Tom Wilson Interview (May 22, 2014)

Nancy Becker: It is May 22nd, 2014, and I am at the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University, with Tom Wilson, former executive director of the Republican State Committee, and campaign manager for the Governor Whitman Re-election Campaign of 1997. We’re here today to continue our series of conversations for the Center on the American Governor. Tom, good morning.

Tom Wilson: Hi.

Nancy Becker: I know you will have a different perspective from those who worked inside the Whitman administration. But you worked on the outside and were very much involved. But I’d like to start this morning by having you tell us about yourself. Tell us about where you grew up, where you went to college, et cetera.

Tom Wilson: So I’m a native New Jerseyan. Lived here all of my life but for three and a half years or so when I lived in Vermont, went to University of Vermont. I grew up in Somerset County in Bridgewater. My connection to politics comes at birth. My godparents are Ray Bateman, the former senator from Somerset County, father of Kip, and my godmother’s his wife Joan. So very close, dear, long-time family friends. My first recollections of politics are 1997 wearing an “All the way with Ray” t-shirt and flipping pancakes at a campaign breakfast and stuffing envelopes and things like that. And the first taste of defeat was election night in November of 1977. Fast forward about 10 years and I’m in college and I’m looking to get involved in campaigns and government again and Kip is connected to the Kean administration and navigates me in and helps me get an internship in the Assembly Republican office. Chuck Hardwick was then the Speaker and I went to work for a division that I would come to learn was as much about politics and the intersection of politics and government and good incumbent protection programs and constituent relations as anything. Ended up taking a semester off college that year to work on the campaigns, the legislative campaigns of 1987, when Republicans held on to control in the Assembly. Got the bug and realized, “Wow. I’ve got to figure out a way to graduate on time so I can be back here,” in 1989 for the elections. I made up credits. I took summer classes here at Rutgers <laughs> and I graduated on time and came back and started working in the legislative campaigns again for Chuck Haytaian, who probably then becomes my entrée, my door into the world of the Whitmans.
Nancy Becker: I’m going to stop you here because I do want you to talk a little bit more about Chuck Haytaian. Tell us a little bit about your family.

Tom Wilson: Which one? My parents <laughs> or my current?

Nancy Becker: Your parents and your current family.

Tom Wilson: So my dad was a solo practitioner, obstetrician/gynecologist in Somerville. He was a Quaker born in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Not overly political. Probably more of a social liberal, social responsibility. Very Quaker is best way to put it. My mom’s an Irish Catholic from Long Island. I have five older brothers and sisters. I am the youngest by seven years, so was almost only childish at times. All but one of my siblings are pretty progressive Democrats. <laughs> The other is my youngest sister age-wise to me, who works in education, actually at the Department of Education in Washington. So that’s where I grew up. My wife is Lysa Wilson, Lysa Israel, most people know her by. She never changed her name. She’s been a political fund-raiser for Republican candidates, including Governor Whitman <laughs> and just about everybody else who’s run through New Jersey in the last 20 years. And we now have a son and a daughter, 15 and 13, and live still here in New Jersey.

Nancy Becker: Terrific. So let’s go back to Chuck Haytaian, who seems to have been a very influential person within your career.

Tom Wilson: Yeah.

Nancy Becker: So tell us about your experience working for the Assembly, what were your responsibilities, and how did Chuck influence your career?

Tom Wilson: So I kind of, you know, Chuck inherited me really, right? He didn’t know me. I didn’t really know him in 1987. You know, Hardwick was the Speaker. I had a little bit of exposure to him, because when the campaign was over they needed to do something with me, so I drove sometimes for the Speaker. I worked in the legislative office again. And I got to know Haytaian a little bit in ’89 in the campaign. Yeah. There was a three-person staff. Ironically, Lysa was the fundraiser for the majority caucus committee. Cliff Pintak was the sort of senior coach and strategist, and I was the, you know, do everything that needed to be done <laughs> kind of helper in the mix. I think I might’ve had a political director title,
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but there was nothing directing about-- I was an executor. I was learning still. And ’89 is the Florio landslide election, and we get washed up on the beach. And I’m not really sure what I’m going to do, and Chuck and I had begun to know each other a little bit but not really much. So I went to him and I said, “I think that we should keep a full-time political operation open. No one has ever kept a staff for what was then called ARM, Assembly Republican Majority. It was the political caucus committee that raised money and recruited candidates and did opposition research and began to package the campaigns. And Chuck said, “Okay. Let’s do it.” <laughs> Kind of took a wing and a prayer on me. And so for the next year and a half or so I dutifully drove myself up to a little office in Hackettstown every day, and we raised money and he helped me figure this business out. He sent me to some campaign schools and fund-raising schools, and we became much closer. And ’91 comes along-- well, very shortly after this thing starts we hit pay dirt with Governor Florio’s policies that begin to create the environment for a real landslide election <laughs> in 1991. And I just transition right into that. Greg Edwards comes over to become the Chief of ARM, Lysa comes back to raise, start raising the money, and the two best things that happened that year were we took veto-proof majorities from the Democrats in both houses and Lysa and I got engaged. <laughs>

Nancy Becker: So fast forward a couple of years to the primary election for governor where Cary Edwards was running against Christie Whitman. And I understand that you worked for Cary Edwards and not Christie Whitman. So tell us about your role in Cary’s unsuccessful campaign for the Republican nomination and why did Governor Whitman win?

Tom Wilson: So when we take control in 1991, I go to work for a little while for then the new speaker. Chuck Haytaian is the speaker’s Chief of Staff. And pretty quickly I come to figure out that I’m not really about government. This is not what I do. I like politics. I like running campaigns. I like being involved in the political part. So about four, five, six months into it, this is not feeling right to me, and Bob Franks had become the state party chairman and an opportunity was there to move over there. And I told Chuck, “I love you. I can’t do this anymore. This is not what I do.” And he did not make it easy for me to leave. <laughs> He gave me a hard time over it. But, you know, for the right reasons, I think. Ultimately I left. We probably talked a little bit, saw each other a little bit, but there was definitely some friction. ’93 comes along. I had done some more campaigns and political things, and I knew a lot of the folks who were getting associated with Cary, and they asked me to have lunch with them. And here I am, you know, 23 or 4 years old, whatever it is at that point. I don’t really know much about anything except what I do, and sure I’ll meet with this guy. I think my wife had already signed on.
I think Lysa had already signed on with him. We were not married by that point. And I just liked him. I mean, he was the first single candidate that I—all my experience before this had been caucuses and working with groups of candidates and this was the first candidate who I had the opportunity to develop a personal conversation with. And it was a marvelous conversation. And Cary was a special guy. He really was. He seemed to me to get it, right? I didn’t have a worldly view of government. I was a politics kid. But he seemed to really be inspirational to me. His life story was unbelievably inspiring. So I said, “Yeah, let’s go.” I didn’t know much about Governor Whitman. Obviously we had lived through 1990. You know, she ran against Senator Bradley and almost toppled the giant. I remember her once coming up to see Chuck and him bringing her over and a quick handshake. Despite the fact that we were both from Somerset County, I didn’t really have any connection. My folks weren’t political beyond the connection to the Batemans. So I really didn’t know much of her. I wasn’t not picking her, I was picking Cary because it was a job that was offered to me. It was interesting and it was an opportunity and I knew a lot of the folks there. You know, at the end of the day she won for a couple reasons, one of which is institutional. You know, the county party chairs by and large liked her. I mean, they thought that she was someone who had a very good chance to topple Florio. Probably a better chance, given her history of almost taking out Bradley and the work that she had done in the succeeding years with a PAC she set up that I can’t recall the name of anymore. Working Families. I don’t remember. But she had spent a lot of time using her newfound political popularity and platform to go out and help other candidates in New Jersey, to help raise money for the county party. So she had connections. Cary had those too, but they weren’t as fresh and they weren’t as deep, and the one thing that we will all come to learn in the long run is what a county chairman must want wins. So they wanted somebody who was going to help them run campaigns below the gubernatorial level that would allow them to win. And she was clearly looked at as the better choice in terms of who could win. Cary tried to out-policy her, but this was not a policy debate. <laughs>

Nancy Becker: What did you do after the primary?

Tom Wilson: So after the primary. I went back to work, or I went to work for a political consultant who I had come to know over the years who did a lot of direct mail, and I opened up a New Jersey office for them for the balance of ’93. Frankly, working on a lot of the legislative candidates who I had known because we recruited them and helped them get elected in ’91, now we were coming back to get them re-elected in ’93. And so I did that for all of ’93 and then into ’94, which is the year that Chuck ran for U.S. Senate. And things were not going swimmingly with that campaign, and so sometime, I think it was late spring, I went to my folks and said,
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the folks I worked for, and said, “You know, my mentor needs me.” <laughs> So I left there for a little while. They gave me a leave of absence essentially to go jump on Haytaian’s campaign and to do communications and press and try to help him get across the line which we didn’t do at the end of the day. I take credit for being the one who thought up at the debate that Chuck should ask Frank Lautenberg to name the 21 counties of New Jersey, because I knew there was no way that he would possibly know them. And Chuck could rattle them <snaps> off like he was a local guy. Went back to consulting very briefly, and that’s just about the time that Governor Whitman, who then won in ‘93, asked Chuck to come become the State Party Chairman.

Nancy Becker: Right. So that’s what my next question was when and how did you meet Christie Whitman?

Tom Wilson: <laughs> So I’m sure that I met her in ‘93, because there were just, you know--

Nancy Becker: Yeah.

Tom Wilson: --by being in the same place. But no relationship. So Chuck was, is and was, probably her greatest cheerleader, right? As far as significant political players in the state at the time went, there was no bigger-- he saw it. He got it. He understood the magic of Whitman long before a lot of other people did. And while there were a whole lot of the old boys who sort of didn’t give her proper respect for what she had done and what she brought to the table and who she was, Chuck never even thought twice about it. For a kid from the Bronx, you know, he would call her Chrissie. <laughs> He would always kiss her on the cheek when he saw her, and I think to some people that was, “Oh, that’s not proper and respectful and sexist,” but that’s Chuck, the passionate kid from the Bronx, and there was no disrespect. That was actually a sign of affection and respect. And so she asked him to become the state party chair, which was not without its own controversy. <laughs> Ginnie Littell had been the state chair for a while. Her husband, Bob Littell, was a very powerful Chairman of the Senate Budget Committee. This was about the time they’re trying to get a tax cut passed <laughs> in her first term. And he’s an important player in that. And meanwhile, the tradition in New Jersey has always been that the governor or the gubernatorial nominee, appropriately, gets to select the state party chair and the state committee members respect that request. That didn’t really happen in 1993, because I think-- and I wasn’t inside that campaign-- they just didn’t want to upset the apple cart. They knew they could work in, around, and through <laughs> Ginnie Littell, even though she
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wasn’t, quote, “their person.” It was better not to upset... But when it came time that, “Now I’ve won,” Ginnie was not interested in going quietly, didn’t feel like she was treated fairly or that it was right for her. She didn’t do anything to deserve not continuing. And that’s not what this was about. This was about the governor wanting Chuck Haytaian, someone who she trusted implicitly and had earned that trust, to take over the state party operation. So he said to me, “Hey, would you be interested in coming over and running the place with me?” I said-- I don’t know them from Adam. This is where Ray Bateman comes back into the story. <laughs>

And I went to him and I said, “I know you know them.” <laughs> “I was on the other side. Would you put a good word in?” And he did. So I think between Chuck and Ray--my godfathers saved me.

<laughter>

Nancy Becker: Yes.

Tom Wilson: And brought me into the world of Whitman.

Nancy Becker: Let me step back a little bit. So were you involved in her general, her first general election campaign at all?

Tom Wilson: Mm-mm. No.

Nancy Becker: You were not.

Tom Wilson: I was working for the legislative candidates. As a consultant.

Nancy Becker: Okay. And so you were not involved in the transition either.

Tom Wilson: Nope.

Nancy Becker: Okay.

Tom Wilson: Other than knowing a lot of the folks who were there. But, you know, because as politics is politics and as 20-something-year-olds we all <laughs>
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are friendly with each other. You know, like all administrations, the kids that get the governor elected, well, I don’t care who it is, you know, there’s a certain hubris and bravado, right. So we’re all friends, but there’s a, “Well, we’re with the Whitman folks and you’re still a Cary Edwards guy.” And that’s okay. And I think there were a bunch of people who in that world in 1994 or 5 when Chuck comes in and it’s me, are looking like, “Well, him? He’s not-- mm.”

Nancy Becker: Now, what did you do between her election and your appointment in ‘95? Because there was a hiatus there.

Tom Wilson: I was back to working with the political consulting firm.

Nancy Becker: Okay.

Tom Wilson: Doing direct mail and running campaigns in other parts of-- that weren’t in New Jersey. I think we might’ve had one congressional. We worked on Lee Solomon’s race, I think, that year, for Congress, and a few others that were sort of regional. And then we had the Chuck race.

Nancy Becker: Right.

Tom Wilson: So I got involved with that for four to six months and then towards the end of I think ‘94, beginning of ‘95 when she started to make the move to bring him in I actually, <laughs> I worked in a little office in exile across the hall from the State Committee while Ginnie was still chair, and sort of <laughs> de facto party kind of stuff, which was uncomfortable because her executive director was a very dear, wonderful friend. And he got it, but there was no talking to her and he was clearly a Whitman person. But Ginnie was Ginnie and still is, and that’s one of the things that makes her a wonderful person. <laughs>

Nancy Becker: So tell us about your role as Executive Director of the Republican State Committee. How long did you serve in that position? What were your responsibilities, et cetera? And I’ll ask you other questions as we go forward.

Tom Wilson: So pretty quickly I think Chuck establishes himself almost as the fourth chief, right? I mean, he’s still the Assembly Speaker, so he’s got that position. But he’s also I think a pretty important and adviser to the governor. And
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I used to refer to him as, you know, he’s the fourth chief, he’s the chief of politics. And when something needed to get done, you remember the Senate President at the time was Donald DiFrancesco, <laughs> who I would later go to work for. But the Senate was a different sort of an animal. You know, it always is institutionally. The Assembly lives and dies by acting together and being a team. By virtue of having Senatorial Courtesy, the Senate is a little bit more lofty and independent. So a lot of times it was Chuck and Christie figuring out how to get Don and the Senate to move on things. And, you know, the disconnect is very real. There were an awful lot of legislators who would’ve looked and treated the governor differently had the governor used the men’s room instead of the ladies’ room. And that was not lost on her. It was certainly not lost <laughs> on a lot of the women who worked for her, but it was also not lost on a lot of the men who worked for her. Myself included <laughs> and Chuck. And Chuck and I would talk about how this one or that one, that Senator, this Assemblyperson. But that wasn’t him. So he pretty quickly becomes an important adviser to her, and our office becomes the office of politics. You know, our job is to try to get the county parties grown, expanded, built out, elect more people who are Republicans that can build our team riding on the same kinds of policies and messages that she’s used. That didn’t mean that we weren’t welcoming and open to helping anybody who won a primary and was on board. We didn’t get involved in primaries. But obviously her brand was something unique and special and a lot of people wanted to be part of it. So we ran it like a business. The county parties would come in and because she was popular and we were able to raise good amount of money and Chuck was a great fund-raiser, the county parties thought, “Oh, you guys will pay for everything.” And that’s not the way Chuck Haytaian and Tom Wilson ran the party. You know, you came in and you’d bring us your campaign plan and you’d just bring your fund-raising plan and you’d just explain to us exactly how you were going to do what you were going to do. Chuck was a big proponent of grass roots campaigning. How many doors are you going to knock on? How many phone calls are you going to make? When are you going to start? And, you know, and then we made partnerships. And we used to say, you know, “We can be the icing on the cake. We can even bring some whipped cream and cherries, but we can’t bring the cake. You guys have to be the cake. You have to provide a basis.” And so we made some progress in some counties. We defended some. We helped. I think we ran a good operation. <laughs> One of the things that I came to quickly realize though is that you also become the chief complaint department. Everybody who has a beef, everybody who felt like they didn’t get what they deserved because, you know, “I was with her and I’m the one who--” her victory in ’93 was pretty close and so everybody took credit for, “Well, I did it.” You know, “I put her over the edge.” Ocean County said, “I gave her this many votes.” And Monmouth County said, “Well, we gave her this many votes.” And Morris County said, “Well, we did this.” And Bergen said, “We did that.” And everybody thought that they were the reason.
And, “if you don’t--” you know, “if you don’t scratch my itch, this is going to come back to bite you when you’re getting re-elected.” And obviously that’s part of what the politics department has to think about is getting her re-elected and how do you begin to build the infrastructure that can then be turned over? So we collected clips and began initial opposition research. We got involved. We sensed that Mayor McGreevey was coming for us and so we got a little bit involved in his mayoral election in ’96 maybe. Must’ve been ‘96. To try to knock him down a few pegs. And all in all, Chuck is sort of the point person and he’s dealing mostly with her. Again, I have a little bit of interaction, but not a lot of interaction with her.

Nancy Becker: Chuck was also instrumental at that time and when he was strengthening, building the party, at recruiting and identifying women candidates, which was unusual. And he really developed a very significant track record of finding women to run for legislative races.

Tom Wilson: It started earlier. It started with that class of 1991 that produced people like Harriet Derman and Ginny Weber and we can go up and down the state. And I think it probably happened before that when you look at people like Lisa Randall and Kathe Donovan, people he’d served with prior to that. I mean, for being an old school Armenian kid from the Bronx, I get the sense that Chuck’s mother was very big in his life and clearly Chuck’s wife <laughs> was a huge figure. So he had a very healthy sense of equality and relationships and that women are no different. I mean, they’re different in good ways. <laughs> Just not less capable or anything.

Nancy Becker: And I believe through the “Christine Todd Whitman Excellence in Public Service” series, the party, the state party, provided the initial funding for that. Which was highly unusual also, and unusual across the country.

Tom Wilson: And we did that. Yep. We gave the seed money, because there were a lot of close friends of the governor, yourself included, who were part of recognizing that this was a unique opportunity. And it was a unique opportunity and you couldn’t avoid it. You know, you needed to. This was a big moment, right? I mean, she was a huge political figure post her election. I mean, it was a slap across the face to a lot of people. You know, the Sunday before the election John McLaughlin had the roundtable and all the smart people like Eleanor Clift and Fred Barnes said, “Who’s going to win?” “Oh, Florio’s going to win. She’s not--” and Tuesday comes and the people of New Jersey rock the world and send a message that’s very clear and very different. And from that moment on, the star begins to take on a life of its own. And I think that back here in New Jersey, figuring out
ways to harvest that. And it did, I think, spark a new generation of women who said, “Why not me? Why can’t I? Why shouldn’t I?” And Chuck, I think, felt a need to sort of try as best as he could to tap some of his county chairs on the shoulder and say, “You know, this works. It’s good politics and it’s good policy.” You know, having these folks join us at the table, it’s not easy to get them elected, but they bring inherent benefits as candidates that we don’t have with the same stable that we run year after year after year all the time. And we do okay, but this is an opportunity to grow and build the party. And he and I talked at length about—something called GROW, something I wanted to launch that I had dubbed GROW, Greater Roles and Opportunities for Women. And we never really could quite get enough people, you know. And the Whitman series had already sort of taken off and it looked a lot like that but it wasn’t. And it was for me and the idea of it wasn’t just about running for office but about getting folks into appointed positions, lining up judicial candidates. It was using this as a real moment in time to sweep everybody who happened to be a woman <laughs> into the process in a much bigger way. Candy Straight, had conversations with her, and I think it needed a champion besides me, probably a woman champion besides me. And we never really could quite nail it down. It’s something I always wish we’d have gotten done because I think it would’ve continued.

Nancy Becker: Did you have a role recommending potential appointees to the governor’s office?

Tom Wilson: I didn’t. I mean, Chuck clearly did. I think, you know, as I said, part of what the state party did was field complaints and that often meant, you know, “My so-and-so needs to be on the Mosquito Commission.” And so there were conversations, right? I think we had regular meetings with the various chiefs of staff that we dealt with. Mostly it was Peter. For me it was, I think, only Peter Verniero. I don’t think Judy was there when I started. And Chuck and Peter would get together over lunch or Peter would come over and Chuck would have his list and say, “I heard from this one,” and, you know, “Let’s talk about that and why,” and Peter, “Okay.” But ultimately it’s their decision.

Nancy Becker: Right.

Tom Wilson: I mean, the Governor would make those final decisions and see a list. But Chuck certainly had input and the ability to say, “So-and-so is a good person and they’ve been helpful and I think they’d make a good person for this commission or that commission.”
Nancy Becker: So the Governor, because she certainly, when she ran against Senator Bradley, she really didn’t owe anything to the county chairs when she was elected. And her relationship with some of the county chairs was reported to be somewhat problematic. Please tell us about that. And were you ever involved in negotiations between the county chairs and the Governor, or the governor’s office?

Tom Wilson: So I think that may be a little bit overblown. Because they were the same county chairs who saw the opportunity. You know, this was a great horse for us to ride in 1993, a better horse than Cary. We’d picked off a couple. We had, you know, we had Glenn Paulsen in Burlington because of a longtime personal relationship with Cary. We had John Renna in Essex. Again, longtime. I mean, we picked off the personal relationships. But the Joe Buckelews of the world, the Bill O’Dowds of the world, the folks from Monmouth and Ocean who had lines, they smelled the opportunity to win, and they didn’t want anything other than to win. So they got on board with Whitman pretty early, and I think the first county actually was Camden, right. So it was a county that didn’t really matter in the world of Republican politics at the time. So for years, whenever the Camden chairman would come in to see Chuck about something, he would say, “You know, we were the first one to endorse Christie Whitman, and we should get this, that and the other thing, and you should pay for my campaigns,” and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. I think it’s a natural tendency, and it happens. I’ve seen it with every governor I’ve been associated with. Everybody thinks they’re entitled to more than they should and they don’t understand or appreciate that when you are the governor, things do change. Particularly if you’re someone like Christie Whitman, right, who came into this office really-- she fought tooth and nail to get there. I mean, the chips were down going into Labor Day, and there were a lot of people who couldn’t be found to help, who thought, “Oh, gosh. This great early horse that we saw has faded down the back stretch. It’s time to circle the wagons, pull up the drawbridge, fill up the moat and protect our little fiefdoms.” And there were a lot of people who ran for the hills and it was on their own backs that they produced their victory in November.

I mean, some tough decisions, right. You know, having to ask her brother to take a step aside and let Ed Rollins come in and finish this job could not have been-- knowing what I know about her now, not knowing it then, probably had to be one of the most difficult things she had to do. I came to know Dan a little bit in ‘97. We could talk about more of that later, but clearly a very, very close, close bond between those two. So I think that the county chairs were, you know, when she won, they, of course, all said, “Yeah. We got those votes.” And nobody really believed they got those votes. It helped, but it was the power of her message, the power of her commitment and passion, that rode it across the line. Would it have
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been possible without good county operations working in Monmouth and Ocean and Morris and places that produce big margins? No. But it wasn’t just because of them. And so I think there’s always a sense of, “Okay. We won. Now, you know, to the victor go the spoils. Now I need this and I want that, and this contract, and I want to be the lawyer for that and my brother needs to be on this commission.” And that’s just not quite that easy. And when you’re the governor and you make those appointments and you make those decisions, and even when you don’t you’re held accountable for them as you know. We’re seeing a little more today as we sit in 2014, than we have in a long time. So yes. Chuck was constantly applying salve to the egos of those who thought they were entitled to more, and there were times when his method of applying salve was to remind them quite bluntly that she was the governor and that they were a county chair and that they could be part of the team or they could not be part of the team. And that was entirely up to them. <laughs>

Nancy Becker: So what were your major challenges as executive director?

Tom Wilson: You know, I had to share Chuck’s time with the Assembly, meaning I only came to appreciate later just how good a job he did at wearing so many hats. And what a truly gifted politician he was. But like I say, I try to learn something, I’ve tried to take something from every person I’ve worked for. And from Chuck, what I took was you wear it on your sleeve. You just put it out there. You be honest with people. When I did my little brief stint in the Speaker’s office with him, I would sit in as people would come in and ask for his help on something and he was always honest. You know, if he couldn’t be with you, if he couldn’t give you his vote, if he couldn’t give you his support, he just told you. Up front. “Listen, I can’t help you with this.” Oh, he would say, “I can’t support you on this. I can’t. I’ve already committed. I think this is a better answer,” blah, blah, blah. But he would then proceed to tell them how to go, you know, “If I were you, I would try this and maybe move over here. Maybe you could talk to them.” It wasn’t, you know, we’re enemies. It was always, “I can’t be with you on this. But just because I’m not with you on this doesn’t mean you shouldn’t come talk to me the next time.” <laughs> So I had to share some time with him, I learned, with his colleagues in the legislature. The hardest thing was having to say “no” to people. Right? I mean, these were our county chairs. The political system in New Jersey is a county-based system. The state party has no power, has no authority. It doesn’t endorse anybody. We don’t own a preferential ballot line. There’s very few things that we actually get to do. <laughs> Statutorily. I mean, you know. So the power comes from purse strings and personalities, right. So having to say “no” to folks and at the same time figuring out how to inject an appropriate amount of political consideration into decisions that were being made on the government side, that
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was Chuck’s. Chuck needed to be that messenger. I didn’t have the stature or credibility really with any of those folks to sort of say, “You know, you should--” this. And there were also good people who helped in ’93 still around, right. I mean, Mike Murphy was still around and he was still providing some advice and counsel. And Dave Sackett was still doing polling, and so we were still keeping our thumb on the public pulse as it related to her and how the public were reacting to her and sharing that information with them so they understood. And when big policy decisions were made, we wanted to make sure that we knew what the political implications of those would be. It was a really neat learning experience. I got to be a little bit of an expert in how people thought and reacted and what the goods and bads about being Christie Whitman as it related to being in the public were.

Nancy Becker: So were there any major disagreements between the state party and the Governor or the governor’s office that you can recall?

Tom Wilson: Oh, Chuck would remember it better than I. Not that I can recall. I think, <sighs> I think as things unfolded over time, there were some things politically that we were a little concerned about. I think about the partial birth abortion mess that occurred leading into re-election.

Nancy Becker: But that didn’t occur in Chuck Haytaian’s speakership.

Tom Wilson: Chuck was not Speaker then.

Nancy Becker: Correct.

Tom Wilson: Right. When he finished, after he ran for U.S. Senate, that’s his last term as Speaker. ’95 he finishes. There’s an election that year. He finishes the job as Speaker in ’95. He gets re-elected. No. Maye he doesn’t run for re-election in ’95? He becomes a full-time chair. And Jack Collins takes over as Speaker. And it’s Jack who changes in a huge way the dynamic between the Speaker’s office <laughs> and the Governor’s office. And so I think that’s where we started to have, you know. And again, this was Chuck as political adviser to the Governor and just laying out the raw politics of stuff. And this was the first time I think I saw the resolve and commitment that personally, face to face, I was confronted with Christie Whitman’s rigid backbone. That when she thought it was the right thing to do, politics be damned. “I’ll take my lumps if I have to.” So that was clearly an
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area where Chuck was sort of, “Why are we-- why can’t you-- why don’t we--” this, “Well, how about a health exception?” And she would just, “Chuck, you’re not going to get me on this one. I understand, but if that’s the issue--” I think leading into the re-election, the decision to put auto insurance up on the front burner and highlight that issue...

Nancy Becker: We’re going to get to that in a minute.

Tom Wilson: Okay.

Nancy Becker: So let me talk about ’97. So again, upon the urging of Chuck Haytaian, who clearly, as we said before, played a significant role certainly in your early career. You were asked to run the Whitman re-election campaign for governor, against Jim McGreevey. So tell us about that campaign.

Tom Wilson: <laughs>

Nancy Becker: What were the issues, what were the challenges?

Tom Wilson: <laughs> So yeah. I get a call one day from Peter Verniero, “Can you come see me?” And I say, “You’re the chief.” I come over and he says, “Well, let’s go get a cup of coffee and a sandwich.” And I thought, “Uh-oh.” This is I think the end of 2000. Sorry. The end of 1996. And he said, “Well, we’ve been thinking about the re-election coming up and we’ve got to start putting a team together and thinking. And the governor and I were talking and she was wondering whether you would be willing to leave the State Party to run the campaign.” And I thought, “Oh, this is funny. Where’s the camera? I’m here because of Chuck. Chuck brought me in and I’m honored and flattered, but I’m not a Whitman person. I’m not in your inner circle.” But Peter assured me that, in fact, I had become a Whitman person and that I was in the inner circle. And this is 1996. I’m 29 at that point and I’m kind of star struck by this idea and a little bit overwhelmed. So I said, “Can I think about it a little bit? I mean, I’m flattered, I’m honored, but I want to make sure this is something I feel like I can do and I’ve got to just think about this.” Never run a statewide campaign. I’ve run some little legislative races and things like that, but this is a big deal. I’ve not done this before. I immediately go running off to see Bob Franks, my third godfather. The one who taught me a lot, as much as anybody, more than anybody, about campaigns and politics. And so I go track him down. He’s running one of his legendary campaign schools at that crummy little
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hotel in New Providence, and I called him. I said, “I’ve got to talk to you.” It’s like, “Just drive up here.” So I drive up and pull him out of the room and I said, “You’ve got to listen to this one. You’ve got to hear this. Peter wants me to run the campaign to re-elect Whitman.” He’s like, “That’s great.” I said, “That’s great. Are you crazy, Bob? I’m not ready for that. Am I ready for that?” I said, “Here’s the way I look at it,” and I had been thinking about this. I said, “There’s really three potential outcomes here. One is that she wins by what everybody thinks she should win by. Remember, she’s a superstar.” You know, this, “She’s on her way to the White House,” right? The White House talk had already started. “If not President, then Vice President.” So here she is this big, huge looming figure nationally and she’s giving the response to the State of the State and she’s the flavor of the year. Her name is being bandied about. She’s showing up on the cover-- “So one is that she wins by what’s she supposed to win by-- Which you and I both know is not going to happen. So we can take that option off the table. Two, she wins by what she should win by,” which isn’t going to be a whole lot, because this is still New Jersey and some of the fundamentals aren’t there. We’re still working on getting the economy back on track and there’s still some issues and we’ve got this partial birth abortion thing that’s now floating up. We had the pension bond refinancing. Three things going into the election conspired against us, right. Three of the legs of the stool that had been established to build her were kicked out. And some by her. The partial birth abortion thing undercut the détente that she had.

There were a lot of conservatives who thought she was going to be completely unacceptable to them. And she did a good job of trying without compromising her core and her principles, trying to be not so aggressive and in their face about it. That got thrown out. That incensed and infuriated them at the time-- seems like 20 years ago. This idea of partial birth abortion, the phrasing, the entire presentation of that issue, was designed to grab you by the throat and pull your heart up through your throat and say, “You’re killing babies,” right. That’s what she confronted. This was the baby killer time, which was highly unjust. So we lost that. The pension bond deal was very difficult to explain. The Democrats did a great job of beating the heck out of her. The editorial writers didn’t like it. So it really undercut a lot of the financial and fiscal bona fides she had built by being a tax cutter. It looked like a gimmick. And then the auto insurance thing that became the centerpiece of the January State of the State speech in 1997, where she says, “We haven’t done enough on auto insurance.” She hands up an issue and begins to undercut her populist appeal. You know, she makes it an issue, because she thought it was the right thing to do. “I’m going to confront this.” It was a heck of a challenge. So I bring this to Bob, and Bob says, “That’s true, all of it. You’re absolutely ready to do this. Go do this.” So I said, “Okay,” and I do. And he says, “Remember, we’ll all be here to help you and don’t worry about the Monday
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morning quarterbacks. There’ll be a bazillion of them.” So I think I just sort of told you what the hardest part about Campaign ‘97 was. We went into it after writing three years, or two and a half years, of pretty good stuff, building three strikes and you’re out laws and welfare reform and a lot of things that really established her and fought back against the image that Jim Florio tried to paint her as this completely out of touch, completely detached, wealthy dilettante who had no sense of the reality of what it was like to live in Belleville, New Jersey. And to her credit, she knew exactly what it was like to live in Belleville, New Jersey. And part of the first campaign and definitely part of the second campaign, and frankly, part of who she was as a governor and the places that she went and the things that she did was very much about demonstrating that she understood probably better than Jim Florio. Because it was real. It wasn’t this ethereal theoretical model. Governor Florio’s very, very smart, but he thought about it as a policy matter and she thought about it as a human matter. And when she stepped off the campaign bus or got out of the car to go to an event, those people that she encountered didn’t see her the way that Jim Florio tried to paint her.

They had done a pretty good job of building a nice platform, and then three events conspired, those three things, to really throw a curveball. Jim Florio, and the Democrats had a primary. Mike Murphy and Rob Andrews and Jim McGreevey. Am I missing anybody? They were at least the three biggest. I feared Rob Andrews the most. Thought that was the biggest. Murphy turned out to be interesting. He went real populist, you know, driving around in the minivan. But McGreevey comes out of this because he’s got the party bosses; and he’s an incredibly disciplined candidate. He wraps auto insurance around her neck and he wraps economics and job creation numbers around her neck. And she enjoyed governing more than she enjoyed campaigning. You would’ve never known it when the doors of the bus opened and she went out. But as much as she loved it, I think she found politics to be the less preferable part of the business. The governing was what she liked. She didn’t like the roll up your sleeves and deal with the smarmy legislator from XYZ county who came in wanting to trade his vote for something he needed. But the policy is what made her tick. And so she had an inclination to argue policy, and in a campaign we don’t argue policy. So it was a nail biter. It was option number two. We won by what we should have won by, which wasn’t a lot. And in the end, it was not a lot at all.

Jim McGreevey was a single-minded automatonic candidate who did exactly what he had to do, which was to continue to point at and exploit all of her inherent weaknesses. He came very close to toppling her. But for two things he probably could’ve been successful. One, he had an abysmal record as a mayor on property taxes, so the number 43 percent still sticks in my head this day. We put a brigade
of people together and armed them with red t-shirts from Woodbridge that said “43 percent,” and we would trail him wherever he went to remind people that Jim McGreevey, who talked a lot about how property taxes, had not been controlled, not been fixed or remedied, that, “Sure, we cut your income tax,” but your property tax bill had ballooned to this point. You know, he did a good job of exploiting that. He also did a pretty good job of exploiting the fact that we didn’t really get a whole lot done on auto insurance. However, what he proposed for auto insurance had some flaws that we stuck in our back pocket until the end of the campaign. It would’ve meant significant rate increases for seniors because of the rating system he was going to do. So we buried about five pieces of mail into the senior communities in Ocean County and in other pockets that just scared the heck out of those seniors. The turning point-- you know, we were neck and neck. We were losing ground at times. I think the turning point of that campaign came in-- I want to say it was October. As much as we told people-- a lot of the campaign messaging post-Labor Day was trying to remind people of all the good things she had done. Three strikes and you’re in. Three time offenders are going to go away for life. She was tough on crime. Welfare reform and what that meant, not just as a matter of saving people, but saving taxpayer’s money: inspiring work; how it meant things for individuals who were taken off the treadmill of welfare and given opportunities to grow and have productive jobs and careers; and the good things that it meant for their lives and families.

We clearly harped on tax cuts, tax cuts, taxes, promises made, promises kept. But in the face of McGreevey screaming and yelling about property taxes, property taxes, New Jerseyans are great, they’re great voters. Because it ain’t about “what you did for me.” It’s about “What are you going to do for me?” And the truth is, we didn’t really have a lot to say about property taxes. She appeared tone deaf. When she would go out and say, “Yeah, but I cut your income tax. And ‘three strikes and you’re in,’ and did all these great things and held spending.” And they said, “Yeah, but my property taxes and my auto insurance.” So all of those great positive messages that we were sending in September just didn’t seem to do anything. And it wasn’t until we put up a TV spot where she basically looked at the camera and said, “I know that property taxes are too high, and I know that more needs to be done on auto insurance. But you need to ask yourself, ‘Who do you trust to do it?’ Me, who did what I said I would do in my first term, or that guy, who’s raised your property taxes 43 percent?” and blah, blah, blah. It was when the voters of New Jersey saw that mea culpa. “Okay. I did a lot but I didn’t do it all. Give me a chance to tackle the next two big problems. I know they’re problems. I’m not deaf. I get it. I hear you, New Jersey. I’m the governor you elected. I’m the same person who you put your confidence in,” that they finally said, “Thank you. Okay.” And we got across the line.
Nancy Becker: Right. So clearly Governor Whitman won by a very small majority.

Tom Wilson: It was a tough night.

Nancy Becker: Yes, it was.

Tom Wilson: It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.

Nancy Becker: Yes.

Tom Wilson: And there’s an interesting back story which made it even the worst of times. Chuck was still the State Party Chair. Rocco Iossa had become the Executive Director. And in sort of division of labor, they were tasked with putting the ground game together. In one of the parts of the ground game they were put to task with the collection of results. “Here’s the system we want.” You know, these people need to call in. They brought somebody else in, a well-known attorney in New Jersey who specializes in election law matters who I think had been involved in ‘93 and I know had been involved in other campaigns. And he said, “I’ll put together the results collection,” and eight o’clock comes, no phones ringing at the host hotel, eight thirty, eight forty-five, nothing happening. “Where are my results? What’s going on?” There are results. We’re just not getting them. What’s happening? Well, this attorney had decided that he would have the results phoned to him somewhere else and then he would produce himself on election night with, “Governor, I have news.” You know, “I bring news from the counties.” It was a heck of a mess, which obviously needed to be fixed. And after a lot of huffing, humming and threats and John Whitman’s involvement, I think we finally opened up the taps and started getting some information. And that’s when we saw, “Oh, jeez, this is a lot closer.” We had some smart people who were part of the campaign, and I remember sitting there with the most recent spreadsheet and doing the math and looking and saying, “Okay. There’s not enough here. There’s not enough here. I’m comfortable we’ve won.” And I showed it to Dave Sackett, the pollster. He said, “Okay. That makes sense.” Showed it to John Morgan, the demographer who knew numbers better than anybody. Showed it to Murphy, showed it to Pintak, walked through, and I said, “We got this. I don’t care what NJN is saying. I don’t care. We got this. It’s not going to be a lot, but there’s not enough room here, there’s not enough votes left here,” and I told her, “I think we’re fine.” And just about then I think McGreevey called her from the suite and--
Nancy Becker: Well, I will add something. Because I was on NJN that night getting the results, and my stomach was in my feet, because it looked like she had lost. And as I drove to headquarters McGreevey conceded. So it was a very interesting evening.

Tom Wilson: I had to convince a lot of people that the numbers that we had, which were better than the numbers the TV had, because that’s just the way it always worked until recently-- still much better. We could bank on them. If these numbers were right, and we’d checked and double checked and asked and re-asked, there just weren’t enough votes left for team McGreevey. And McGreevey’s campaign manager was a guy named Doug Heyl who went on to be very involved in a lot of big campaigns nationally for Democrats. And I had a bit of a relationship. I mean, we talked to each other frequently throughout that race. You need to just have that kind of discussion. It’s better to have it than not. And so he and I had some. I said, you know, “Doug, I don’t know what you’re seeing, but here’s what I’m seeing and this is what I’ve got. We’re bumping up against the bewitching hour here.” And he said, “Well, I’ll get back to you.” And I said, “Okay.” And he didn’t get back to me and future Governor McGreevey got back to then-Governor Whitman and phew. Big sigh of relief.

Nancy Becker: So when Governor Whitman won her second term as governor, you did not go into the administration. Why?

Tom Wilson: What I did immediately, the next morning, I went down to Washington to stand in for her at the RNC when the RNC was going to celebrate her win and the governor of Virginia who won that year who was a Republican. You know, they’re only one-termers there, and they’re Virginia. But he won. So he was there and I was there for Whitman, so I didn’t matter. And then very shortly thereafter, Lysa and I took off for a two-week vacation and then came back and got married. So I had a lot going on in the month of November, and you’ve been around long enough to know that A, it’s not like the first term, right? All the jobs aren’t open. There’s only a few jobs open, and there’s some changing and some moving. And chiefs of staff were moving. I let it be known that I would love to have the opportunity to say “no” to something or to say “yes” to something if it made sense for them and it fit for them. But it didn’t really ever fit for them. And it didn’t really ever fit for me. And I really wasn’t a government person. I was still a politics person. And so I went into doing some more politics and some public affairs and some lobbying for a little while and realized that I still didn’t have the political bug out of me. And I went to work for Don DiFrancesco in 2001, when Governor Whitman becomes--
Nancy Becker: I’m going to get to that. So were you, just sort of staying sequentially, were you surprised when Governor Whitman decided to resign before the end of her second term and join the Bush administration?

Tom Wilson: No. Not at all. And not for any reason that she wanted to get out of New Jersey, but what I had come to know of the Governor, the discussions we had during campaigns. And during the campaign, a lot of candidates.... Running a re-election is different than running an election. Because there’s a government going on at that same time. And so there is some natural tension. You know, you have parallel universes. You have parallel press operations. And the reporters are all very smart. They’re going to try to get you to contradict each other, so they’re always asking. And there’s a lot of discipline that has to be had there. The governing part has political ramifications, so you have to have a lot of interaction and dialogue to understand what each other is doing and you don’t want to be caught blind-sided either way. But there are also boundaries that have to be respected. And Harriet Derman was the Chief of Staff then. I had known Harriet since 1991 when I worked on her first election, and we had a great relationship. And so we had frequent meetings. A lot of campaign managers believe that you need to be the first and last person your candidate talks to every day. I didn’t feel that was appropriate, honestly. She’s the governor of New Jersey. I didn’t need to talk to her but when I needed to talk to her. She had bigger things to do than worry. My job was to worry about everything that needed to get done on the campaign and to let her know what I needed from her when I needed it. But otherwise she had the business of running New Jersey to be concerned with. So I didn’t really develop an extraordinarily close, personal relationship. I think we had a good relationship. I’m grateful for her confidence and that she gave me that opportunity, and I hope she appreciates that I gave up a year to try to do the best I could to get her re-elected and that despite some tough times, we got there. Wasn’t pretty but we did it.

Nancy Becker: So I want you to reflect a little bit about the Whitman administration. What do you think were her most significant accomplishments? What were her greatest strengths and what were her significant weaknesses?

Tom Wilson: Hmm. The greatest accomplishments. I mean, the greatest accomplishment is not the achievement of a particular policy objective in my mind. It is bringing back to New Jersey, bringing back to the office, hope. Right? I mean, we came from a place in the Tom Kean era of New Jersey and you, perfect together. People felt good about being from New Jersey. Good things were happening. Governor Florio comes along and people get very angry and very down.
on New Jersey. And they feel betrayed. They are hurt, they don’t trust government, and she brought back optimism and hope and belief that we live in a good place. And I think changing that and getting people to have some confidence that government can do good things and good people in government can make a difference. So I think changing people’s perspective. I think proving that one of the ways to reduce spending is to simply cut off the supply of funding, right? You know how we’re going to cut spending? By cutting taxes. Well, what are you going to cut? We’ll cut. When there’s less money to spend, we’ll spend it. It’s no different than being at your house. Everything’s a necessity until you don’t have enough money to pay for it and then you make choices about what’s important and what’s a need versus what’s a want. I think standing up for her principles on stuff, particularly when it was hard to do that. You know, when friends like Chuck Haytaian are saying, “The politically easy thing to do here would just be just give a little bit. Just give a little bit.” <thumps> No. <laughs> That’s, that’s impressive. That’s impressive. I mean, you know, to put that ahead of politics is not something you see in most. Now, interestingly, a fiercely competitive woman who wanted to be re-elected to prove that point to everybody. That you can do the right thing and be the right kind of Republican, and win. And as you look at that era in time in the Northeast, virtually every state in the Northeast from Virginia, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, all the way up through with the exception of I think Rhode Island. No. Rhode Island... had Republican governors. It was the era of the moderate centrist Republican governor. In the Northeast and in America. And so there was a movement. You know, today we’ve got Governor Christie, Governor Rowland, Governor Pataki, Governor Weld. I mean, guys who were a mutual admiration society and they showed the way for others to be. And somehow since then, that has evaporated and I know that you don’t have to read very much to understand how upsetting that is to Governor Whitman and to a lot of other people who share her brand of Republican and believe that, you know, “it’s my party too.”

Nancy Becker: You went on to work for Don DiFrancesco, who succeeded Governor Whitman and became the interim governor. Please compare and contrast their styles as governor.

Tom Wilson: Well, I don’t know. I don’t have the same perspective for Governor Whitman, because I wasn’t in the government.

Nancy Becker: Okay.

Tom Wilson: So I’m not sure I’m fair, but I can tell you what I perceive to be the differences. Don DiFrancesco is a man of the house, right. He is-- in the way that
Tip O’Neill was referred to as the Man of the House. He is a creature of the legislature. He is everybody’s pal in the State House, including every reporter who could be counted on to call him. So when he becomes governor, he views it through that prism. He is a legislator and governor. He’s also the Senate President at the same time he’s governor. I mean, that’s incredible, like, I don’t even know how you balance that out in your head, to wear those two hats, because they’re huge hats, you know. He nominates. He confirms. And then he appoints. There’s a lot of stuff. So he was clearly much more about his colleagues in the legislature. He thought about problems and things that government needed to do like a legislator would. “Well, how am I going to get this to my-- how are my colleagues going to react to this? How am I going to get the votes to line up on this? Will so-and-so-- Hank McNamara’s not going to like this because-- That’s going to make him--.” He was doing the math about, “Can I get this bill passed? What do I have to do to give it up? How can I?“ There had been a lot of legislators who...

One of the things that the Whitman folks did was in the outer office of the Governor-- there was installed a gate. The significance of that-- it was a matter of some of the staff not wanting people just to walk in like it was their office. That we wanted the people-- it was practical. It was not because Christie Whitman didn’t want people to come into her office. It was a staff thing that said, “We need to have some control here.” People can’t just waltz in like they own the place. They need to say, “I’m so-and-so and I’m here to see so-and-so,” and give people a chance to know this is a place of business. Symbolically though, the legislature all thought, “I should be able to walk in and see the governor whenever I want to, or the Chief of Staff or the Chief Council because I’m a Senator, I’m an Assembly Person.” So that stupid gate became symbolic. One of the first things Don did was have that gate taken down. He wanted to send a symbolic message to his colleagues that said, “Hey, it’s your buddy Donnie in here. Come see me. Jefferds right down the hall. You could talk to him. Jimmy Harkness is over here.”

Governor Whitman I think, and I don’t mean this in any way to be disrespectful to Don. She thought about everything up here. It was, “This is where we should get to. You guys figure out how to get us there. I don’t know how to count all those legislative votes. I’ll never know what makes Hank McNamara tick. And frankly, I’m not sure I really want to know,” right? “That’s what you guys are here to do. My job is to set big ideas and go sell them and make them happen and create goals and drive this administration to get there while listening to everybody along the way and getting input from good people.”
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Don was maybe a little more bottom-up. We inherited all of the cabinet that was still serving, so they weren’t really his people. They were her people. But we had to figure out a way to get everybody to work together and not check out. I mean, this was an election year. It’s 2001. He’s running. Or at least at the beginning he’s running. So getting that together, and in the life cycle of administrations, this is the last year of that administration. So everybody’s sort of like, “Okay. What we’ve got to do is make sure this place doesn’t explode, tidy up before we leave and hand the keys to the next person.” Well, in comes Don DiFrancesco saying, “Let’s go, baby. We’ve got time to run here. I’m running and we’ve got to gin the machine back up.” And I think he found a lot of people going, “I’m tired. I’ve given my ideas. I’ve done what I came to do.” And we had to say, “But we need you. You’ve got to respond.” And so I think the governor’s office took a much more proactive, you know. He brought people in, senior staff of his own to sort of say, “We need to create policy. We need to move things. We need to get ideas moving here.” And he had things that as a legislator he cared about that he wanted to achieve and accomplish. And so they couldn’t be more different. And I think he came to understand a little bit more the differences. That it’s not quite as easy as, “Well, why can’t you just give me that?” It’s just not as easy to be governor. It’s not as easy as saying, “Yes.” Sometimes you have to say, “No.”

Nancy Becker: So you’ve continued to have an interesting career since the Whitman administration. Tell us a little bit about it.

Tom Wilson: So I did some public affairs and lobbying for a little while and then at the end of 1997 I thought, “Okay. That’s it. I’ve reached the pinnacle of my political life. I’ve run a statewide campaign. I’ve gotten the governor re-elected. I’m done. That’s it. Politics is over. I’m 30. I’m ready now to have children.” I told my wife, “We can finally think about having kids.” And very quickly realized, well, you know, tried the lobbying thing for a little while and doing a little bit of extra campaign-- just didn’t work. Didn’t feel right. So the opportunity came to go back into the world of Don DiFrancesco. Well, frankly what sold me on becoming the communications director for Governor DiFrancesco was that there was going to be a campaign, and he was going to run. And this was an opportunity to be part of that again, politics and doing this from a different perspective. That didn’t come to pass. 2002. Go back to my lobbying world. I’m restless for 48 months, and Joe Kyrillos was the State Party Chair, Don had made him State Party Chair. I’m feeling restless politically. Joe says, “I’m done being State Party Chair.” We’re now in the McGreevey administration. We now have the whole Jim McGreevey, end of his political career or his governorship, and Joe steps out through the Torricelli fiasco. Joe’s out. I become State Party Chair. I go back to all my old friends in the county chairs and say, “Listen, we need a full-time chair who can be a bulldog.” I think
one of the things that happened between ’97, one of the roles I played in ’97 was I became a much more visible, public face. I spoke for the campaign. I was the voice and the face of the campaign when Governor Whitman wasn’t. I launched a lot of the attacks on Jim McGreevey. In 2001, I was the governor’s spokesman as well as the communications director on big issues. When it was hitting the fan and everything was coming across the transoms accusing Don DiFrancesco of this, that and the other thing, I was the guy on the front line. So I think the county chairmen recognized that they needed somebody who was going to go kick Governor Corzine, rather, he wasn’t Governor Corzine then. He was going to be candidate Corzine in 2005. So it’s the end of 2005. He runs. We all know he’s running. And I said, “We’re going to need somebody who, while we have a primary going on with God knows how many candidates, can focus on just being relentless on beating up Jon Corzine and trying to soften this guy up for whoever wins.” They all think that’s a good idea. So I spent the first half of 2005 following Jon Corzine around, putting out press releases, accusing him of being in all kinds of horrible, dastardly things and pointing out that he’s not what he says he is. And Doug Forrester wins that primary and says, “Hey, you do a pretty good job at this. I’d like to keep you around.” “Great. I’m in.” So I stick around and I continue, and I was chairman all the way through June of 2009 when Governor Christie won the nomination. And I stepped aside. He put his person in, and I went to work on the campaign for a little bit. And when that ended I went back out into the world of lobbying with a couple of great partners, Trish Zita and Adam Kaufman. And this time it’s for good. I’m done with politics. Although I will say this. My county chairman has badgered me into being the municipal chairman in my town. So I’ve gone from being state chairman to Montgomery Township Republican Municipal chairman, and I make cotton candy on the Fourth of July at our booth.

**Nancy Becker:** That’s great.

**Tom Wilson:** That’s what the rich and famous do now.

**Nancy Becker:** Is there anything else about the Whitman administration that you would like to tell us that we may not have asked?

**Tom Wilson:** I guess I would finish on the idea that you asked before, what were her strengths and weaknesses. I mean, a group of more dedicated and passionate people could not be found. It’d probably equally fair to say that for the most part politically tone deaf. And perhaps intentionally so. You know, there were a lot of very strong, smart advisers around her on the government side who pushed her, who pushed her to do more than she wanted to do that was politically perilous or
politically difficult or at least they had not thought through, “How will this impact or how do we do this in a way that’s less threatening to our political interests?” And on the one hand that’s admirable, but on the other it’s kind of naïve. I mean, and it wasn’t malicious, it just was that’s not how they thought. And there really were very few people who were inside the circle of government who thought that way at all. In fact, I think perhaps the Governor purposefully built an administration that was mostly devoid of political operatives. Mostly. And those that were there weren’t really in the top three, five, inner circle. And they were certainly in a minority if they were there. So despite all that, they didn’t make my job easier. But the fact that we were able to, in spite of that, still get her re-elected is admirable. It’s hard to argue with the success they had. Was she a perfect governor? Probably not. I don’t know that you could find a perfect governor. But the similarities as I went back before this and sort of looked at some old articles and things like that and the things that were said about her and the word “tough” comes up over and over and over again. And so to think about where it started and how Jim Florio presented her as pearls and Somerset Hills and horses and her home has a name, to the real tenacity of a politician, a public servant, who very much believed that good policy would become good politics. And that was the key. You didn’t let the politics drive the policy. You forced the politics to follow the policy. And that’s, that’s a lesson for everybody.

Nancy Becker: And I think that’s a very good place for us to stop. So thank you, Tom. It’s been delightful.

Tom Wilson: Thanks, Nancy.