sticking to a theme, making sure you stuck with the policy, push, push, push. It's hard to tell. I'm confident he would have been good. Would he have been great? I honestly don't know. I think the times sort of make the person, you know.

Williams: When you were with him in '80 and '88, were you predicting a role for yourself in the White House?

Wells: Well, not in '80. [laughs] I clearly was not going anywhere. In '88, yes, I thought about it. It was so early. We had to get past New Hampshire. But I thought about what would happen if, you know. I, frankly, didn't know. I knew I would probably not be able to resist, and I assumed that I would have a shot at a fun job. I didn't want to go back to be the Deputy Secretary of Commerce, you know. [laughs] I had no interest in that. I actually thought the job I would like would be press secretary. That was just a fleeting thought. We didn't get far enough to start worrying about it. I think I could do that well. But I don't know.

Williams: Did your time overlap with Walt Riker at all?

Wells: Yes, a little bit. Riker was involved. In '88 Walt was on the Senate staff. Walt's a good friend, a great guy. I think he had a unique relationship with the press. I, frankly, don't see Walt ever making White House press secretary.

Williams: Why not?

Wells: I don't know. He could do it. I don't mean he's not competent. Maybe I'm selling him short. Maybe he could be. The good press secretaries, the ones that are really effective at it, I mean, up to and including today, Tony Snow is very good at it. Some of the early—Jody Powell was good. He had nothing to sell. The communication skills, not just knowing the media. I might have been terrible at it. I'm not saying I'm any good at it. [laughs] It's a job I might like. I might not have the patience. I think you have to have the patience. With this pack of wolves you're dealing with every morning, it must be hard.

Williams: Talk just a little bit about those of you who are veterans of service with Dole. Do you hang out ever or keep in touch?

Wells: Through the Dole Institute I see people, yes. There was a reunion a couple of years ago which I could not go to, I was out of the country, but I talk to people now and then on the phone and still see people around here, talk to people in Washington, people who were on the Finance—Bob [Robert E.] Lighthizer and Sheila Burke, I see her, talk to them. Rod [Roderick A.] DeArment. But we're getting older. We're not all here anymore either.

Williams: Is there any common thread that you all share?

Wells: The standard—I mean, Scott Richardson's the best, having the standard—just the Dole caricatures. “Hi. How ya doin’?” Hold the pen in your right hand. Everybody does it—Bill Lacy and others. There's a lot of affection for him, in a funny way talking about what things were like. To this day, John Petersen, who worked for Senator Dole mainly

out here, have kept in touch with him, whenever he calls me on the phone, “Hey, how ya doing”? Makin’ any money out there?” [laughs] So there’s a lot of that.

Williams: I interviewed Tom Korologos, and he said that he figured the reason he and Dole had an affinity was because they were both wise-asses.

Wells: I don’t know Korologos. That was a different relationship. I knew him, but that’s probably right. I would assume that’s true. And [Lyn] Nofziger liked him, too, an ultimate wise-ass, a great guy.

Williams: Were you a collection of wise-asses?

Wells: No, no, no. No, I don’t think that’s true. No, remember I was much younger than some of that involvement. I was perfectly capable of being a wise-ass, but I think I was much more circumspect in my behavior back then. I wasn’t a contemporary of Senator Dole’s. Tom Korologos had been the chief lobbyist for the White House. I was just a guy from Kansas.

Williams: Maybe we will end with this. As a guy from Kansas, and speaking for the Republicans out here, how did the Washington operation look from the Kansas perspective?

Wells: The Senate office? I think generally it was viewed as pretty good. I think there are always frustrations between the field offices and the central office, because what happens there, the Senate office is going to immediately react to the senator. If he has something he wants to focus on, what someone out here wants to get done, if there’s a time problem, is going to be put to the back burner. But for the most part, I thought it worked okay. His constituent services were always as good or better than anybody else’s, as he was also doing national politics at the same time.

Williams: Constituent services, that was mainly operated out of the local offices?

Wells: For the most part, yes. There were case workers in the Washington office, too, that would handle things that needed to be done there, but part of it is just showing the flag, really. It was different back then because long-distance phone calls—people didn't want to make long-distance phone calls. Now nobody thinks anything about it, so anymore I think the need for constituent offices is really probably lessened, but that doesn't mean they're not out here still, because that's the way it's always been done.

Williams: Richard Norton Smith, who's also doing interviews in this project, is asking some people, what would you say to someone ten, fifteen years hence, who is a young person, "Who is Dole?" What would you say to someone about Dole the man to someone who didn't know anything about him in the future?

Wells: I'd say he's one of the best legislators of the twentieth century, one of the most important politicians of the twentieth century, domestic politicians, who came pretty close to being President of the United States. I would say there is no one up there today in the Senate that wields the kind of power and influence that Bob Dole did, given the nature of the times and how things have changed, or for that matter, George Mitchell, someone who's extremely competent in his own right. Times have changed. I don't know if we'll see anyone that powerful. They need to go read. They would learn about how a guy from Russell, Kansas could learn to be friends with people from Upper West Side of Manhattan and California and Hawaii, and they all respect him, and he was doing the most important legislative work in the country.

Also the personal story of Dole is just compelling, just absolutely amazing. I often say if what happened to him happened to me, I'd have died in the hospital bed. Now, I hope maybe I'd summon up the energy and courage he had, but just watching his drive later in life, that was him. I think most of us just wouldn't have made it. When we have setbacks and someone would say, "Do you think Dole is down in the polls?" and reporters would say there were a bunch of things going wrong on the campaign, they said, "How's he taking it?" I said, "How is he taking it? This is nothing. He was flat on his back for two years, you know. This is nothing. He'll survive this."

"How will he survive losing that election?" "Fine. He won't like it. He likes to win. But you don't have to worry about Bob Dole."

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Williams: Great. Thank you.

Wells: Sure.

[End of interview]

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