Michael Aron: It’s the afternoon of February 15, 2011. We’re at the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University for the Center on the American Governor. We’re talking about the Thomas H. Kean archive and also talking about former Governor Christie Whitman of New Jersey. And this afternoon we’re going to talk to Jim Weinstein who served in both administrations. In the Kean administration, Jim worked in several positions at the Department of Transportation and then became the head of the Authorities Unit within the Governor’s office. And in the Whitman administration, he was Commissioner of Transportation in the second term. Where are you from originally?

James Weinstein: I was born in Newark, grew up, left Newark and my parents moved up to Pompton Plains, Pequannock when I three. Grew up in the Pompton Plains, Pequannock and Wayne area. Went to work for newspapers in North Jersey, graduated from Seton Hall University and right until newspapers started closing I worked at newspapers in North Jersey and then went down to Philadelphia. I’ve basically lived my, except for an abhorrent 18 months in Delaware County Pennsylvania, I’ve lived my entire life in New Jersey.

Michael Aron: What’d your parents do?

James Weinstein: My dad was an executive with General Electric. My mom was a housewife. They were both natives of Newark and as were their parents and sort of like I’m a fifth generation New Jerseyan.

Michael Aron: So as you work in Newark today running New Jersey Transit you’re in your backyard in a way.

James Weinstein: I’m actually about three blocks from the old Newark News building and one of my first jobs at the Newark News was as a copy boy. I used to go down to Penn Station in the summer for a job during college, and pick up and drop off envelopes from conductors on the trains with news dispatches from our far-flung bureaus in Belmar and points south.

Michael Aron: So newspapers drew you initially. You became a reporter at some point?
James Weinstein: Yes. I spent 10 years as a reporter for the Newark News, for the Courier News when it was in Plainfield, actually. That’s where I started and then I spent about six years at the Philadelphia Bulletin covering New Jersey.

Michael Aron: The Newark News was a much exalted newspaper at least in retrospect. It’s thought of as the New York Times of New Jersey back in the '50s and '60s.

James Weinstein: I think it actually was. I mean--actually a number of my family worked at the Newark News from the day it opened until the day it closed.

Michael Aron: When did it open?

James Weinstein: It opened before the turn of the century, the 19th century and it closed in I guess about ‘85, ‘86.

Michael Aron: Before the turn of the 20th century.

James Weinstein: Twentieth century, right. I’m a journalist Michael, the math doesn’t go that well.

Michael Aron: We all get one little fact wrong in one of our pieces. You went to the Bulletin. I know the Bulletin because I grew up in Philadelphia. That was another fine newspaper that didn’t last very long.

James Weinstein: No, at that time I had worked for all afternoon newspapers and the afternoon newspapers, at that point, were getting killed off by broadcast journalism.

Michael Aron: The Newark News was an afternoon paper.

James Weinstein: An afternoon newspaper. The Bulletin was afternoon; so was the Courier News.

Michael Aron: John Farmer, Sr. was at the Philadelphia Bulletin but probably after you were <crosstalk>.
James Weinstein: No, actually I worked with John Farmer, Sr. at the Newark News also. And I often tell the story-- I've told it to General Farmer, his son, about the time I took dictation from John. It was during presidential primaries maybe in 1968, '69 maybe, '70, I don’t-- one of those years, the year of Kent State.

Michael Aron: '70 was the year of Kent State.

James Weinstein: Yes. John was traveling on the presidential primary, the Kent State tragedy happened, and John called in on deadline for the Sunday paper and I took dictation from him. It was off the top of his head, it was pure poetry and by the time it was over I had tears in my eyes.

Michael Aron: That’s a good story. So the Bulletin was your last paper?

James Weinstein: The Bulletin was my last paper yes.

Michael Aron: And did you stay with it until it died?

James Weinstein: No, I left the Bulletin in 19-- let me think about this. I left the Bulletin to join Ray Bateman’s campaign for governor in 1977.

Michael Aron: Why?

James Weinstein: I needed to do something different. I had some friends who I had met, sort of covering them over the years, David Norcross and some other folks. I knew Ray Bateman and it was an opportunity for me so I jumped on it.

Michael Aron: Why did you need to get out of the newspaper business?

James Weinstein: It was time to do something different. I think as a journalist that you need to have a passion, almost a blind passion for that work and if you don’t have that blind passion you don’t do it well. And I just felt that passion disappearing so I decided that it was something <inaudible>.

Michael Aron: I think that’s an astute observation. I think you’re right.
James Weinstein: Yes.

Michael Aron: Ray Bateman had been, or was at the time, Senate President or he had been Senate President?

James Weinstein: Ray had been Senate President. He was obviously a well respected long-term state senator. Actually, the day I joined him, his campaign, in August of that year, ’77, the Eagleton Poll was published and it had him 15 points ahead so this is fate and it was.

Michael Aron: Did you join as a press secretary?

James Weinstein: I did, yes.

Michael Aron: The Press Secretary?

James Weinstein: The Press Secretary, yes.

Michael Aron: What happened between August and November? I know what happened, we’ve heard it <inaudible>.

James Weinstein: We lost about 25 points.

Michael Aron: Yeah, for the Brendan Byrne archive of this center, we’ve heard this story a hundred times but let’s hear it from you. What happened?

James Weinstein: Well, we sort of got wrapped around the axle of the tax issue at the time. Governor Byrne and his campaign did a very good job of counteracting it. Brendan, who on occasion has a decent sense of humor, was able to do the BS line which we wore around our necks like a millstone for the remainder of the campaign.

Michael Aron: BS for the Bateman/Simon plan.

James Weinstein: That’s it.
Michael Aron: Yes we’ve heard that anecdote many, many times.

James Weinstein: It’s a great story to tell. It was really painful 35 years ago, however.

Michael Aron: I’ll bet. So you ended up in a losing campaign for governor then what did you do?

James Weinstein: Started my own public relations firm.

Michael Aron: In what town?

James Weinstein: I actually started out in my home in Willingboro, at the time, opened an office in Mount Holly eventually and eventually moved to Trenton. And I did some political campaigns, did sort of issues communications, strategic communications.

Michael Aron: Who were your big clients?

James Weinstein: At that point, I did work for former Congressman Ed Forsythe. I did work with Hazel Gluck when she was elected to the Assembly in 1979 and worked with a number of other candidates, Millicent Fenwick. Did that for about five or six years and decided it was time to do something different.

Michael Aron: Were you a Republican before you joined Bateman or did joining Bateman turn you into a Republican?

James Weinstein: No, I was an independent voter up until the time that I joined the Bateman campaign. I knew Ray, I respected Ray and I knew a number of the people around him and I respected them. And I saw it as an opportunity and I took it.

Michael Aron: At what point did you come in to contact with Tom Kean?

Michael Aron: You were stationed at the New Jersey State House?

James Weinstein: Yes. I was at the Statehouse for five years. I was a member of the Legislative Correspondents Club. I could sing once a year, sort of. So I knew Governor Kean as Assembly Speaker Kean, actually as Minority Leader Kean, followed his career and so I knew him.

Michael Aron: Like him? Did you like him back in those years?

James Weinstein: I did like him. I mean as Tom Kean was a very likeable person and in addition to being likeable was a guy who sort of commanded respect.

Michael Aron: Were you a reporter when he cut the famous deal with David Friedland that made him Speaker?

James Weinstein: I had just come to Trenton around that time. I’m just trying to think, maybe actually a little after that time so I wasn’t around. But I did have the opportunity to meet David Friedland but I wasn’t around. I was actually at the station in Philadelphia the year that that agreement was reached and the Governor became the Speaker.

Michael Aron: So you’re doing public relations and issues consulting in Willingboro and Mount Holly in 1981 and Tom Kean is running for Governor. Did you get involved in his campaign?

James Weinstein: I did after the primary but I had worked for one of his opponents during the primary campaign.

Michael Aron: Who did you work for?

James Weinstein: Pat Kramer.

Michael Aron: Pat Kramer, the Mayor of Paterson.

James Weinstein: Yes, yes.
Michael Aron: Who was expected to win the primary or at least he was certainly one of the strongest members in a seven man field.

James Weinstein: I had this certain ability to pick leaders who became losers. <Laughs>

Michael Aron: How is it that Kean took you on after you worked against him for <crosstalk>?

James Weinstein: I worked on the campaign afterwards. I had a number of friends from the Bateman campaign who had worked for Tom Kean in the primary and I just offered to do whatever it is I could at that point. I had an office in Trenton and it ended up being a pretty good staging area for delivery of news releases and staff could use it.

Michael Aron: It was easier to migrate between campaigns, primary to primary opponent in those days than it would be today, or not necessarily?

James Weinstein: I think it depends on the tenor of the primary. I mean I think you still see it but campaigns tend to be a lot more acute these days than they were back then. But there’s competition and even though I hadn’t been involved in the Bateman campaign in ’77 in the primary I watched the folks that had been in the Kean campaign that year that lost move over and try and work with the Bateman campaign. People like Tony Cicatiello. There was a sense that we had good people and okay we didn’t win, you won so let’s see if we can do that.

Michael Aron: Were you a volunteer for the Kean campaign or did you have a paid position?

James Weinstein: No, volunteer, volunteer.

Michael Aron: So Kean beats Jim Florio in the narrowest election in modern times and it takes three weeks to sort out the winner.

James Weinstein: Actually it was more than that.

Michael Aron: It was more than three weeks?
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James Weinstein: Yes it was.

Michael Aron: At what point were you offered a position in the Kean administration?

James Weinstein: I actually didn’t try and get a position in the Kean administration. I was involved in the recount in Burlington County which is where I live. And I didn’t make an effort to get involved, to go into government at that point. I had my own company, stayed with it, watched it. I had an opportunity at the end of 1982, ’83 to do a public education effort. Actually John Sheridan, who was then Commissioner of Transportation, retained my services to help in press relations, media relations, for New Jersey Transit’s takeover of the old Conrail commuter line. So that was in late ’82, early ’83.

Michael Aron: The old Conrail commuter line, was that what is currently New Jersey Transit or is that what is currently one line on New Jersey Transit?

James Weinstein: It is actually all of those lines that New Jersey Transit runs today. They were run by the Erie Lackawanna, the Lehigh, the Pennsylvania, the Jersey Central, all of those at some point in the mid ‘70s, at the same time Amtrak was formed, became part of Conrail as well as the freight operations for those railroads. They spun off the commuter thing to a thing called Conrail Commuter. And Congress passed a law that gave the states the option to either take them over or to hire-- actually there was a thing called Amtrak Commuter at that point. New Jersey opted to take over the rail lines. That happened I think very early on in the Kean administration or very late in the Byrne administration. And they took them over and there were like 18-- as I recall there were 18 brotherhoods that contracts needed to be negotiated with. Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, Brotherhood of-- The United Transportation Union, all of those maintenance workers and so they took it over and New Jersey Transit’s rail operation was formed. New Jersey Transit-- at that point about two years old. It had been formed originally to take over the old Transport of New Jersey bus lines that were bankrupt. So New Jersey Transit was formed to operate bankrupt buses and bankrupt rails and actually have done a pretty good job.

Michael Aron: And you were hired to help get the word out?

James Weinstein: And deal with the communications when you’re going through the negotiations. And at that point you had people literally laying in the tracks of
trains to stop the service, protesting the service, the lack of decent equipment, lack of on-time performance. Former Judge Ted Labrecque and a whole coalition of people in the Monmouth County area who were heavily reliant on commuters and it sort of grew out of that.

Michael Aron: I should have said in the introduction to this that you are currently the Executive Director of New Jersey Transit under yet another governor. Did that work with John Sheridan at the DOT lead to a job at the DOT?

James Weinstein: Yeah, eventually Tom Flynn, who was a former managing editor of the Courier Post. I worked with the managing editor at the New Jersey edition of The Bulletin-- turned John onto me. Tom left and became the Communications Director for the Casino Commission which, at that point, was fairly new. They had a Communications Director job at DOT and John asked me if I was interested. I had found doing transportation with New Jersey Transit that I had ended up with a real passion for transportation. I said sure.

Michael Aron: You hadn’t been transit oriented up to that point?

James Weinstein: I had had an interest in it but it was not something that I had worked in or frankly ever thought of having a career in and that was 35 years ago. I have been doing the same thing since, in one way or another.

Michael Aron: So you were in essence the Public Information Officer of the Department of Transportation?

James Weinstein: Yep, Communications Director, Public Information Officer.

Michael Aron: Alright. So we probably dealt with one another in those days indirectly.

James Weinstein: Probably, yeah. I moved from that and became Chief of Staff.

Michael Aron: Who was the commissioner when you were the Chief of Staff?

James Weinstein: John Sheridan and Roger Bodman actually.

James Weinstein: Sheridan first, yes.

Michael Aron: And then Bodman.

James Weinstein: Right.

Michael Aron: Sheridan left to do what?

James Weinstein: To go practice law again, to return to the practice of law.

Michael Aron: Riker, Danzig.

James Weinstein: Yes.

Michael Aron: Yeah. So Bodman came over from Insurance to take on Transportation.

James Weinstein: Actually Labor.

Michael Aron: Labor.

James Weinstein: Yeah, he had been Labor but then he went into the private sector and came back in from the private sector.

Michael Aron: So you went from being a communications person to a Chief of Staff.

James Weinstein: Yes.

Michael Aron: How was that transition?
James Weinstein: It was actually pretty easy because I continued to be the Communications Director. All of that stuff is about communications anyways so I just didn't have to write news releases.

Michael Aron: And how long did you do that?

James Weinstein: I was at DOT from August of 1983 until early 1986 where I spent a brief time in the legislature as Senior Director of the Majority, the year that the Republicans took control of the Assembly. Chuck Hardwick was speaker.

Michael Aron: How long did you work for the legislature?

James Weinstein: Less than six months.

Michael Aron: How was that experience after being in the executive branch?

James Weinstein: I returned to the executive branch.

<Laughter>

Michael Aron: Well tell us a little more.

James Weinstein: About?

Michael Aron: About the position you held for Chuck Hardwick.

James Weinstein: I was Senior Director. And I was basically responsible for constituent services, for outreach into the communities. I enjoyed working with Chuck Hardwick. I enjoyed the people that were on staff and the new members. That was the year that Jack Collins was a freshman and I remember him vividly because he actually read the bills before the sessions. I did that for about six months. Some folks are meant for the legislative process and it's not the place that I'm most comfortable or the most confident.

Michael Aron: Let’s explore this just a little bit. Is it that when you’re in a position like that you have 30 or 40 people who think they can call on you? Is that..
James Weinstein: No it’s actually not that they can call on you because as a Communications Director you’ve got 50 or 60 reporters who think they can call on you and it’s not that. It’s just that it’s difficult to strike a direction and then follow through on it. I found it very frustrating frankly. I loved the people but it’s just

Michael Aron: Harder to get things done.

James Weinstein: Yeah. It’s harder-- I guess harder to get things done. That’s true.

Michael Aron: So did you seek a position back in the executive branch?

James Weinstein: No I actually left the Assembly and figured either I’d go back into business for myself but shortly after I left I was offered a job as Director of the Authorities Unit for Governor Kean.

Michael Aron: How did that come about, do you know?

James Weinstein: How did?

Michael Aron: How did that job offer come about?

James Weinstein: I got a call from Ed McGlynn who was the Governor’s Chief of Staff at that point.

Michael Aron: And the Authorities Unit has how many authorities-- or in those days had how many authorities?

James Weinstein: There were around 40, a little bit more than 40 as I recall and some of them are small and all of the transportation authorities, so I was again back into transportation at the Turnpike, the Parkway at that point, the Atlantic City Express Way before it became the South Jersey Transportation Authority. I dealt with the Port Authority in New York and New Jersey, the Delaware River Port Authority, Delaware River and Bay Authority, the Joint Toll Bridge Commission, as well as higher education, health, EDA, all of those. And I had a staff of about six or seven people. And the job basically was to work with the authorities to make sure that the Governor’s policies were being pursued by the agencies, not to
micromanage the agencies but to make sure that they were in sync and doing the things that the Governor had promised the people of New Jersey he’d accomplish.

**Michael Aron:** Sounds like a big job.

**James Weinstein:** It was a great job.

**Michael Aron:** How so?

**James Weinstein:** It was diverse. I got to go all over the state. I got to be involved in basically every issue that you can imagine just because those agencies are involved in every issue whether it’s healthcare or it’s education, transportation—I mentioned, all of those. And you can do it from day to day. As the director I could deal with the cream on the top. But it was just wonderful. The really neat thing about it was that it gave you a real sense about New Jersey’s diversity not in terms of its ethnic makeup but in terms of the complexity of what New Jersey is. You got a really good sense of it.

**Michael Aron:** What was the most prestigious authority? The Port Authority? The Sports Authority?

**James Weinstein:** I guess in a lot of ways it’s sort of a function of where you sit. I think that at that point a lot of folks would have told you that the Sports Authority was the most prestigious authority and it clearly was. I mean that was really in the heyday of the Sports Authority. Jon Hanson was the Chairman, Bob Mulcahy was the Executive Director. Racing was doing well. The stadium was doing well. There was talk of building another stadium I guess. The arena was doing well. There was talk about building a baseball stadium, so it clearly was a prestigious organization. And professional sports and all of those things have a certain cache, and based on that, I think people would probably say that. From my standpoint I thought the Bi-State Authorities, the Port of Authority of New York and New Jersey, the Delaware River Port Authority were the most interesting organizations.

**Michael Aron:** Why? How so?

**James Weinstein:** It goes back to transportation. They touch everybody’s life every day in a thousand different ways that people don’t think about they just take for granted. And in terms of the Bi-State Authorities at that point, the Port
Authority of New York and New Jersey actually laid the ground work for how you can take the revenues that are generated by transportation facilities, invest in a region, help that region to grow and the Port Authority laid groundwork with that when Peter Goldmark was Executive Director. And we did the same kind of thing I think. It may have been a mistake in hindsight but with the Delaware River Port Authority we gave it some economic development powers. We had to get that through not only our legislature but through Congress also because it’s a bi-state compact. The same thing was done with the Delaware River and Bay Authority although that was finalized I think during the Florio administration but we started it. The ability to take those things and reinvest in the region in which those agencies exist and create jobs, create wealth, create a quality of life. It also resulted in some abuses and on occasion I’ll go back and say, “What could we have done differently that would’ve avoided that” and I haven’t come up with the answer.

**Michael Aron:** Well this year, the DRPA has come under great fire in part from reports that we did on NJN news and put on the air for diverting toll monies to economic development projects that didn’t bear fruit or that were wired to political cronies or whatever. How does using a port authority as an economic development engine look to you in hindsight?

**James Weinstein:** I think that there were some things that should have been done differently over time. And I’ll tell you the Delaware Port Authority is a perfect example. You remember that the aquarium was actually built by the Sports Authority and..

**Michael Aron:** The Camden Aquarium.

**James Weinstein:** The Camden Aquarium.

**Michael Aron:** Thomas H. Kean Aquarium.

**James Weinstein:** Aquarium, yes. And the Governor was not a big fan of having that named after him. They did it over his objection at the time. But I think it was in recognition of his willingness to direct the state to make some investments in a place that needed investments.

**Michael Aron:** So that was a good thing is what you’re saying?
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James Weinstein: Well yes. I think it is a good thing. But those investments obviously have gone a little far afield and I think anybody who looked at it objectively would say, “You know, we should have done some things differently.”

Michael Aron: You had served on the DRPA board when you were in the private sector, is that what you told me?

James Weinstein: Yes, yes. Yes.

Michael Aron: Because you had helped Tom Kean get elected you stayed with your public relations business but got an appointment to a board?

James Weinstein: Well actually, Christie Whitman appointed me to the DRPA.

Michael Aron: Oh, you served later on the DRPA?

James Weinstein: Yes, yeah. Yes.

Michael Aron: Not before you..

James Weinstein: Not before, no.

Michael Aron: Okay. To what extent did you interact with Tom Kean when you were his authorities unit chief?

James Weinstein: I used to get him in trouble on a regular basis. We worked pretty closely. I mean all of the minutes of virtually every major authority have to go to the Governor for his approval, either tacit or written approval. So you’re communicating with him on a regular basis as the staff on these 40 agencies and at some point I concluded that the indebtedness of these agencies was actually greater than the general obligations of the state. So they’re doing little things. They did a Turnpike widening at that point. They built the aquarium.

Michael Aron: Where was the Turnpike widening, exit..

James Weinstein: The..
Michael Aron: Thirteen?

James Weinstein: Yeah. It was basically from Newark Airport down to exit 8A as I recall.

Michael Aron: So where the merge now happens.

James Weinstein: Right. That was the widening that was done-- I guess it would have been-- O'Sullivan was chairman of the agency at the time it was initiated and basically was going on the whole time. Took about 10 years to complete.

Michael Aron: What’d you think of Tom Kean as a governor?

James Weinstein: The same thing I think about him today. It was a great honor to work for him. I think there are some things that you take pride in in your life and one of the things I take an immense amount of pride in is that I was able to work for Tom Kean. I think he is what every person aspires to be. He’s a great model. He was a great statesman and a very good politician.

Michael Aron: Was he a very good politician when you knew him as a reporter early in his career.

James Weinstein: I think the answer to that is yes. He was the Speaker of the Assembly. Actually I met him before he was Speaker. I met him when I was working for the Newark News and based in Essex County at that point. But when I really got to know him he was the Speaker. You don’t become the Speaker of the New Jersey Assembly especially in a house that’s evenly divided unless you’re a very good politician. He understood the game. He understood the State. He understood the people that he worked with and despite his efforts to be kinder and gentler he’s pretty firm and tough.

Michael Aron: What do you think his greatest contribution or contributions were as governor?

James Weinstein: I mean you can go through a whole series of legislation that he’s passed and all and that but I think that for those of us who are New Jerseyans by birthright and know what New Jersey’s about and know what the people in New
Jersey are about or at least think they do that he’s just a terrific model of what we want to be and setting an example for that. And you can talk about specific examples whether it’s investment in the cities, whether it’s NJPAC in Newark and all of those sort of bricks-and-mortar accomplishments that are clearly important and they clearly underscore his commitments to the cities of the state and all of that. But I think, more importantly, his example that he set of the politics of inclusion, the fact that he could go from an election victory in 1981 of 1,849 votes as I recall to the largest plurality in the history of the state to this day, I believe, an election in which a Republican won a majority of the African American vote and to the extent that a governor sort of represents all of the people in the state, I just think he did a magnificent job of it and I told him when we did the first forum that I was proud to work for him.

**Michael Aron:** Did you work right up until the end of the administration?

**James Weinstein:** No, I left about six months before the administration ended.

**Michael Aron:** Why?

**James Weinstein:** I had kids that I had to put through college.

**Michael Aron:** What’d you do?

**James Weinstein:** I went back into business for myself.

**Michael Aron:** Doing what kind of work at this point?

**James Weinstein:** Communications again, public relations. Did strategic communications, some lobbying. Eventually did lobbying, but basically the same kind of work that I had been doing on a different playing field.

**Michael Aron:** Who did you work most closely with when you were in the governor’s office? Who from his staff?

**James Weinstein:** In Governor Kean’s office?
Michael Aron: Yes.

James Weinstein: I think I actually reported directly to the Counsel, Mike Cole at the time, and Mike’s successor, Debbie Poritz, Chief Justice, and I also worked very closely with the Chief of Staff, Ed McGlenn.

Michael Aron: When did you first become aware of Christie Whitman?

James Weinstein: I met Christie for the first time actually during the Kean administration after she had been appointed to the BPU or the PUC. I forget what it was.

Michael Aron: BPU.

James Weinstein: BPU at that point. She was. So I met her there.

Michael Aron: Did you know you were meeting a future governor when you met her?

James Weinstein: I was hoping. No.

Michael Aron: I mean did she look like a promising politician at that point in time?

James Weinstein: Sure, absolutely. Yes, I think everybody understood that Christie was the future in a lot of ways, or potentially the future in a lot of ways.

Michael Aron: She ran for Senate in 1990. You were gone from government at that point in time. Did you do anything with her?

James Weinstein: No, not really. I contributed, but I didn’t work in the campaign. I basically was not doing campaigns at that point, but to the extent that you have friends working in campaigns, you try and be helpful if they call. But I was not actually involved in that campaign.

Michael Aron: She came close to knocking off a legend in that campaign.
James Weinstein: Yes she did.

Michael Aron: How about her next campaign, two-three years later for governor? Did you get involved?

James Weinstein: Yes.

Michael Aron: What’d you do?

James Weinstein: I volunteered, sort of gave her advice on the things that I knew about. Worked with Hazel Gluck and John Sheridan who were also working on it, Judy Shaw, and did whatever I was asked to do.

Michael Aron: She was running against an incumbent governor. Did you expect her to win?

James Weinstein: I think that when you’re running against an incumbent, you’re always hopeful that you’ll win, but you never expect it. The incumbency is powerful.

Michael Aron: You say that when you went to work for Ray Bateman in August he was up 15 points. Christie Whitman in September was down 20 points and then promised a 30 percent income tax cut and that seemed to turn everything around. Is that your recollection of what turned it around?

James Weinstein: Well, I think that clearly was sort of the decision, but I think that the important part of what Christie did in that campaign was be resolute on that. Not only that we’re going to cut taxes 30 percent. Anybody can say that, but you’ve got to stick to it because people are going to push back and if you didn’t learn that from the Bateman campaign then you didn’t learn anything. I mean Christie learned from that and so she pushed. She said, “Look, this is what we’re going to do and we’re going to make it work,” and she did it with credibility and she convinced a sufficient number of people to believe her and she did it and delivered on it when she got elected.

Michael Aron: How quickly did you join that administration?
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James Weinstein: They actually invited me to join and I was still putting kids through college, so she asked me if I would serve on the Delaware River Port Authority. There was one seat that was up and I agreed to do that.

Michael Aron: That’s a volunteer job.

James Weinstein: Yes, it was like a 60-hour-a-week volunteer job.

Michael Aron: You put a lot of time into it?

James Weinstein: A lot of time, yes.

Michael Aron: Why? What required so much time?

James Weinstein: At that point there were negotiations going on with the City of Philadelphia that the city wanted-- when the PATCO line was built in the mid-’60s, the city basically allowed the Delaware River Port Authority and PATCO to use the tunnel on the Philadelphia side of the river for a dollar a year and the city decided that that was no longer any good. They wanted to charge and there had been previous discussions with the Florio administration and so all of that had come to a head. They threatened to shut down PATCO which was what they would have done. So we had to negotiate that. You just have to learn it, have to make sure that the policies that the Governor was looking to pursue at that agency were implemented and, frankly from a partisan standpoint, at that point I was the only Republican on the DRPA. All the others were holdovers. We got along great with them, but I had to learn it. I mean I had been away at that point from that agency from April ’89 until ’90-’91 into ’93-’94.

Michael Aron: You say implementing the Governor’s policies. What does a Governor from northern New Jersey really know about what should be done in the bi-state relations between Philadelphia and Camden County or south Jersey? Is it really implementing the Governor’s policies or is it studying the situation and being the eyes and ears for the Governor and telling the Governor what the policy should be?

James Weinstein: That was very well said, Michael.
Michael Aron: Thank you.

James Weinstein: That is actually what it is, but every governor comes into office with some sort of overarching ideas of the kind of government they want to provide and I think you need to take those ideas and those principles and apply them in a specific situation. I knew the agency and frankly she had some familiarity with the agency. You pick that up during the campaign whether it was Tom Kean or Jim Florio or Christie Whitman or Chris Christie. I mean you pick that up as you go along. It’s just a question of making sure you understand the details and moving forward and making sure that things that are in the best interest of New Jersey are happening. It’s really easy to have your pocket picked by folks who have been there for awhile and know the agency much better than you and it’s not like you have a whole broad staff that’s at your beck and call to do that.

Michael Aron: You say you were working 60 hours a week at this volunteer--

James Weinstein: For a while. Yeah, for a while.

Michael Aron: For a while. How’d you feel about giving so much of your--

James Weinstein: I loved it.

Michael Aron: Did you?

James Weinstein: I loved it.

Michael Aron: Why?

James Weinstein: It’s great. I mean you’re not only dealing with an agency that’s interesting and it’s got a transit system, it’s got bridges, it’s involved in the port activities. It’s involved in sort of the freight rail side of the port, all of that. You’re also dealing with the interest with another state, so you’re not only dealing with the geopolitical realities of New Jersey. You also have to recognize the geopolitical realities of the state that you’re dealing with. They’re partners on that and it’s a 50-50 partnership. I can’t do anything as New Jersey if you’re not willing to allow me to do it as Pennsylvania. So it was terrific. I mean I enjoyed it and at some point I had to back off and work for a living again, but--
Michael Aron: Who were you advising privately during those years?

James Weinstein: I don’t know. I was doing some healthcare stuff. I had to be very careful about who I advised. I actually represented an engineering firm that didn’t do work at that agency.

Michael Aron: You had to be careful that you didn’t mix the DRPA with the private work?

James Weinstein: Yeah. You had to be sensitive to the ethics of the situation.

Michael Aron: At what point did you get recruited to come into the administration?

James Weinstein: After the reelection, John Hailey who was Commissioner at the time decided that he wanted to move on and they were looking and my kids were out of college at that point and I was able to. I was asked and I said yes. Didn’t look back. It was a great job.

Michael Aron: Was it?

James Weinstein: Yeah.

Michael Aron: What did you like about it?

James Weinstein: You’re touching everybody’s life in the state every day in some way and if you do your job well and the people that you work with, more importantly, do their job well which means I’m getting them the resources they need to do their job, everything’s working. I mean I would suggest to you that transportation’s at the essence of what New Jersey is about and Benjamin Franklin referred to us as a keg tapped at both ends and people always think that’s a slight or an insult. The reality is it’s sort of our power. It’s what empowers us to do things. Ports and airports and railroads.

Michael Aron: Do we have a good transportation infrastructure or one that’s decaying and in need of a lot of help?
James Weinstein: We do have a good transportation infrastructure, but it needs a lot of help now and it just needs constant investment and I think one of the things that’s sort of a life lesson for me and I think for New Jersey is that you look at how much we spend on transportation. We spend a lot and you say okay, we’ve got that Transportation Trust Fund done, which is something I worked with John Sheridan and Governor Kean to do in his first term. We got that, but you don’t do it just once. You have to keep doing it over and over again. Things wear out and the demands on system change and you have to adapt to those demands as time goes on, whether it’s in the highway system or the road system and understand that it’s a system. It’s not just highways and it’s not just railroads and it’s not just ports. It’s that whole system and if there’s any weakness in the system, or any break in the system, the whole system breaks down-- you’re at the essence of what New Jersey’s about.

Michael Aron: Did you work through the administration and the DiFrancesco period as well?

James Weinstein: I did. One of the things I always regretted was not being around on the last day of the Kean administration. For practical reasons I didn’t. So when I took this job, one of my goals was to turn out the lights, and I did.

Michael Aron: And who did you work most closely with in the Whitman administration?

James Weinstein: Mike Torpey was Chief of Staff at that point. Rick Moros was Counsel for a while. I’m trying to think who else was Counsel. And I worked closely with the Governor herself at that point.

Michael Aron: When you think of her governorship, what was the focus of her governorship or what is the legacy of her two terms in your view?

James Weinstein: Well, I think that the greatest-- I said this when I was sworn to office-- that again one of the proudest moments of my career was being able to help elect the first female governor of New Jersey. I mean I considered that personally a life accomplishment. I think it was important for New Jersey and Governor Whitman was clearly focused on the environment. Unfortunately it lured her away to Washington, but the environment. She was a terrific, just as Tom Kean was, a terrific transportation governor. You’ve got the River Line, light rail system. You’ve got the Hudson-Bergen Light Rail system, which was one of the
great transportation success stories in the country on the investment of more than three billion dollars. It has revived the economic vitality and the prosperity of Hudson County and the waterfront area. It’s just a tremendous success and it’s a great legacy for her. But preserving open space-- I mean she grew up on a farm-- so she had a sense of what open space meant. I think the open space preservation effort and environmental effort that she was responsible for is a real thriving part of her legacy.

Michael Aron: You mentioned the River Line and the Hudson-Bergen Light Rail line. The River Line has been portrayed as a boondoggle at times over the years. What’s your view of it?

James Weinstein: I would suggest to you that it’s not a boondoggle at all. I mean one of the things that’s always amused me and I know that some folks don’t think that the money should’ve been invested in the River Line, but if you look at what’s happened since the River Line opened about ten years ago now, at this point--

Michael Aron: It runs from Camden to Trenton.

James Weinstein: It runs from Camden to Trenton and you look at what’s happened in some of those old industrial river towns that were part of the original 13 colonies. I mean Burlington was the capital of West Jersey and you see what’s happened and you look at places like Palmyra and Riverside and you see prosperity and you see the housing that’s gone up in Cinnaminson and again along the way you see what’s happened in Pennsauken. All of those things, and it takes time. I mean it doesn’t happen overnight. You don’t spend a half a billion dollars on the River Line and on Tuesday everything’s hunky dory and you’re living in Valhalla. But I would suggest to you that before the River Line was built, those communities along that area were communities that were on the downside of their life and they’re coming back and in very real ways. People are living there and there are communities that are growing there and that’s because the investment was made in River Line. I have the benefit now in this recession that we’re in right now, even though the River Line is not-- the growth of ridership on the River Line is larger than any other part of the system. Now does that mean it’s paying for itself? No, but it means that people are using it. I admit that, but I happen to believe that how well a place does transportation and in this case it’s the state, is a real reflection of its civilization, of how it views itself and how it empowers people.
Michael Aron: That’s very interesting. Let’s get back to Whitman’s legacy for a second. How successful was her governorship in your view?

James Weinstein: I think it was very successful. I mean I think as I just pointed out some of those investments that were made. It’s interesting, at least the part of it that I’ve been involved in, that you end up sort of cutting a ribbon on something that’s a generation ago started. So I mean you look at how much open space was preserved in this state while Christie Whitman was governor and I think that’s a testament to her commitment of what the future in New Jersey is like and so I think that’s really significant. I think she provided leadership. I think New Jersey was prosperous when she was governor. I believe that actually New Jersey was one of the most prosperous places on earth. Now is that just because of Christie Whitman? No, but she was the leader of it and she fueled that. I mean you saw the investments that took place in our ports which tie us to the rest of the world and she fought for that and those were important battles and I think that you look at Port Newark now and Port Elizabeth. I mean those are some of the largest, second-largest port in the country and in very real ways drive what the economy in New Jersey is.

Michael Aron: As the state’s fiscal picture has deteriorated in the 2000s, revisionists looking backwards start pointing fingers at the Whitman era stewardship of the state’s finances. Is she getting a bad rap for that or is that legitimate?

James Weinstein: I think that in hindsight we all could’ve done better. There were things that if we knew then what we know now we would’ve done differently. I don’t think there’s any question about that, but that’s not just Christie Whitman. I mean you look at the Transportation Trust Fund, for instance, which was sort of one of the symbols of the problem. Probably shouldn’t have leveraged it out the way we did. We should’ve been a better steward of that, but that’s not just Christie Whitman or Tom Kean or Jim Florio or Jon Corzine. It’s sort of all of us. I mean I think if we’re not wiser in hindsight then we’re beyond help.

Michael Aron: You say that you were delighted to have worked for the first woman governor of the state and took pride in that. Do you think that she had a tougher time by virtue of being a woman than she would’ve had she been a man?

James Weinstein: I think she got dealt with differently. I think that in some ways that it was tougher; that perhaps people didn’t take her quite as seriously as they would’ve taken a man in the same situation. I thought she handled that
remarkably well and anybody who didn’t think that Christie Whitman could stand up to the best of them was a fool.

Michael Aron: Is it easier on a governor who comes out of the legislature than on one who does not? Or not necessarily.

James Weinstein: I think not necessarily. I think they call them two different branches of government because they’re two different branches of government and I suppose that to the extent that having been a legislator can inform how you act as a governor, that’s good, but it also could inhibit how you act as a governor. Your expectations I think if you’re not a legislator, if you’re not bound by the traditions of the legislature, whether those are good traditions or bad traditions, that it gives you some freedom to act differently and I think clearly that’s the tone that Christie Whitman set. Just silly little things, but sort of going out of her office and wandering around offices in the Statehouse shortly after she became Governor. I mean no other governors did that. Probably not since Harold Hoffman.

Michael Aron: You say you turned out the lights at DOT I guess when Don DiFrancesco left office?

James Weinstein: Yes. Actually when I think--

Michael Aron: When John Bennett and Dick Codey left?

James Weinstein: I forget. The day on Jim McGreevey’s inauguration day at noon--

Michael Aron: That’s right. We had a few governors for a week between DiFrancesco.

James Weinstein: A few? I mean there were like 16 governors between the time Christie Whitman--

Michael Aron: And then what did you do after you left office?

James Weinstein: I went to Amtrak and became the Senior Vice President, ran the Northeast corridor for Amtrak for a brief time.

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Michael Aron: Out of Washington?

James Weinstein: No, out of Philadelphia.

Michael Aron: Out of Philadelphia. Amtrak every year seems to be threatened with having its funding zeroed out and then Congress changes its mind at the 11th hour. What happens? Is that what happens?

James Weinstein: Yeah, that’s basically what happens. I mean it’s just sort of like having your head in a noose and Congress says that they’re going to pull the stool out from under you, but they keep the stool there just so if you touch it with your tippy-toes you’re not going to die. It’s actually been a little bit better recently, but, in my personal opinion, the whole sort of framework that led to the creation of Amtrak-- Amtrak was created as a for-profit corporation and is in fact a for-profit corporation. It’s 99 percent owned by the United States Department of Transportation, but public transportation is not profitable. It just isn’t. There wouldn’t be an Amtrak if it was. It would be called the Pennsylvania Railroad.

Michael Aron: So how long did you do that for?

James Weinstein: About six or seven months. I went down there when George Warrington was president of Amtrak. He actually recruited me.

Michael Aron: He had been Executive Director of New Jersey Transit.

James Weinstein: No, he left Amtrak to become Executive Director of New Jersey Transit. I knew George when he had been at New Jersey Transit, and his successor was not, and we’re not from the same planet.

Michael Aron: Who was his successor?

James Weinstein: David Gunn.

Michael Aron: From what state?

Michael Aron: Really?

James Weinstein: Yes.

Michael Aron: That is a different planet, isn’t it?

James Weinstein: Yes.

Michael Aron: So then what did you do?

James Weinstein: Then I took a couple of months off and eventually went to work for a large engineering company that’s now AECOM.

Michael Aron: AECOM.

James Weinstein: AECOM, yes.

Michael Aron: Where’s it based?

James Weinstein: It’s headquartered in Los Angeles.

Michael Aron: And where did you work out of?

James Weinstein: I worked out of their Philadelphia office.

Michael Aron: Doing transportation?

James Weinstein: No, I headed up their highway bridge business for the US.

Michael Aron: They build highways

James Weinstein: Design, do construction management, planning. All of that.
Michael Aron: And what lured you back into government service as Executive Director of New Jersey Transit?

James Weinstein: Chris Christie.

Michael Aron: What about Chris Christie?

James Weinstein: I was asked. He asked me if I would take the job and I was honored and thrilled and I did.

Michael Aron: Had you worked on his campaign?

James Weinstein: Actually not. I had volunteered to offer policy information, but the contribution laws are such that if you work for a company that does public work, it’s very difficult to understand where the line is and if you’ve got a big company that feeds a lot of people and their families, the last thing you want to do is make a stupid mistake. It’s not good for the person that’s running for office. It’s certainly not good for the company and most of all it’s not good for the people whose lives and families depend on the business so I pretty much offered some policy advice and that kind of stuff when I was asked about it, but was not actively involved. I was traveling all over the country at that point.

Michael Aron: Did you enjoy that job at AECOM?

James Weinstein: I did, yes.

Michael Aron: But you gave it up to come back into government service.

James Weinstein: I did.

Michael Aron: Go ahead.

James Weinstein: I haven’t found anything in my career that’s as fulfilling as government service.
Michael Aron: That’s interesting how many people we’ve interviewed for this series who share that sentiment. You could’ve come back as Commissioner of Transportation. I don’t know if you could’ve. I don’t know if you were tapped for that or asked about that, but why New Jersey Transit and not DOT?

James Weinstein: I think that who was it, Thomas Wolfe? You can’t go home again. I think it probably is not a good thing to try and go back. I don’t think it would’ve been good for the Governor. I don’t think it would’ve been good for me and so if I had had the opportunity I probably would have said exactly what I just said to you.

Michael Aron: And how are you enjoying running a challenged public transit agency in this economic climate?

James Weinstein: It’s a challenge, but one of the benefits I have is that I’ve known this agency almost from its very beginnings. Actually as a newspaper reporter for the “Philadelphia Bulletin,” I remember doing an interview with Alan Sagner when he was Commissioner-- he was actually Brendan Byrne’s first Transportation Commissioner and there was a thing called the Commuter Operating Agency which eventually became New Jersey Transit. So I’ve had a perspective on how this thing evolved and took over the rails from the beginning. The remarkable thing about New Jersey Transit is you took bankrupt bus companies, you took bankrupt railroads and they’ve turned it into one of the truly great-- it doesn’t have anything to do with me-- public transportation agencies in the country. It’s the third largest, but you’d be surprised and I was always proud about this when I was traveling around the country with AECOM at how many people who had learned the business whether it was railroads or bus or public transit planning or management, but who had learned the business at New Jersey Transit who were out running, or in significant management positions, at transit properties all around the country. I mean it is something that I always took immense pride in New Jersey and just so it’s a real honor to be the Executive Director of it now, especially when it runs on time.

Michael Aron: What are the top couple of transportation challenges facing the state in 2011?

James Weinstein: Well, I think Governor Christie made this clear when we terminated the ARC project that while we terminated the project, we didn’t terminate the need for the project. So the real challenge is how in the face of ridership that’s projected to double in the next 20 years-- trans-Hudson ridership--
how do you meet that need? Because if we can’t meet that need, the whole system’s going to collapse. I said earlier about the interrelationship of all of the elements of the system. About ten percent of the people in New Jersey that commute to work every day use public transportation. It’s one of the highest percentages in the country, but if those ten percent or half of those ten percent had to use the roads, the roads would totally stop functioning. There’s just not the capacity there, so meeting that challenge in the wake of the ARC termination is how we can do it. I mean we just have to think about it differently when we’re doing it. I mean I think the other part of it is that people have to-- it’s interesting-- we talked about the River Line earlier. If you had gone down and ridden the River Line when-- and I saw this at Amtrak when we started service up in Maine, but on the River Line right after it started the heaviest ridership on the River Line wasn’t during the week. It was during the weekends and people were taking their kids out and it was just a thrill to them to be able to ride that and there was an excitement about it and I think that one of the things I’d like to do is try to create that excitement. It’s not going to be like being at Disneyworld, but I want to create a situation in which people get on a New Jersey Transit train or on a New Jersey Transit bus and they feel good about it and that’s going to take a lot of work on the part of a lot of us, not just that they’re getting there on time, but it helps them conduct their lives and they feel good about it and they’re proud of it.

Michael Aron: Well, I’ve always heard that the measure of a society is how it treats its least privileged. Now I know that there’s another measurement. How good is its transportation system?

James Weinstein: How good is the transportation its least privileged can use?

Michael Aron: All right. Thanks for looking back with us.

James Weinstein: Thanks. It’s good to be here, Michael. Thank you.