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# **President Ronald Reagan Oral History Project**

## **Briefing Materials**

**Stuart Spencer**

**November 15-16, 2001**

**Prepared by Gar Culbert, Research Assistant**

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## STUART SPENCER TIMELINE

*Prepared by Gar R. Culbert*

*Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, 06/07/2001*

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- 1960** After resigning as director of parks and recreation for the city of Alhambra, California, Stuart Spencer teams up with William “Bill” Roberts, a former television salesman, to work in politics. After a brief run with the Los Angeles County Republican Central Committee, the two take out a month-to-month lease on a small office and open up their own small political consulting operation, Spencer-Roberts. (Matthew Dallek, *The Right Moment: Ronald Reagan’s First Victory and the Decisive Turning Point in American Politics*, New York: The Free Press, 2000).
- 1961** Spencer and Roberts begin to make a reputation for their firm, helping several candidates win seats on the Los Angeles City Council. (Dallek, *The Right Moment*.)
- 1963** Spencer and Roberts, in special congressional elections, run successful campaigns for two Republican candidates, and in so doing continue to enhance their team’s reputation. (Dallek, *The Right Moment*.)
- 1964** Spencer and Roberts run Nelson Rockefeller’s California primary campaign against Barry Goldwater. While the campaign itself is unsuccessful, it does a good deal to solidify the reputation of Spencer-Roberts. (Dallek, *The Right Moment*.)
- 1965** In April, Spencer and Roberts begin meeting with Ronald Reagan to discuss their potential involvement in his effort to win the 1966 California gubernatorial election. (Dallek, *The Right Moment*.)
- 1966** On January 1<sup>st</sup>, Reagan announces his candidacy for governor of California promising to “clean up the mess at [U.C.] Berkeley.” Despite reservations, Spencer and Roberts go to work for the Reagan campaign. They try to pull off a delicate balancing act: distancing their candidate from extreme elements of the Republican Party, like the John Birch Society—without alienating them—and presenting him as a moderate. (Dallek, *The Right Moment*.)
- On the 8<sup>th</sup> of November Reagan is elected governor of California, defeating Democratic incumbent, Edmund G. (“Pat”) Brown by almost 1 million votes.
- 1967** Reagan is sworn in as governor of California on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of January.
- 1968** Reagan is unsuccessful in his bid for the Republican presidential nomination.

**1970** Reagan, again aided by Spencer-Roberts, wins re-election as governor, beating the leader of the California state assembly, Democrat Jesse Unruh. After the campaign, Spencer, no longer pleased with other members of the Reagan team, decides to leave. (Jack W. Germond and Jules Witcover, *Blue Smoke and Mirrors: How Reagan Won and Why Carter Lost the Election of 1980*, New York: The Viking Press, 1981.)

**1975**

*October* Stuart Spencer is named new political director of President Ford's campaign for the Republican Presidential nomination replacing Lee Nunn, who quit because of his dissatisfaction with the slow pace of grassroots organizing. The Ford campaign's biggest effort to date had been in California, where the goal was to demonstrate enough power there to dissuade Ronald Reagan from running. *New York Times* 10/05/1975

**1976**

*February* As Ronald Reagan criticizes Ford's foreign policy positions, Stuart Spencer and Bryce N. Harlow urge a sharp and direct response to the criticism, while campaign directors Howard H. Callaway and Rogers C. B. Morton push Ford to make more a subtle reply to Reagan lest the party be severely fractured by hostile exchanges. *New York Times* 02/27/1976

*March* President Ford, Callaway, and press secretary Ron Nessen, dismiss as unfit for reply Ronald Reagan's attack in Orlando, Florida, on Ford's foreign policy of detente. Ford tells a group of Florida editors that he did not intend to respond if Reagan attacked him sharply, but, as Reagan prepared to issue his own statement, campaign aides Callaway, Stuart Spencer and Peter F. Kaye are summoned to White House for meeting. *New York Times* 03/05/1976

The race in Florida's Republican primary tightens. The dramatic upturn in Ford's hopes are linked chiefly to the organizational work of Stuart Spencer and William Roberts. Official campaign chairman Howard H. Callaway is now said to have lost responsibility for making key decisions. *New York Times* 03/08/1976

*April* Ford, in a speech and news conference, in Milwaukee, holds that Ronald Reagan's criticism of his defense policy is "built on misleading statements." Says Reagan's attacks are a result of ignorance or political opportunism. Ford campaign aide Stuart Spencer suggests that Ford must now go on the offensive. *New York Times* 04/03/1976

President Ford's campaign aides concede that Republican Presidential aspirant Ronald Reagan will score some points as the battle for the

Republican Presidential nomination moves West and South, but say Ford will win nomination in early June. Stuart Spencer, now the campaign committee deputy chairman, has advised Ford that he could trail Reagan in some state conventions, but will still capture a 1<sup>st</sup>-ballot nomination at the national convention. *New York Times* 04/09/1976

### May

President Ford hails his Michigan and Maryland primary victories. Stuart Spencer remains cautious, however, holding that the Reagan campaign has only been blunted and not stopped. *New York Times* 05/19/1976

Stuart Spencer says that Ford's victories over Ronald Reagan in Tennessee and Kentucky establish him as the national candidate. *New York Times* 05/26/1976

A move to change the California state primary rules, in which the state would no longer hold a winner-take-all primary, was stopped by Reagan state manager Lyn Nofziger. Nofziger suggests that the move to change the primary format was devised by Ford campaign aide Stuart Spencer. Ford supporters claim they, too, oppose the change in the primary rules. *New York Times* 05/28/1976

### June

President Ford concedes the California primary to Ronald Reagan. Launches his effort to win support from the 152 uncommitted Republican National Convention delegates and from those delegates to be chosen at party conventions in 11 states in next 6 weeks of the campaign. Stuart Spencer outlines the effort, which is aided by James A. Baker 3<sup>rd</sup> and F. Clifton White. *New York Times* 06/03/1976

Spencer says that the race for the Republican Presidential nomination remains "fluid" as the primary season draws to a close. Further says that the big issue in convention states will be who is most electable and that Reagan is not electable. *New York Times* 06/09/1976

Despite a setback at the Missouri Republican Convention where Reagan wins 18 out of 19 at-large delegates, Ford aides remain confident that he will win the Republican nomination. Ford campaign chairman Rogers C B Morton concedes that the count will be close. Ford has 963 delegates and Reagan 879. Morton, deputy chairman Stuart Spencer, and James A Baker 3<sup>rd</sup> say Ford can win at least 167 more delegates from among the 255 remaining. *New York Times* 06/15/1976

### August

On the 18<sup>th</sup>, President Ford wins his party's nomination at the Republican National Convention in Kansas City, narrowly defeating Reagan who garnered 47.7% of the potential delegates. A good deal of credit for Ford's success is given to the organizational capabilities provided by Spencer. (*New York Times* 03/08/1976.)

- November* In the general election, Democratic candidate Jimmy Carter defeats Ford in the Electoral College by a count of 297 to 240.
- 1980** Spencer rejoins a stumbling Reagan campaign and plays a large role in its turnaround. Spencer makes a name for himself on the campaign for his wealth of political knowledge and his ability to help keep Reagan focused on the task at hand. Spencer also plays a key role in the addition of George Bush (who had challenged Reagan in the primaries) to the ticket as the vice-presidential candidate. As well, Spencer is one of a handful of advisors who presses the otherwise apprehensive Reagan to accept the challenge and debate the incumbent Carter during the campaign. (Germond and Jules Witcover, *Blue Smoke and Mirrors*.)
- May* Presidential hopeful Ronald Reagan says he knows nothing of a report, made on CBS News, that a committee had been formed by political operative Stuart Spencer to raise funds for Reagan's campaign in the general election. *New York Times* 05/28/1980
- November* Reagan defeats Democratic incumbent Jimmy Carter in the Electoral College by a count of 489 to 49 on November 4<sup>th</sup>.
- Speculation begins regarding which members of Reagan's campaign team will be named to administration posts. Those on campaign who are not expected to take posts in the administration include William J. Casey, Lyn Nofziger and Stuart Spencer. *New York Times* 11/11/80
- 1981**
- January* Ronald Reagan takes the oath of office and is inaugurated as the fortieth president on the 20<sup>th</sup> of January.
- 1982** After the mid-term elections Spencer becomes more involved in talks among senior aides at the White House regarding the organization and the staffing of President Reagan's upcoming 1984 re-election effort. (Peter Goldman and Tony Fuller, *The Quest for the Presidency 1984*, New York: Bantam Books, 1985.)
- December* Conflict over leadership of President Reagan's 1984 re-election campaign grows even though Reagan has not yet formally declared his intention to run. Reagan aides James Baker and Michael Deaver hope to have the campaign directed by Stuart Spencer, while more conservative members of the party push for Senator Paul Laxalt. *New York Times* 12/22/1982

**1984**

- May* California-based political consultant Stuart Spencer arrives in Washington to coordinate President Reagan's re-election campaign; associates note his "mysterious" influence on Reagan's style and self-confidence on the campaign trail; Michael K. Deaver and Edward Rollins are also noted for having key roles. *New York Times* 05/26/1984
- October* Spencer plays a large part in developing strategy and preparing the President for debates with his challenger that take place on the 7<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> of October. (Goldman and Fuller, *The Quest for the Presidency 1984*.)

**1986**

- November* In November, as Iran-Contra begins to become a major public issue, Spencer returns to the White House as a special political aide to the President.
- December* Michael K. Deaver and Stuart Spencer, two of President Reagan's closest political advisers, press for the early removal of Donald T. Regan as White House chief of staff with the active support of Nancy Reagan; Deaver and Spencer are said to believe that only the departure of Regan can restore public confidence in the Administration, which has been shaken by the controversy over arms sales to Iran and diversion of funds to Nicaraguan rebels. *New York Times* 12/11/1986

**1987**

- February* A dinner, attended by President Reagan, Vice President Bush, and a number of other key players, is held in Stuart Spencer's honor and at his expense. *Washington Post* 02/21/1987

**1988**

- September* Republican Vice Presidential nominee Dan Quayle's campaign confirms report that Quayle campaign chief Stuart Spencer, longtime political adviser to President Reagan, worked in 1985 and 1986 as a paid consultant for Panama to improve nation's image and met twice with General Manuel Antonio Noriega. *New York Times* 09/02/1988
- ABC News' "Nightline" features excerpts from the "secret tape recordings" made during a strategy meeting in the Fall of 1984 that mapped President Reagan's campaign for a landslide victory. Stuart Spencer hosted the meeting. *Washington Post* 09/19/1988

## **STUART SPENCER SUGGESTED TOPICS**

*Prepared by Gar R. Culbert*

*Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, 06/07/2001*

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### ***The California Years***

- How did you come to work for Ronald Reagan in California? What role did you play in the gubernatorial campaign of 1966, the 1968 presidential bid, and also in the gubernatorial administration?
- Describe your relationship with Reagan and other key members of his staff, and your decision to leave in 1970.

### ***The Ford Hiatus***

- Explain your decision to work for President Ford in 1976. What did you take from your time with Reagan that helped you and your team during the primary season? How did your position with the Ford campaign effort affect your relationship with Reagan?

### ***Returning to the Reagan Camp and the 1980 Election***

- How did you come to reenter the Reagan fold? How did this affect your relationship with Reagan and others on his team?
- What was your role during the campaign, and did any of your experiences with the Ford administration eventually prove useful?

### ***The First Term***

- What was your role in and around the White House during Reagan's first term as president? On what issues were you consulted most regularly? Describe your relationship with the President and other staff during this time.

### ***The 1984 Election***

- What was your role during the 1984 election? Describe the strategies you developed and employed during the primaries and the general election. How did these differ from what you did during the 1980 election?

### ***The Second Term***

- What was your role in and around the White House during Reagan's second term as president?
- Describe your role in Donald T. Regan's departure and the selection of a replacement.
- On what issues were you consulted most regularly? Describe your relationship with the President and other staff during this time.

### ***The 1988 Election***

- Describe your role in the Bush campaign and your decision not to become a part of the Dole effort.
- Describe your role and relationship with Dan Quayle during the 1988 election.

***Retrospective***

- What were the strengths and weaknesses of the Reagan administration?
- What features of the presidency were missed or misunderstood by the press?
- How should the Reagan presidency be viewed in history?



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- “‘Making Dan Quayle’ Political Pro is Pulling All the Strings,” *The Los Angeles Times*, 10/21/1988.
- “Los Angeles Times Interview Stuart Spencer From Nixon Through Reagan-the California Political Campaign,” *The Los Angeles Times*, 05/01/1994.