Michael Torpey Interview (April 24, 2014)

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: It is Thursday, April 24, 2014. I’m Marie DeNoia Aronsohn here for the Center on the American Governor with Michael Torpey who played several significant roles in the administration of former New Jersey governor Christie Todd Whitman. So, Michael, Counsel, Chief Counsel, and Chief of Staff, you were very busy during the Whitman administration.

Did you have a favorite role that you played?

Michael Torpey: I think I enjoyed the Chief of Staff position probably more than the others I held, but I enjoyed every moment of the administration. It was exciting from day one, and I was there from the very first day and I left on the very last.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: So, backing up, a little about you, where did you grow up and go to college and law school?

Michael Torpey: I grew up in Somerville, in Somerset County, and went to local parochial schools, Immaculata High School, and ultimately graduated from Saint Michael’s College in Vermont, and went to law school at Seton Hall. Graduated from Seton Hall Law in ’89 and was admitted to the bar the same year.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: Tell us a little bit about your family.

Michael Torpey: Well, my family was very active in civic and political affairs in Somerset County. My father was very well-known in Somerset and knew Christie Whitman’s parents and then Christie herself. And so I was introduced to politics and government through my father’s association and his activities. And as a kid I did those things that kids do on campaigns, hanging banners and lawn signs together and what have you. One of my father’s best friends was Ray Bateman who ran for governor on a Republican ticket in 1977, and his parents lived down the street from me, about four houses down. And so we had a very active political life. As a kid, I tagged along with my dad to a lot of events and what have you and kind of caught the bug I guess when I was a kid tagging along with my father.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: What were your earliest impressions of what politics is?
Michael Torpey: Well, one of my earlier memories of meeting a politician that had an impact on me was Millicent Fenwick who was a local congresswoman at the time and quite a personality. And I remember meeting her at a luncheon when I was-- I don't recall exactly my age, probably 12 years old or so, and I just remember her views of government and her views of public policy really had an impact on me. And what came through very clearly from people like Millicent Fenwick was the notion of public service and that this wasn’t about acquisition of power, this was about the government as a public service.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: Is that when you thought this is for me?

Michael Torpey: Yes, I don’t know that I thought about it quite like that, but I was involved in student government when I was in high school. I went to college, I ended up running a campaign for one of my professors as a sideline, just as something fun to do. Got some of my friends involved in that. Ultimately, he was the first Republican elected from a very Democratic district in Vermont. This is right in Burlington, Vermont, which is anchored by a socialist <laughs> mayor. The current U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders was the mayor of Burlington at the time in that district where I ran this campaign. And so that was interesting—a lot of interesting political dynamics in play there and just kind of kept up with it.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: What was your first position in politics other than this campaign that you just mentioned, your first paid position?

Michael Torpey: Well, I first went to the State House as an intern in 1985 and right out of college. My intention was to stay there just for a few months and then I was planning to go to law school down in Washington at American University. And I enjoyed the internship so much I asked my boss at the time, Brad Brewster (and this is 1985, there was an election going on), and I said, “Hey, if we win the control of the Assembly and you have the opportunity to add more staff would you hire me?” And he said, “Yes, you’re on.” So I decided to go to night school at Seton Hall. And then we ended up—the Republicans took control of the Assembly in the ‘85 elections and the Kean landslide and I’ve been there ever since.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: What was it about working there, even as an intern, that you found so compelling?

Michael Torpey: Well, there’s definitely an energy in politics that’s undeniable. And I think if you talk to anyone regardless of their political persuasion, there’s something about the energy that really grabs people. Certainly I had an interest though in public policy. I had
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that interest throughout my life and through college, and so obviously the opportunity to have an influence on the public affairs of, in this case, the state was adventurous to me.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: So when you looked at the Assembly people and the State Senators you had a lot of respect, what was your impression of them?

Michael Torpey: Well, I did have a lot of respect for them and at the same time as I got to work more closely I got to see some of the more interesting aspects of their personalities. And I have to say I mostly enjoyed that. I mostly came to respect people even more, that was not always the case, but I found it just an interesting and kind of a fulfilling place to work.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: When did you first, I know you mentioned that you knew Christie Whitman’s parents at a very young age, when did you first meet her?

Michael Torpey: Well, I really didn’t know Christie myself—she’s just a few years older than I am. And so when she was getting involved in politics I really wasn’t around in Somerset County at that time, when she was a Freeholder, and then into the Kean administration as a BPU President, but I think that the first time I met her was when I started—prior to working for her in the transition after the ’93 election.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: What did you think during her campaign against U.S. Senator Bill Bradley?

Michael Torpey: Well, many of us who were in the Assembly, I was on the Assembly staff at the time, Republican staff, were thrilled at what she was able to do in that race. And that was the first indication that there was something happening out there that would ultimately lead to the ’91 races, legislative races, where Republicans took major majorities back after being out of control. And so Christie’s senate race was the first indication that there was a big wave that was forming out there that was going to ultimately sweep Republicans into power.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: Did you have a sense watching from the sidelines of that campaign that you wanted to be involved with this person, wanted to support her going forward?

Michael Torpey: I have to say at that time I was very focused on the Assembly. After the ’89 election the Republicans lost control of the Assembly. There was a major staff
reduction. And I was a midlevel staffer and thankfully made the cut after we went from about 50 down to about 17 staff and I was able to survive that cut. So I thought, well, this might be my place to do my work. And after the ’91 races where we went back into control I was promoted and I was made one of the Deputy Directors, so I was one of the two Deputy Directors of the staff. And so I was really focused on doing the legislative work at the time. I hadn’t really thought about moving to the executive branch. That opportunity was still a couple years away anyway.

**Marie DeNoia Aronsohn:** How did you come to be involved with her? You said your first experience was on her transition, how did that happen?

**Michael Torpey:** Yes, exactly. What happened was that after she won I did have an interest in moving to the executive branch. I made that interest known to Hazel Gluck and John Sheridan who were the co-chairs of the transition team. And I then got a call from Peter Verniero, who was—the Governor had already indicated was going to name as the Chief Counsel to the Governor. And Peter called me, there was actually a matter of interest to the Governor in transition that I was also handling on the legislative staff, and so I worked on that matter with Peter. And then thereafter Peter called me and asked whether I would join him on his staff as Deputy Chief Counsel.

**Marie DeNoia Aronsohn:** Did you have a role in the Ed Rollins situation? Is that the matter you’re speaking of?

**Michael Torpey:** No. The matter had to do with some discussion at the time about building an arena in Camden. Governor Florio on his way out was looking to accomplish that, and he needed the support of the Republican legislature to do that. And there was a lot of skepticism, and Governor Whitman, Governor-elect Whitman at the time was not supportive of that. And I was part of a staff group that analyzed that project, and frankly we did not think it made sense. And so we ultimately opposed it and it obviously never occurred.

**Marie DeNoia Aronsohn:** What about the Ed Rollins controversy? What’s your recollection of that situation?

**Michael Torpey:** Well, I really was not—at that point was not—formally part of the team, so I really had no inside knowledge or I wasn’t working on the matter. From the outside it was obviously disconcerting, and I didn’t know this, I felt this about Christie, but having not worked with her yet I didn’t know for a fact, but I could not have believed that she or anyone close to her would’ve actually done anything that had been alleged. Despite the fact that Mr. Rollins made that allusion to paying off ministers. So I think that from my point of
view it was a little disconcerting, obviously, but I didn’t believe it. And ultimately it proved not to be true.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: A big part of Governor Whitman’s administration was her tax cut policies. What was your role in that part of things?

Michael Torpey: Well, as my primary job as the Deputy Counsel to the Governor was—I was often the point person for the Governor in the legislature. Now, I should say it’s very much a team approach so I wasn’t by any means the only one, but I was hired because of my experience in the legislature. And there was very little experience on the staff with the legislature and Peter Verniero recognizing that, hired me for that purpose. And so my role was, not just on the tax cuts, but on any significant piece of legislation was to figure out a way to get it through. Now we, of course, had Republican majorities in both houses so that was helpful, but that’s often a double-edged sword. And in this particular case these policies were popular. The Governor ran on them. She made it clear that this is what she wanted to do. And I think the little bit of the surprise that happened was that the Governor announced at her inaugural that she was going to accelerate the tax cuts.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: Make them retroactive, right?

Michael Torpey: Yes, make them retroactive. And so that was a bit of a surprise and I do know that the legislative leaders were not informed of that until just before the speech. And I can’t say that I was involved in that decision, but I thought it was an interesting little twist right at the beginning of the administration.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: Did it make your work on the legislative side a little bit more difficult?

Michael Torpey: Well, the legislature likes to have—they’re very focused on process—and so sometimes when things surprised them there’s a tendency to pull back a little bit. But there was a lot of support for these tax cuts. The Governor ran on those tax cuts. Many of the legislators who had just been elected had endorsed those tax cuts, not all of them by any means, but many of them had. And so the tax cuts in and of themselves I don’t think were particularly difficult, but they were part of an overall budget strategy that had as part of that a number of different pieces of legislation that were not as easy to get done. And so we had a very difficult, I shouldn’t say difficult, a very intense first six months. And the difficulty is that you all start in this administration, this staff comes on board. Many people don’t know each other. You all come into these new jobs, they’re brand new. None of us ever held the positions that we were actually hired to do and you immediately began
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governing. The first day when the Governor is inaugurated and you’re on staff you are now empowered to do your job, whether you know how to do it or not. And this is very much akin to trying to build a car as you drive it down the road. And it’s fascinating, but it’s incredibly challenging.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: So apparently you were a part of meetings that involved Steve Forbes and Larry Kudlow. Tell us about that.

Michael Torpey: Yes, this goes back actually to during the campaign when I was on the legislative staff. The very long story short is that through a contact I was asked to meet with Larry Kudlow, who was advising the Governor on her tax cut policies. And a couple of my junior staff had been, with my approval, working with him to provide him data so that he could do a proper analysis. I ultimately met with Larry and then the Speaker at the time, Speaker Haytaian, who did not really know that this was going on. But I do know that he was very supportive of the Governor, and I did know that he was supportive of tax cuts. And so there was a meeting that was scheduled to occur at Pontefract, the Governor’s home in Oldwick. And at that meeting would be Larry, and Steve Forbes, and Chuck Haytaian, and Donnie DiFrancesco the Senate President, where she was going to seek their support for these tax cuts. Just prior to that meeting I’d met with Larry and Speaker Haytaian at a little restaurant in Oldwick, and we kind of got our act together. Speaker Haytaian was very supportive of the tax cuts and we went to the meeting. The meeting didn’t go quite as well as maybe the Governor would have hoped or in this case the candidate who would have hoped, there was a little bit of pushback. I know that Senator DiFrancesco was a little concerned about this and thought that this would be a difficult political position to take. I should just flash forward and say Senator DiFrancesco was extremely helpful in getting this done ultimately, but at the time was a little skeptical. And again, my recollection is the meeting didn’t go so well. Actually I think that you asked me before what the first time was I met the Governor. It was at her house at that meeting and it was a little uncomfortable. It did not stop the Governor. As I came to understand that’s just the way she is. And she had done her homework, she had made her decision. She was looking to gain the support of the two key legislative leaders and she was going to do it. She was not asking for permission to do this, she was informing them, and telling them also that she had good reasons to do it, and that Larry Kudlow and Steve Forbes had done an analysis and were there to provide that. But, ultimately, she went out and announced it and I know Speaker Haytaian was very supportive, as were many of the Assembly candidates (I was part of the campaign team of the Assembly at the time). There was a significant rift that happened in several of the campaigns where the Assembly candidates who generally supported the tax cuts separated from the Senate candidates, some of whom did not. And that proved to be a little bit difficult because many of these campaigns were run jointly, jointly financed, jointly managed, and so that was difficult. By the time we got to governing and got to the point of the Governor being inaugurated most of that had started to fall in line.
Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: What were some of the, I mean, politically it seems as if this would be a big win, I mean, tax cut. Were the concerns that it would just not be doable?

Michael Torpey: I think the biggest concern really was the one that formed the basis of the greatest criticism coming from Governor Florio and some others, and that is that when she removed these revenues, then what are you going to cut? So that was always the political debate. Well, if you want to cut taxes then what are you going to cut programmatically? And since most of Governor Florio’s tax increases were passed in order to generate new state aid programs, the state school funding program, the QEA, and also to fund a homestead rebate program. If you’re going to cut the tax revenues that supported those, then okay does that mean you’re going to then cut state aid? And Governor Whitman’s view was that tax cuts done properly would stimulate economic growth and that it was not a question of simply subtracting from the state aid programs in order to support tax cuts, but that they would enhance economic activity. And I think she was proven correct. Now whether the tax cuts were the primary reason for that or whether there were other things going on in the economy, but the point is is that ultimately the economic activity in the state grew fairly dramatically during her time in office. And we were able to support the tax cuts by growing out of our problem.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: Your first role was Deputy Counsel?

Michael Torpey: Yes.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: When were you promoted to Chief Counsel?

Michael Torpey: I was promoted to Chief Counsel during a series of moves. I was kind of the tail end of a series of moves that occurred following the death of Chief Justice Wilentz. Debbie Poritz was the Attorney General at the time. She became the Chief Justice. Peter Verniero went from Chief of Staff over to the Attorney General’s office, and Harriet Derman, who at the time was Chief Counsel, became Chief of Staff, and I became Chief Counsel.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: What were your responsibilities at that time?

Michael Torpey: Well, the responsibilities of the Chief Counsel were fairly well-defined. They’re defined in statute for one thing—you are in fact the Governor’s lawyer, and all the people on the counsel staff are in fact the Governor’s lawyers. They work for the Governor, in her capacity as Governor, but they work for the Governor. We don’t work for anyone else. We don’t represent anyone else in the state, unlike the Attorney General, who represents all departments of the State. Primary role though that was defined at the
beginning of the administration and really never changed was obviously the review of all legal matters, including legislation, oversaw nominations of prosecutors and judges. And inside the State House our primary operational role was to be the chief liaison unit to the legislature.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: What did you find challenging? Were there some challenges you were up against in that role?

Michael Torpey: Well, I would say that the legislative liaison role is clearly the most challenging, at least to my mind. I should say I had a staff, many of whom I inherited from my prior Chief Counsels. Peter Verniero, from the very beginning, hired a very competent staff of lawyers, and truthfully I did not have to do much in the way of legal work. The people, the subordinate staff were outstanding lawyers. And by the time the things came to me for my review it was often a rather cursory review. It didn’t require a lot more input because it was so well-done. I had some absolutely brilliant people working underneath me at the time, including my deputy, John Farmer, who became Attorney General among other things. John is a brilliant person, and he’s a brilliant writer as well. And so in terms of legal work, I was basically reviewing, ensuring that it met with the Governor’s policy goals. But it was the liaison role with the legislature, kind of the hands-on working to gain support for what we wanted to do, or for that matter stopping things that we did not want to have happen down there. It’s also the most fun part of the job as well, but definitely a double-edged sword.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: So then 1997 comes around and you’re appointed Chief of Staff. Tell us about that. When did that happen? I know when that happened, why did that happen? What were the circumstances surrounding that promotion?

Michael Torpey: The Governor, of course, had just been reelected. It was very close, closer than I think anyone had thought it would be. That was a little disconcerting. It was frustrating, I think, and I don’t want to speak for the Governor, but I can say that for me, and for many of us who worked closely with her, we were disappointed. We really thought, and I still look back and historically, I believe this is also the case, I think she had an extremely strong first term, and it accomplished a great deal. She had said she would do certain things and she did them. We kept a score card that we reviewed every other week to make sure that we were reaching the goals that she had established, both as campaign promises, and then after coming in and establishing more goals. We constantly looked to make sure that we did the things that we said we were going to do. And the governor was incredibly successful in that respect. Politics being what they are, some things took us a little bit by surprise. I have to say that Jim McGreevey, soon thereafter to be Governor McGreevey, ran an extremely good campaign, extremely well-disciplined. And so he made
the race very, very close. So I think we were frustrated at that, frankly, and what happened then was that Harriet Derman was Chief of Staff at the time, and Harriet had always indicated her desire to be a judge. This goes back to her. She at first indicated her desire to be a judge and then was ultimately recruited to be an Assembly candidate, and then became a member of the Assembly. I don’t think that was really what she had intended to do, although she was a very good legislator. I met Harriet in her capacity as a legislator when I was working on the staff that supported the Republicans. I knew Harriet very well and she made it clear that she would like time to actually do what she initially set out to do several years before. She became a judge. And so the Governor asked me to be Chief of Staff. I have to say honestly I hesitated because, while I was not very old, I felt that I may have been a little burnt out from those four years. People don’t survive in those jobs very long typically and I thought about it and I thought well that’s kinda crazy, this is a unique opportunity and I had enormous respect for the Governor. I think some of my competitive instincts kicked in too. Going back to what I was saying about being frustrated by what happened and this was not the time for me to leave. But it was the time for me to step up if the Governor wanted me to do it, had that confidence in me, then I should absolutely say, yes.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: And it ended up being your favorite, you said...

Michael Torpey: It did, it did.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: ...of the three roles that you played.

Michael Torpey: Yeah, yeah. I ended up with a tremendous group of people around me that made it very fulfilling but made us very successful, I think. I think the Governor had an extremely successful second term, which is not always easy.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: Going back to the reelection campaign, you mentioned that candidate McGreevey ran a really good campaign and that’s why it diminished the margin of victory for Governor Whitman. Where did he, in your opinion, gain a foothold there?

Michael Torpey: Well, the issue that he seized upon was auto insurance. That was the one where we really did not get it together as well as we could have. Now, I should say that interestingly, Governor Whitman identified auto insurance as an emerging issue that needed to be addressed. She herself did that the year prior. It’s ’96 and my recollection is that when we were considering, I think it must have been the ’97 State of the State. That’s usually a process where several weeks before that we talk about what we wanted to do, what the Governor wanted to talk about, and we tossed around the issues that needed to be
addressed. And I remember her saying, "You know, I’ve been out there and I’m hearing a lot about auto insurance.” Now, auto insurance, as you know, in New Jersey had been a hot topic, but it ebbs and flows...

**Marie DeNoia Aronsohn:** Especially then.

**Michael Torpey:** ...especially then. And she had clearly detected an uptick in public concern over auto insurance. And so we set out to try to address that. Unfortunately, I don’t think that we addressed it effectively in the beginning half of ’97 and that permitted candidate McGreevey to seize upon it. I will say, and I should say I’ve gotten to know Jim McGreevey and I respect him, but at the time, we felt that he basically demagogued the issue. He put out prescriptions that really could not be accomplished and that were legally impossible to accomplish, but they sounded good. And interestingly enough, I flash forward to when he was Governor and he ended up passing a series of auto insurance reforms that have worked about as well as anything has. They were a lot closer to what Christie Whitman actually proposed than what he was proposing at the time in ’97. So, I give him credit for that.

**Marie DeNoia Aronsohn:** That’s really interesting, but his message resonated so much because...

**Michael Torpey:** It sure did.

**Marie DeNoia Aronsohn:** ...it was a pocketbook issue for so many people in New Jersey, right?

**Michael Torpey:** Yes.

**Marie DeNoia Aronsohn:** So, he had a lot of emotional energy. <laughs>

**Michael Torpey:** He did.

**Marie DeNoia Aronsohn:** He had the wind at his back for that, right?

**Michael Torpey:** And as a candidate he was extraordinarily disciplined with his message. He just stayed on this and just beat it to death and the thing about Christie Whitman is Christie Whitman never says anything that she doesn’t believe, and so it would have been
nice for her to have made some more politically acceptable, attractive statement on the issue that would have maybe satisfied the public, but if she didn’t think it was something she could actually accomplish or it was something she didn’t actually believe in, she wasn’t gonna say it. And so we were a little bit stuck on that issue and almost paid for it with a loss.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: Wow. I love that message discipline term because it cuts both ways. I mean it’s a great campaign device, and then this isn’t to put anybody who runs for office down, but does it get to the truth for voters listening, that’s a question.

Michael Torpey: Yeah, no I think that’s true, but you know you don’t get a chance to govern unless you win an election. To win an election you need to say things and you need to say them in ways that resonate with people and I think that by and large Christie Whitman was extraordinarily successful in doing exactly that but in the ‘97 race it just—the dynamics I just described were such that it did not work so well in our favor.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: Right, right. So, going into the second term, as you said, you had that competitive feeling. What were some of the things that you, the major issues that the Governor wanted to accomplish that you were involved in?

Michael Torpey: Well, in the second term she certainly laid out her desire to increase the state’s land preservation goals and that was certainly one of the hallmarks of her second term. We were very aggressive about that. I would say that politically, that her team who oversaw her political well-being was focused on improving her popularity as well. And again, you can’t divorce popularity from effectiveness as a leader. So we felt that in order to accomplish some of these things that she said she wanted to get done, that we needed to improve her public image given the little bit of a beating that it took during the prior campaign. And so we did a number of things structurally inside that I think were very effective and there were some personnel changes that occurred. Pete McDonough was moved. He had been on the campaign as Press Secretary. He moved over and became Director of Communications in the Governor’s office. New Press Secretary, Jayne O’Connor, was very very effective. I established for the first time an Office of Intergovernmental Affairs in the Governor’s office. Now, this office did exist in prior administrations but it had not existed in the Whitman Administration, and in that group was a group of campaign operatives who I had brought inside with their goal of being the primary liaisons to local government officials. So we had a way of doing the care and feeding that was necessary politically to local officials, local political leaders of both parties. We were obviously conscious of the fact that we were Republicans, and sure there was a Republican bias, but this group was a group of government employees who did focus on ensuring that all the local officials of the state had a way to communicate with the Governor. I should say that
just a few days ago, I ran into a significant Democratic mayor still in office who did say to (I hadn’t seen him in a while), “You know, I go around and I tell everyone that the Whitman Administration was the best administration to deal with.” I said, “Well, why is that? That’s funny—that’s first time I’ve heard that from you,” <laughs> and he said, “Ah, you know, it’s absolutely true because I always could get an answer out of the Whitman Administration. When I needed something I knew I could call, I knew I could get an answer. It wasn’t always the answer I wanted but I knew I could always get an answer.” So, that was nice to hear, you know, 14 years later, 15 years later, but it was nice to hear.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: Yeah, by design, you wanted to be there.

Michael Torpey: Well, I think that was also true of our cabinet, our cabinet was very outward focused. These are some of the things that we really insisted upon. We insisted that the cabinet actually identify the ways in which they were going to be more active and increase their outreach. And we did coordinate, I think, more effectively internally than we had previously. And a lot of that was due to the fact that the Governor had promoted many of us from within, so we might have been new to the specific positions but we had already been inside. Her core, you know, four people in the beginning of the second term had all been with her throughout the first term. We all knew her, she knew us, we all knew each other and we worked extremely well together. It was a very tight operation, I think, at that point.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: Now, in 1999 when Governor Whitman appointed Peter Verniero to the Supreme Court there was a lot of controversy around the approval of that appointment, the confirmation hearings...

Michael Torpey: Mm-hm.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: …having to do with racial profiling and Peter Verniero’s connection. What was your role during all of that?

Michael Torpey: Well, my role was to ensure that Peter was appointed to the Supreme Court, that’s what the Governor wanted. Frankly, I thought Peter, and still think that he was an outstanding candidate. I think he proved that in his time on the bench, and so my goal was to get that done. And I will say that in those types of situations it’s not just about wanting to get it done because that’s what is the right thing to do or what the Governor wants done. Those things are important, but there is an issue that comes up sometimes where you have to win these types of things because if you don’t your credibility is undermined and your ability to lead is undermined. And the Governor staked a great deal on
Peter’s nomination and I knew that. Even though I was friends with Peter and wanted to see that happen for him, I saw this as one of those moments where we absolutely had to win or else the Governor would be undermined, and so we went about it accordingly.

**Marie DeNoia Aronsohn:** Can you discuss at all about that process?

**Michael Torpey:** Well the process, you know, sometimes I think there’s an assumption that a lot of things are happening that are in some way nefarious. In a situation like this, a lot of this was about good hard work, presenting the facts, making sure Peter (Peter had some explaining to do) explained it well. I think we had to recognize that there were some people who were not going to be with us strictly for political reasons. It would not matter what we said to them, and so you have to identify that. Sometimes it’s just as important to know who’s not with you and know that they’re never going to be there, and not waste any time trying to deal with them. But identify the 21 votes that you need in the Senate in order to get the nomination done. And, you know, there’s a saying in the State House about, it’s 41, 21, and 1 wins. 41 votes in the Assembly, 21 votes in the Senate and the Governor’s signature that passes a law. In the case of a nomination, it’s 21 votes in the Senate. I don’t need 22, I need 21, and that’s the way we went at this. Now, it’s always nice to build larger numbers, but 21 is what we needed. I don’t remember the vote...

**Marie DeNoia Aronsohn:** Sounds like...

**Michael Torpey:** ...but it was close.

**Marie DeNoia Aronsohn:** <laughs> I don’t remember the vote...

**Michael Torpey:** <laughs>

**Marie DeNoia Aronsohn:** ...but it sounds like, would you say this was one of the tougher ones, one of your tougher challenges in your service to this administration?

**Michael Torpey:** I think it was, it was a tough one. I frankly never doubted that we were going to get it done and maybe that’s part of the way you have to think when you’re in these positions. I never thought we would ever lose anything, anytime we went to try to get it done. And that was the way that I went about it. I have to say I was certainly not the only one. When I worked with Peter, that’s the way Peter looked at it. Harriet’s the same way, Judy Shaw, you know, all of us, Pete McDonough. We were all focused on, once we make the decision, and I say “We” meaning the Governor’s decision but one that we then had to
support, that we had to accomplish. I’ll note that with respect to the Governor and her
decision making, she was very deliberate in her decisions and so we were never surprised by
anything as a staff, we never had to go back and say, “Governor, I can’t believe you said
that. You made a commitment, how could you have made that commitment?” Never did
anything like that ever happen and so by the time that she made a decision, we all
understood what she was thinking, why she was thinking it. On the big decisions we had
already worked through what we anticipated to be the problems in getting it done, and so
we were all ready to go. And so that’s why I think a lot of us always had that confidence
that once we set out, once something was activated that we would be successful.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: Mm. So, were you surprised when Governor Whitman decided to
resign before the end of her second term and join the Bush Administration?

Michael Torpey: Well, I wasn’t surprised and I can tell you that she wasn’t necessarily
looking for anything, but it didn’t surprise me that she got asked. She was obviously a
national figure in her own right. She’s obviously a Republican woman and she was also
someone who had the ability to reach beyond the party and speak to moderates and to
Democrats as well. So, she has this set of political skills that are really major league political
skills and it did not surprise me. And I’ll flash forward. I had the interesting experience,
after the discussions occurred privately about whether or not she would join the
administration, the Bush Administration. She and I flew down to D.C. somewhat
surreptitiously to go meet with President-Elect Bush, President-Elect Vice President Cheney,
and Andy Card, the incoming Chief of Staff to the White House. And she and I went up to
(there was a transition office set up in a hotel), the floor where they were all meeting and
the Governor goes into that meeting. I waited in the hallway, and she came out and I said,
“So what was it?”

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: <laughs>

Michael Torpey: And I knew, we knew what was gonna be asked, and she said, “EPA,” and
I even said to her then, “So, what’d ya say?”

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: <laughs>

Michael Torpey: And I was thinking of course she had said yes, but she said, “Oh, I said
yes,” and her next comment was, “When the President of the United States asks you to do
something, you do it,” and that was that.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: Alright. That’s an interesting story, you know, I can picture it.
Michael Torpey: I should also tell you that at that time, just as kind of an aside, people may know that President and Mrs. Bush’s dog, Barney, who had come from the litter of Governor Whitman’s dogs, and so Barney was delivered at that very moment and as a matter of fact, one of our staff members, our Director of our Washington office, had gotten Barney, brought Barney upstairs to the same place, Mrs. Bush arrived and we’re showing Barney to Mrs. Bush and she says, “Oh, I have to show the dog to the President.” And so she walked into the room with Barney and the next thing you can hear from the outside is, “Oh my gosh, I can’t believe he did that,” and the dog peed on the carpet...

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: <laughs> Of course.

Michael Torpey: ...in the room and Barney was delivered to the president that day as well.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: That’s a great...

Michael Torpey: Yeah.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: ...that’s really great. So, in the overview, what would you say were the Whitman Administration’s greatest accomplishments?

Michael Torpey: Well, there are obviously policy accomplishments that I’ll speak to, but I really think that the Governor, her integrity and her strength of leadership are the things that were the real hallmarks of her administration. I’d like to think that given a longer arc of history, that’s already being seen that it will continue to be viewed favorably. She had a very very strong leadership style. When she made decisions, she stuck to them. She made them deliberately, but when she made them she stuck to them, and I think there’s a certainty about the way that she led that resonates with people. So, from a policy standpoint, clearly there was an economic policy that was established, that really led a national wave of Republican tax cutters and I think that that was extraordinarily important. And one of the things that I think people need to be reminded of, particularly given some of the things that have happened since she left office and some of the budget issues that have arisen, is that we balanced the budget. Of course the budget needs to be balanced, the constitution requires it. So, that in and of itself is not the great accomplishment, but how you do it matters. When the Governor came into office 15 percent of the state budget was supported by one-shot revenues, meaning that they were non-recurring revenues and so we set out a goal at the very beginning of the administration to minimize them and if possible eliminate them. We actually did accomplish that in one year where there was a de minimis number of one-shots so it was practically down to zero. We did reduce it dramatically from about 15 percent down to just a couple of single digit percentage points. We contained the
growth of state government. The growth of state government, in historical perspective over the four or five prior governors and then in comparison to those since, was one of the lowest-growth periods in the state's history. This despite the fact that we had some significant economic growth. That is difficult to accomplish where there’s a lot of revenue coming in. There is a tendency, particularly from the legislative side of things, to spend some of that money. And so, it’s not that we didn’t do it, it’s not that we didn’t take some of that economic activity or the revenue generated from that economic activity and dedicate it to expanding certain programs, we did, but we did it carefully and we did it in a way that we believed would be sustainable in the future. And I think if you look at some of the big budget metrics from our time in comparison to the prior several governors and those since, Christie Whitman matches up extremely well.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: What would you say were some of her weaknesses, or the weaknesses of the administration?

Michael Torpey: That’s tough because I think with every strength there’s some weakness. I would say that one of her weaknesses was that she was not always willing to do the politically expedient thing. I know that might sound a little self-serving, but that was the truth. I tell people that one of the great honors for me was to work with her in that capacity, in several of those capacities, but mostly as the Chief of Staff, where I had the unique opportunity to sit with the Governor one-on-one with no one else in the office. There was no one reporting on what we were saying, and we had a chance to just speak directly about things. And I remember on more than one occasion I would sit in there and I might outline something that’s happening and, you know, here’s some of the options, and she would say things like, “Well, what’s the right thing to do?” you know? And I’d say, “Well, I think this is the right thing to do,” and she says, “I think that’s the right thing to do too. Just do that.” And that’s the way she made decisions. Now, some things required some more political deftness and she was very astute politically as well, but she was able to balance those. She was able to do the right thing and at the same time she had a very good sense of, “Okay, how are we actually gonna get it done?” To say you wanna do the right thing and actually get it done are two different things, and that’s where I think her political skills came in.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: Wow. So, you’ve continued to have an interesting career since the administration. Tell us about that a little bit.

Michael Torpey: Well, right now I have a lobbying firm and I have a couple of partners, and I kind of view it as more of a boutique kind of operation. I don’t have a large client list, I’m not seeking to have that, I like to do the work myself. I have to say that one of the big changes for me was leaving the Governor’s office where I had an extraordinary amount of support and to going out and really doing most of my work on my own. But I have to say
over time I’ve really come to enjoy that part of it because ultimately I really think I enjoy public policy and the development of solutions to problems, and that’s kinda how I approach my lobbying practice. I’ve never had to do or say anything as a lobbyist that I was uncomfortable with and I never had to do that when I was working for the Governor, so I’m happy that I can still say that today.

Marie DeNoia Aronsohn: Mm. That’s a good career. Is there anything else that you want to tell us about the Whitman Administration that I haven’t asked you today?

Michael Torpey: I think that the only thing I would say, and maybe this is going back to what I was just reflecting on before, is that Christie Whitman and who she is as a person is something that I hope comes through in these interviews that you’re doing, for those of us who talk about her. I don’t think that it can really be fully appreciated by the people of the state. I think the citizens of this state, obviously, did elect her twice and that in and of itself was an honor for her for sure but I don’t think they know how lucky they were.