

THE RULE OF LAW ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Jane M. Mayer

Columbia Center for Oral History

Columbia University

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Jane M. Mayer conducted by Ronald J. Grele on December 28, 2012 and July 24, 2013. This interview is part of the Rule of Law Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

VJD

Session One

Interviewee: Jane M. Mayer

Location: New York, NY

Interviewer: Ronald J. Grele

Date: December 28, 2012

Q: Let me begin with the dedication in *The Dark Side*. It's to your parents and your grandparents. So I wonder if we can start with your early life, really concentrating on two kinds of areas—how you became a journalist and, also, the evolution of your political views.

So let's start with your family. You were born in New York?

Mayer: I was born at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in 1955. I grew up in Riverdale, New York, which is part of the Bronx and went to the Fieldston School, which probably was a good part of my political training without my having any awareness of it at the time. It's a progressive school in many ways and had a particular outlook on the world. It was an Ethical Culture school—which some people call an "ethical vulture school" because it's so filled with upwardly-mobile, grasping people. But, just the same, they taught us ethics there. The ethical lessons were often out of history. They were questions about when do ends justify means and means justify ends. Whatever. We talked a lot about right and wrong. So it was a non-religious upbringing but with a big emphasis on ethics.

On my dad's side of the family—he [William Mayer] was a descendant of the Lehman family that included the governor of New York, the former governor and senator from New York [Herbert H. Lehman], who, we were told early on, had stood up to Joe [Joseph R.] McCarthy—

who, in our family, was considered a bad guy. My parents were very interested in history, always. My mom [Meredith Nevins Mayer] actually has a tremendous grasp of history, having grown up with my grandfather [Allan Nevins]—and they were Democrats. That was the water I swam in, without even realizing it, growing up.

My grandparents—part of the reason I dedicated the book to them was that my grandfather was from the heartland in America. He was self-made. He grew up on a farm in Illinois and he got to the pinnacle of American history, in some ways, just by his own wit and his hard work. Those kind of self-made qualities were very much revered in our family and so was the country that made it possible for someone to get ahead just by working hard. We had a kind of patriotism in the family that was about its meritocracy and its values. Egalitarianism was big in our family because, on my grandfather's side, he'd come from nowhere to really becoming an important person in the world of American history.

So there was a lot of love of the country. My dad had been in World War II. That was the reason I also wanted to put him in the dedication. He did Army intelligence during World War II in Japan and interrupted his career at Yale College, where he was a student. All my uncles fought in the war. They didn't boast about it in my family but there was a kind of quiet patriotism that appreciated what we thought were the decent and right values in the country. There was a great appreciation of American civil liberties too. My father's family was friends with Roger [N.] Baldwin, who was the founder of the American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU]. I heard stories about him early on when I was growing up and I always thought that sounded like something I

wanted to do someday. I was very interested in the rights of the people who were on the bottom of things, to try to make it fair, so that everybody had a shot.

So those were the kinds of values we grew up with and that's what I wanted to celebrate in this book.

Q: Did you ever meet your grandparents?

Mayer: Did I meet my grandparents? Sure. I have many memories of them. We spent lots of time with them. The problem was he died when I was young. I was just in middle school in 1971, so I didn't get to have grownup, intellectual discussions with him, but he was revered as a great man in our family. There was great to-do when he came to visit the family for various vacations and things like that. We always made fudge because it was his favorite. He played games with us and we had to be very careful about not knocking his various awards off the mantles.

One of the things I remember very early on was that we were out at my grandparents' house—I think it was in Pasadena, when he was working for the Huntington Library—there was a call from the president. It was John [F.] Kennedy's office calling. My grandfather was helping to work with the inaugural address that Kennedy was giving. It was about the “New Frontier” and my grandfather had written a book about [John C.] Fremont and was, I think, quite instrumental in helping coin that phrase and contribute to that address. When the White House called, all the kids in my family were hushed up, ushered out of the room and told to be quiet. It was very exciting though and it made me feel, I think, from that point on, that I really wanted to have

something to do with touching history. I wasn't sure what it was but I thought nothing could be more exciting.

Q: At Fieldston, you were on the newspaper?

Mayer: I wasn't on the newspaper at Fieldston. I did other things—the *Fieldston Daily News* [laughs]. It was kind of a backwater. It wasn't really what I wanted to do and I didn't know who I was at that point, yet. But at the end of Fieldston, I applied, on my own, to a boarding school in England and took a year, my senior year, and went to England. I grew up a lot there. It was called the Bedales School. Looking at America from afar during that period—it was just the end of the Vietnam War—gave me some perspective. It was very interesting. I got interested in American history and applied and got into Yale. I decided I wanted to study American history there.

But how I got into journalism, I think again, had a lot to do with my grandfather because my mom always said that of the things that he did, one of the things he had the most fun with was working on newspapers in New York City. Word passed down through the generations that it was just a fantastically fun thing to do as a job. You could see the world and get to know interesting people. It was just enjoyable. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do but I was encouraged by my mom to go into journalism because her father had had such fun with it. He had left it, obviously—at a certain point he felt it made his writing crummy. It degraded his talent at writing by making him write so much so fast. But getting into it was partly because of him, because he seemed to enjoy it so much. So it seemed to me something that might be fun to do.

So I became a stringer when I was at Yale for *Time* magazine. I was the campus reporter for *Time*.

Q: How does that happen?

Mayer: It's one of those things that's kind of passed down through kids. They recommend each other. I think I somehow learned about it and volunteered to do it. I took a summer course, also, at Yale with people who were connected to *Time* magazine somehow.

Q: Who was that?

Mayer: Strobe Talbott was at *Time*. Jonathan [F.] Fanton ran the summer program. He later worked at the MacArthur Foundation and he also worked at NYU [New York University]. Anyway, they helped set up an internship at the Washington bureau of *Time* and I was the second intern, after the first term. Somebody else had done it. I became the second one, in 1976. I took off a term from Yale, worked in Washington in that bureau, and it was during the presidential election. Jimmy Carter was running for president and I did everything from get people coffee to—that summer I also worked at the conventions, the presidential conventions, for *Time*, as a stringer. My job was to measure the temperature of the arena, of the Kemper Arena in Kansas City, during the fight between Gerald [R.] Ford and Ronald [W.] Reagan for the Republican nomination. I had to go down there with a thermometer and report back on how hot it was.

Q: Why did they want that information?

Mayer: I guess they just wanted to be able to say, on a story, that temperatures rose to whatever degree and the fight was a hot one. It was a hot one. It allowed me to hear Reagan speak for the first time and to see him mesmerize that auditorium—giving that speech that became quite famous for its reference to the "shining city on the hill." He lost, obviously—he didn't get the nomination that year—but you couldn't miss the sensation that he was a force that was growing.

So I got to see it and to me it was incredibly exciting, even in the peon position I was in. So those were the early moments I got to be a witness to and it made me think journalism might be worth going into.

Q: Did you study history at Yale?

Mayer: I did study history at Yale.

Q: With whom?

Mayer: I did American history and Chinese history and some European history. The most important professor to me was David Brion Davis, who was my thesis advisor. I also did a junior thesis with C. Vann Woodward. I think I was there in his last year. I studied the ante bellum South with him. My thesis with David Brion Davis was—it was really his idea—that—. The Yale rare books library had just been given a bequest of a huge collection of blackface minstrel

show sheet music and the scripts for the shows from the ante bellum South, so I dove into those and wrote a thesis about what they showed about race relations in the period in which they were written. Many of them were 1840s to 1850s. It was such fun. It was a great project. David Brion Davis, to me—he taught American intellectual history. It was just a course that opened my whole mind. I thought it was just fantastic. I was shy. I didn't really get to know him that well personally but to me he was very important. He probably wouldn't be able to pick me out of a lineup but I really learned so much from him. That was a fantastic course for me.

Q: Had you ever had any experience at analyzing popular culture?

Mayer: No. I learned about it from him. Because one of the things I loved about his course was the way he wove in so many different strands in what history is. It wasn't just economics or trade policy or speeches of great men; it was all kinds of other fabrics that had to do with movies and pop culture and consumerism and texts that were popular at the time but not official in any way. I just loved the breadth with which he viewed American history and the way he told it. He gave a famous lecture on historiography too that was about the importance of history. His passion for it was really contagious. He made a tremendous impact on me.

Q: Now you were at Yale at a yeasty time—the last years of Kingman Brewster [Jr.]?

Mayer: The very last. Kingman Brewster retired while I was there and then Hanna [Holborn] Gray came in. So basically, my first year at Yale was the last year that there were older upperclassmen who remembered the times of turmoil during the 1960s. If you got lucky, you

could sit them down at a table and get them to reminisce about what the sixties were like. Part of the reason my grandfather did Civil War history was because when he was a young man, the last of the veterans were still telling stories about the Civil War. So he overlapped with it and was able to get their first-hand oral history of it. To me, the sixties were a little bit like that, too. The seventies seemed like a pretty dull time politically but you could hear what it was like when things were exciting if you got older people to talk to you about it.

I grew up in New York City during the sixties and was shaped to some extent by the pop culture and what was hip. I saw demonstrations. I was too young—at Fieldston, we studied the takeover of Columbia by the radicals but we had to study it; we weren't part of it. It was in seventh grade. In 1963, my parents and grandparents went to hear Martin Luther King [Jr.] speak in Washington but I was too young to go, so I just had to hear a little bit about it. The King family, actually, by coincidence, lived next door to us the summer of 1963. They rented a house. So we got to see the kids, mostly.

But most of these things, I was too young to be a participant in that kind of exciting stuff. And I was not that politically—and never have been—engaged or radical or a participant. I was an observer and student of it. Later, in some of the things that I wrote, I've been attacked by the Right as a political person or a radical person or whatever and, I have to say, I never recognize it as me because I've never been involved in any group or movement. I've even voted for a Republican senator, after I registered to vote. I've been less about political activists than the people on the Right seem to think. But it's convenient to them, maybe, to attack people they don't like as just political.

Q: If we can back up for a moment—why Yale?

Mayer: You know, I wasn't really sure why Yale, except it was the best school I got into I think. My dad went there, too. I was playing with the idea—I got into Swarthmore and Stanford and was thinking of those, as well. But Yale—I looked at all the things on the bulletin boards and saw how much was going on in New Haven and thought it looked exciting. I was coming back from England, where I'd been in this boarding school. It looked exciting and when you're young you're not really sure what you're doing. It seemed like a good bet. It turned out it had, I think, one of the best American history programs in the country at that point and probably still does.

Q: Yes. Now women had been admitted to Yale—

Mayer: —five years before me. I was the fifth year, I think. Maybe I thought, "Great, it will help my ratio." Because we still weren't fifty-fifty. Maybe I thought I'd have a better shot at the boys if I went to a place that had a few more of them than girls. [Laughter]

Q: Those were also the days at Yale of really rotten labor relations. Were you tangentially or at all involved in any of that?

Mayer: No. That was going on in the background. Actually, I don't think the students—maybe a few students were involved but not very many. I think it became much more of a campus involvement issue after my time. The other things I did at Yale that were important to me were,

again, mostly academic. One of them was—I took a course with John [R.] Hersey. It was a tiny seminar on writing. It was a non-fiction writing class and he was a fabulous teacher. I had to qualify to get into the class and I was thrilled to get in. It was when I was a junior. We wrote pieces for him pretty much every week. You'd have a private audience with him in his little office and he would go over your writing with little, tiny, scratchy checkmarks and X's in the margins. It was like seeing a priest of writing. He was so serious and it was such a religion with him that it be as wonderful as it could be. Excellence—anything less than striving for excellence wasn't even worth spending your time on with him. That really raised my eyesight to what you could do with writing. We basically read his favorite pieces of writing, starting with the ancient Greeks and going all the way up through modern writing, to sort of understand how the writers had approached the subject. It was about craft. That was also a really life-changing course.

Q: I was going to ask you about the craft of writing—where that all came from.

Mayer: Well, that was part of it and it made me self-conscious about storytelling and about structure. Because we took great writing apart to figure out how the writer had structured the piece. It made me realize that you have many, many, infinite choices about how you tell a story—which characters you focus on and what kind of language you use; how long or short the sentences are; what kind of adjectives you decide to use or not. It all became a very conscious process because of John Hersey's approach to it and making us aware of it. I wasn't the best writer in the class and I don't think I'm the best writer now. There were some people in that class who were so gifted. It just plain happened with them, without them seeming to have to try. I have to work at it.

My mom, probably because of my dad—my mom is Meredith Nevins Mayer. My mother is a wonderful writer and wrote us letters, always, when we were kids, in a way. They had such style. I think she got it partly from my grandfather. In my family, because of him, there was a very old-fashioned style. I remember one funny thing about him was—he had a great vocabulary but really antiquated. When we got into traffic, he had a horrible temper. I remember him rolling down the window and screaming at another driver, yelling, "You cur! You knave!" [Laughter] So I grew up with people with a funny, fantastic use of the language, anyway. It helped.

Q: When you graduated from Yale, what were you prepared for?

Mayer: Nothing. [Laughter] I didn't know what I was going to do.

Q: I have a granddaughter who's graduating this year and I asked her the question. She gave me the same answer.

Mayer: Where is she graduating from?

Q: The University of Maine, in Farmington.

Mayer: Well, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. I had, believe it or not, an application for a Rhodes Scholarship. My year graduating was the first year that women were allowed to apply for it. I was going out with a superstar at Yale, who was, I think, the top student in my class.

Q: A superstar academically?

Mayer: Academically. He also was in the state legislature in Vermont at the same time and he looked like Bobby [Robert F.] Kennedy. I took one look at him and I had this application and I just thought, "He's going to get it." And—what would make any feminist cringe from then on—I handed him my application for it. He applied and got it, of course. I hadn't wanted to compete against him for it, so I didn't.

He went off to Oxford and I decided that I wanted to keep up with him so I got a temporary job working in London. Because of my internship with *Time*, I was able to get a job working with *Time Life* books in London, where I wrote little things like credit lines and descriptions of photographs. It was lonely. I lived in a bed-sitter in London and tried to go up to see my boyfriend on weekends. I was also stringing for the *Time* bureau in London. Then *Time* bought the *Washington Star* and I thought I'd better do something different. I applied for a real job with the *Washington Star*, in Washington. That was actually a year later. I also went to Oxford for a year, in history, and decided I'd rather be a reporter.

Q: What was history like at Oxford, after Yale?

Mayer: Well, I enrolled in the D. Phil [Doctor of Philosophy] program and it was completely independent. Unlike undergraduate work in America and I think even graduate work in America, which is much more guided, they basically said, "You're enrolled. Here's your room. You can

live. There's the library. In three years we'd like to see your thesis." There were professors you could consult with and I think you were assigned one but they didn't have much interest in you. I found it pretty disorienting. I wasn't sure what I was doing. So I didn't last very long. I started doing more and more writing for *Time* magazine. [Richard M.] Nixon came to visit the campus at Oxford and I wrote that up. I wrote other pieces up. That's why *Time* eventually, when they bought the *Washington Star*, offered me a spot in Washington.

I left graduate work and moved to Washington. I became a cub reporter on the metro desk and that's how I got into journalism. It was, I think, 1980.

Q: Had you worked in Vermont for a local newspaper?

Mayer: I had also worked, in the summers, at the *Rutland Herald*. I stayed on for one fall with them as well. That was a lot of fun. I also worked on the littlest weekly newspaper in Vermont. That was my first journalism job—the *Weathersfield Weekly*—which was in my parents' town, where they had a summer house. The family that owned the paper were friends, so I did little tiny local reporting. We'd then type it up and then throw the papers out on people's porches. I was interested in it but I didn't really become—I guess at the *Rutland Herald* is where I got my first real experience in it and I learned that you couldn't make mistakes. I did things like people's obits and in these big Polish families the names were impossible to spell. You had to get every name spelled correctly; otherwise, you'd get in trouble. The family would call up and yell, then your editor would yell at you. I also did something called "Hospital News" where I had to drive by the hospital and pick up who was born and who died and write it up every day. It was very basic

stuff but it was good, in the beginning, to learn the dos and don'ts of reporting and accuracy. And fairness.

Q: Was going to Vermont hooked up with the boyfriend from Vermont?

Mayer: Yes. He was up there and my parents had a place up there, so I had a place to live while I was up there doing that. Some friends of mine, along with the boyfriend and some other friends from Yale, we all started a newspaper of our own—the *Black River Tribune*—which was another weekly. At that point I learned how—it's really hard work putting out a weekly newspaper. You've got to fill it up every week. [Laughs] But I did a lot of things there. You could try every aspect of the paper. I reviewed the plays; I drew the cartoons; I did all kinds of things. It was a lot of fun.

Q: At the *Washington Star*, you were a local reporter?

Mayer: I was a metro reporter, yep. I covered Alexandria, Virginia. Then I covered the D.C. cops—the homicide unit, all kinds of crime in Washington. I remember my promotion of coming in from the suburbs was attributable to someone who later became scandalous and that was a reporter named Janet [L.] Cooke, who was on the *Washington Post*. She was writing these fantastic stories and my editor said, "We want you to write stuff like this—better things that will get more attention." They thought I was a good writer, so they brought me in from the suburbs and said, "See if you can write things like this." Well, it turned out that Janet Cooke was making it up. She won a Pulitzer Prize and the whole thing unraveled. It turned out that those great

stories she was telling were fiction. But I owe Janet Cooke a thank you because she brought me in from the suburbs to the city, where I got to cover more important stories and better stories.

In 1981, the *Washington Star* was one of the first big-city papers to fail, at the beginning of what became a trend we all recognize now. When it went under, because I'd had a string of better stories than some people there—because I'd had more opportunities to write them—I had some great clips. I was offered a job by the *Washington Post* and by the *Wall Street Journal*—both of which were better papers than the *Washington Star*. So I had a way out.

Q: How would describe your Washington when you went there as a journalist? The culture of the place? The culture of journalism? The culture of a woman, then, as a journalist, in Washington at that point in time?

Mayer: First of all, I was a particular kind of woman at that point. I was freshly-minted, Yale graduate, young and full of fun. So there weren't, probably, as many barriers for me as there might have been for some other people. In fact, I have to say—I took the job with the *Wall Street Journal* after the *Star* failed. I think I owe my career success, to some extent, to favoritism for having been young and female, because at that point the journalism world was beginning to realize they had to hire women. So the older generation of women had suffered all kinds of indignities but they had opened the doors to the younger women as a result and the paper was looking for women to hire. They wanted token women, too, and they wanted them to be visible. So they put me on the White House very early, at the *Wall Street Journal*, even though I didn't know anything about politics, really. Part of it was that they wanted a young female to be

representing the paper there, along with their other reporters. I kind of got a hand-up, I think, by being young and female.

The newspaper culture, when I first joined it, was incredibly fun, just as my grandfather had said. The *Washington Star* was the less good of the two papers in town—the *Washington Post* was a much finer paper and had Bob [Robert U.] Woodward there—famous reporters doing amazing work and the *Star* was kind of the dead-end gang. But it was the first time in my life I had ever been in a place that was really kind of the losing gang. It was so much more fun because whenever we could beat the big guys it was an excuse for revelry and partying. Everybody went out for a drink. No one expected you to be ahead every day because you couldn't be. We had many fewer reporters and there was a kind of esprit de corps that went with that.

The young reporters there that they had hired, they were great. They had some fantastic young talent there—and old talent—but the younger ones, my crowd, was Maureen Dowd, who became a good friend and became a wonderful columnist—I think—for the *New York Times*. Michael Isikoff, who is one of the best investigative reporters out there. He was a cub reporter with me and later became sort of instrumental in all of the Monica Lewinsky coverage. Fred [Frederick W.] Barnes, who's a fantastic conservative columnist, was there. Who else? David Maraniss. Excuse me. David Maraniss was at the *Post*. He hired me, actually. He offered me the job at the *Post*. I'll think of others. Randy Sue Coburn—great reporters. We hung out together and had a really good time.

The older ones—one of the people who mattered to me was Mary McGrory, who was a terrific liberal columnist. She was kind of a den mother for the young reporters. She explained the advice that she had been given about becoming a reporter when she started. She kind of seized up with kind of fear about how to write for a paper and her editor had finally said to her, "Mary, just write it as if you're sending a letter home to your relatives in Boston." And that's what she did. She wrote about Congress as if it was a real place, with real people and the stories just flowed. I thought that was great advice. Try to write about Washington as if it's not just some kind of separate part of government that's different from life as we know it, but write about the characters and the power and the fights that go on there in a way that ordinary people can understand and enjoy. Also, with my training from John Hersey—I wanted to write non-fiction that was better than just newspaper writing. I wanted to try to bring some life to it and some thought to it that would elevate it somehow and make it important. So that was on my mind and there was a tremendous amount of non-fiction writing going on during that period. This was the period of Tom [Thomas K.] Wolfe [Jr.] writing elsewhere and *Esquire* having wonderful writers. We were all hoping to somehow be better than just ordinary, daily newspaper writers.

Q: One of the things I was so impressed with in *The Dark Side* is the number of people you were able to call on and interview—your contacts. These were developed very early on, as you were working and developing a kind of network of people that you talked to? Your sources, in a sense—

Mayer: You learn, on a newspaper, how badly you need sources and how you have to take care of them in order to keep the information flowing. When I covered cops for D.C., particularly the

homicide unit, I got sources and I realized how key they are. When John [W.] Hinckley [Jr.] tried to assassinate—and did shoot—Reagan, I was one of the few reporters on the paper who had sources among the cops who could give us information. It had come from getting to know them and getting to earn their trust and making sure that when they told you something off the record, it stayed off the record; and hiding their identities if you needed to, to protect them. So source management is something you learn at a newspaper—that and fairness.

It's very important to me, despite what critics might say, to be able to talk to people on all sides of issues, because, invariably, everybody's got something to offer. So, in *The Dark Side*, it was terrifically important to me to try to cultivate very conservative sources—people who disagreed with the civil libertarians that I was more sympathetic to. But I needed to be able to understand the arguments on all sides because you don't want to just write a polemic. I wanted to be able to explain the choices and how hard they were and explain the history and history requires seeing it from multiple points of view, I felt. But *The Dark Side* is the result of many years of work. There were at least a dozen stories for the *New Yorker* that went into it and all that period of reporting meant getting around to people on all sides of issues. And I wasn't sure, personally, really, what I thought of a number of these issues. I didn't go into it knowing much about it and I didn't have a strong point of view. It developed, but in the beginning I simply had questions.

Q: Looking through the *Wall Street Journal*, it seemed to me that in 1982 or 1983, some of this stuff was kind of heavy on TV and the media.

Mayer: My beat was to cover entertainment. The *Wall Street Journal's* assignments are made by companies and the companies I was assigned were the networks—the television networks and other TV companies. That was my beat. I was interested in pop culture and its effect on America—having written about blackface minstrels and other things—so I was really interested in the impact that television had on the country and vice versa. That was my beat. It turned out to be perfect preparation for covering Ronald Reagan, a movie actor who became president.

But the way I got into more serious work, actually—I mean, it *was* serious in its own way—but the way I got into more conventionally political work, anyway, was that as the reporter covering television, I suggested that we do a story about a war zone camera man and how they are the people who really have to take the risks, to get in close to the combat; that they bring the bang-bang pictures right into your living room. I was interested in that whole process. Those kinds of pictures were what would get you ratings on the news but there had to be human beings right behind that camera, right in the middle of the bang-bang.

So I did some research and tried to find the person who I thought—was told—was the best war zone cameraman in the world, as the entertainment coverage reporter. It was a man named Alain Debos. He was working for CBS News and he was in Beirut in 1983. I convinced my editors to send me to Beirut to write a profile of him. This was a restless reporter trying to expand my horizons, also. But it turned out, in that period in Beirut—it was in the late summer/early fall of 1983—our regular *Wall Street Journal* reporter in Beirut, David Ignatius, wanted to take a break. He was tired, it had been [? hired ?] and no one expected anything to happen during that period. It was a quiet time in Beirut. They didn't think they were taking much of a risk. They sent me in

as a cub reporter to just give him a break, basically. I didn't know anything, really, about Beirut. I remember my parents were horrified and told me not to do it. But I thought it was an opportunity and it would be fun. It wasn't until I was flying in, I started reading the news clips about Beirut and I got more and more upset and nervous.

Q: When was this?

Mayer: On the flight to Beirut.

Q: After the Israeli invasion? The collapse of everything.

Mayer: Yes. But it seemed like there wasn't anything especially going on. The various factions in Beirut were kind of at a standstill against each other.

Anyway, I flew in and they had to turn the lights off in the plane—I think I was one of two or three passengers—as we came into Beirut so we didn't get shot at. So that was the beginning of kind of a wakeup call that this might not be the easiest thing. It turned out to be really exciting and mostly pretty quiet. I got to meet Alain Debos, whom I profiled and who was an amazing person—and kind of a junkie for the adrenaline you get in a war zone—and I wrote some other stories that were really eye-opening.

I was kind of ready to leave, when I woke up one morning, on October 23, 1983, with a humongous boom and almost knocked out of bed in the Commodore Hotel, where I and all the

other reporters were staying. Everybody started knocking on the doors and there was pandemonium. It was about maybe six in the morning. It turned out that there was a truck bomber who had blasted, in his truck, through the gates at the U.S. Marine compound, which was there as a peacekeeping force and detonated a truck-full of explosives right next to the compound, which had been obliterated. It had blown up and collapsed, completely flattening all the young Marines who were in it—many of whom I'd been interviewing days before, eventually killing 241 American soldiers. There had been a second bomb at a French installation, which had also killed many people and flattened an apartment building nearby.

So it was my first kind of face-to-face experience with terrorism—terrible carnage, just heartbreaking. I could hear the voices of the soldiers under the rubble, calling out for help and nobody could do anything. One of the hallmarks of the terrorists at that point—which turned out to be Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed, Syrian faction of terrorists—one of the things they were infamous for was shooting at the Red Cross trucks—or they were Red Crescent trucks—when they showed up, so that the rescuers, themselves, couldn't do anything without risking their lives. It was just the picture of pitiless horror, basically.

I was there, walking through it with one of the best reporters in the world, Tom [Thomas L.] Friedman from the *New York Times*, who, thank God, was there, because I really did not know anything about covering such a scene. He knew who to interview. One of the amazing facts that he got was an eyewitness report from the guard in the Marine Guard House who had gotten a glimpse of the truck driver on his way through the front gates as he came barreling through, ready to commit suicide, to blow it up. He was described as having a smile on his face. I think

that image of these Islamic militants ready to die for their cause and happy, in some kind of maniacal way, to do it, was the first and most important glimpse I got of this new kind of anti-American terrorism.

So it made me think a lot about America's place in the world. The Marines were supposed to be there as a peace-keeping force; they were supposed to be non-combatants. But just by being there and putting the U.S. footprint into the middle of that war, they were regarded as combatants. We had this image of ourselves, always, as innocent good guys. In many ways, we were, there. We were just trying to keep the peace. But that's not how we were regarded by the militants in that part of the world. It gave me kind of an early lesson in how we see ourselves versus how the rest of the world sometimes sees us.

It was interesting, later, to read that, basically, the lack of retaliation from the Reagan administration, because of that terror blast, was read by Osama bin Laden at the time as an indication that America was a paper tiger. We felt the restraint was a sign of strength but that's not how he was regarding it.

It was also very instructive to me to see how the Reagan administration played all of that, because they just quickly changed the subject. It was a disaster. It was an intelligence failure. It was a horrible loss of life. It showed, to some extent, how bad their planning was. Rather than dealing with it in some kind of upfront way, the Reagan administration, by February, invaded the island of Grenada and turned it into a kind of mini-military triumph, because they managed to save some American medical students there. It became this great rah-rah-rah moment and

changed the whole subject from what really had been a horrible disaster. I think I felt that it was hypocritical that they would use this rhetoric of how glorious war was and what great warriors they were and what a power America was, without dealing in some kind of honest way with what had been such a horrible failure. I thought they tried to sweep it under the rug, really. If you had been there, you couldn't sweep it under the rug, because you could never get it out of your mind again. Every year, on October 23, I always remember that Marine barracks.

So, anyway, it also ended up with changing my assignment when I came back. While I was in Beirut, because of the coverage I did there, I got a call from Al [Albert R.] Hunt, who was the Washington bureau chief for the *Wall Street Journal* and he asked me if I wanted to come to Washington to become a political reporter.

Q: You were in New York then?

Mayer: I had been in New York covering the entertainment industry then used this war zone cameraman story as a way to kind of step out into the world. In some kind of ghoulish way—while it was horrible for everyone else—it was good for my career. Al Hunt called and invited me to Washington. I thought about it and said yes and came to Washington. I really did not know that much about politics and had never covered it, because when I'd been at the *Washington Star* I covered local news. I came to the Washington bureau of the *Wall Street Journal* and was asked to cover the 1984 presidential campaign, which was a gigantic step up. I really had had no background in this. It was a steep learning curve. My beat was mostly—which made it a sensible transition—was to cover the role of the media in the 1984 campaign. It was kind of a step

between covering the entertainment industry and covering politics—was to cover how politics was covered, which was becoming a specialized area of coverage at that point, anyway. Not a good way, I learned, to make friends in the media—because I wrote a lot of critical stories about the coverage and discovered that it didn't make me popular.

Q: Being the correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal* in Washington—does that give you a certain entrée to places you wouldn't ordinarily have gone? My image of it that it's a staid, conservative kind of network.

Mayer: Good question—because it was an absolutely wonderful paper to be on if you wanted to be able to get access to the conservative movement, which, at that point, was just beginning to explode with power with Reagan in the White House. Many other papers were regarded with suspicion by the conservative movement. The *Wall Street Journal* was viewed as a friendly force. They didn't make a distinction—that they should have, probably—which was that the editorial page was church and the newspaper was state. We didn't play favorites, as reporters. We just got the facts, as we saw them, without fear or favor. The editorial page took the side of Reagan but those of us who became the White House reporters covering Reagan covered him like anyone else would who was a reporter. Yet, we had fantastic access.

I went to see the White House Chief of Staff Jim [James A.] Baker probably every other week during that period, who sat down with me and whoever the other White House reporter for the paper was at that point—there were a series of them—and talked to us, on background, about what was going on. We had tremendous access. We talked to everybody in the White House all

the time. It was spectacular. It got me very interested in the right wing because, truthfully, at that period, I thought they were just sort of historically interesting.

They were colorful and they were a wild fringe at that point; they were not necessarily considered—they were considered "far out." Some of the people I liked to talk to were Paul [M.] Weyrich, Richard [A.] Viguerie, the kind of movement conservatives. They were all on my Rolodex and I called them all the time because they had interesting points of view. I used to visit with Pat [Patrick J.] Buchanan, who was a White House speech writer. I'd stop in and see him all the time. These were people with really strong, colorful convictions and they were fun to talk to. They had ideas and they were constantly battling with the pragmatists in the White House, who were the people like Jim Baker and the more political people—Ed [Edward] Rollins—who were trying to keep Reagan out of trouble in the country, because the country was nowhere near as right wing as the right wing was. They were constantly trying to keep him from saying things and doing things that would kind of get him into political hot water. There was this constant fight over what the right wing would call "letting Reagan be Reagan." Nancy [D.] Reagan was a big part of it, too. She was always in there with the pragmatists, trying to keep Ronnie from stepping in a disaster zone.

The view of Reagan was so different then than it is now. It just absolutely stuns me to see the way he is regarded as some kind of wise man. The people around him—the first book I wrote was about it—*Landslide*. The people around him regarded him as constantly on the edge of making terrible mistakes. The staff did not revere him. They told jokes about him. They talked about him napping and needing note cards to be told what to say. They enjoyed him to some

extent but he was jovial more in the public arena than in the White House. He liked to tell jokes. He was a fantastic joke-teller and a great raconteur but he was not a very social person. The staff didn't really socialize with him much. They basically regarded him the way you know they say "no man is a hero to his valet." Well, the valets did not regard him as a hero, really. He and Nancy would spend most of their time together. He didn't have very many close friends. He didn't call people on the phone. He was quite isolated. The staff was always afraid he was going to step in it. [Laughs] He was seen as much more human, with many more foibles, than the way the keepers of his flame have cast him in history.

Q: These conservatives you talked to—did they have any inkling that you were not part of that crowd? Were they at all confrontational? How did you negotiate that?

Mayer: Well, again, I've always thought my job as a reporter is to try to be fair, so I tried to be fair in what I wrote. I wrote stories that were—some of them were favorable. Some of them would be seen as favorable; some of them were seen as negative. They weren't all of one kind. The people I dealt with were under no impression that I was a fellow conservative, I don't think, but neither was the rest of the press. We regarded ourselves, as reporters during that period, as non-ideological, basically. That's how I was trying to be. I wrote pieces about the fight over tax reform. I wrote a profile of Donald [T.] Regan and his efforts to try to reform the government and make it more like business—which turned out to be a disaster. I wrote a lot of pieces, because of my orientation coming out of show business coverage, about the show business of the White House—how they staged things. They really were so good at it because of Michael [K.] Deaver and they put such effort into it that they kind of liked being described as good at it, in

some ways. [Laughter] I described them as manipulative and they took it as a compliment, I think.

What I realized before too long at the White House was that, in some ways, being a White House reporter is one of the worst jobs in journalism because you basically just take dictation. You get to see these people behind the scenes and at that point I did have access to their thought process, which was fascinating. But for the most part, you don't get to see the president often or really draw him out on things. You're kind of just a stenographer and it doesn't provide you with much access to the real truth—which is what we learned when the Iran-Contra affair broke.

I have to say, I did have a really interesting glimpse at Reagan that I do remember. About once a year, the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page and reporters and bureau chief would go in and get to interview him in the Oval Office. We would decide what our questions were in advance and I asked a kind of unscripted question, anyway, that I wanted to ask, that wasn't really what my editors—and certainly not what the editorial page—wanted me to ask. But at sort of a lull in the conversation, I said to Reagan, "I understand you're interested in Armageddon." And he said, [imitating Reagan] "W-e-l-l, I was just thinking about it this morning." He started to go into this really strange soliloquy about the end of the world and how the Bible said it would take place in the Middle East.

The fact that he'd just been thinking about it and that he was the man who had access to nuclear weapons—to me it was really scary and fascinating. It also showed that the best questions are often the ones that are the unexpected ones, to me anyway. I found that interesting and I think it

explained a little bit about why he was, also, so preoccupied with Star Wars [Strategic Defense Initiative] and ways to do defensive programs and the High Frontier—which was a big, kind of incredibly expensive and kind of daft program that they were thinking of launching, to put a shield around the entire United States. This was very much on his mind. Anyway. You only got tiny little glimpses of Reagan.

Q: I read one article on a press conference that Reagan was giving after Iran-Contra where you asked him a question he didn't understand or know how to answer, when you asked him how the Iranians may have looked at a deal.

Mayer: You know, it's funny—I don't even remember this. This is why my memory—I really apologize.

Q: It was an article in the *New York Times*, with Reagan talking about the ways in which there was no deal. Then you asked the question, "Then how did the Iranians look at?"

Mayer: Did they look at it as a deal. Yes. And what did he say?

Q: He didn't really have an answer, because he had never thought of it. That's what the article said.

Mayer: That's interesting. I did go to the press conferences as the White House reporter and I did a small piece about how Reagan, like a bull, was attracted to red. So if you wore a red dress—

remember, Nancy Reagan always wore red—you were much more likely to get called on.

[Laughter] I did a small piece in the *Wall Street Journal* describing this—it was what his aides had said—and my bureau chief, Al Hunt, said, "You *have* to wear a red dress now to the press conference." So I did. The day the story ran, he called on me and I remember him saying, "There's the little girl in red. I want to call on her." So that was sort of how I was seen, I guess, by Ronald Reagan. I did try to put good questions to him when I did get the chance. At the time, he was not seen as the genius that he is seen as later.

I didn't get to cover, though, one of the most important parts of his administration, which was the arms control summit in Reykjavik. I have to say—you asked earlier what it was like being female in that period, as a reporter. The reason I didn't get to go was because of sexism, which was—in the *Wall Street Journal*, there was a division of labor. They thought that females were not capable of covering arms control. It would be too complicated for them to understand these complex military issues, so they allowed the Pentagon reporter, who was male, to cover the arms control. The saying at the time was that "females don't do throw weight," meaning the throw weight of missiles. I was upset about it and went to the bureau chief, Al Hunt, and said, "I'm the White House reporter and this is something the president is very involved in and I want to be able to go to Reykjavik and cover the arms control agreements and the summit with [Mikhail S.] Gorbachev." And he said, "No, I'm sorry but I have a good idea for you. Why don't you stay home and do a piece about Nancy Reagan's favorite dress designer?" That's what he saw as suitable work for the female in the White House.

So that was the flipside of being asked to be at the White House because you're female and a little bit of a decoration, to some extent—of token. They thought I was good enough to cover most things but not arms control. I didn't get to go there and I didn't get to cover those issues. It turned out to be really interesting, an unexpected moment in Reagan's presidency.

Q: Yes. It was strange. Yes.

What is the genesis of the book, *Landslide*?

Mayer: Basically, when Ed [Edwin A.] Meese [III], the attorney general, came into the White House briefing room and told us that there had been a little surprise—and while we were sitting there, like numbskulls, covering Reagan, we hadn't realized that the biggest story was taking place right under our noses—which was that, despite saying that there were no deals that the White House would make with terrorists, in order to try to free U.S. hostages that had been taken by Iranian radicals in Beirut, the White House had secretly been selling arms to Iran in order to get the hostages free—in other words, dealing with terrorists; making deals; giving them unbelievable U.S. arms. And beyond that, what they were doing with the profits they were making from these arms deals was subverting the money and spending it to fund a secret war that had forbidden by the U.S. Congress in South America. They were supporting the Contra rebels in El Salvador and Nicaragua. It was *mind-blowing*.

The reason that Ed Meese had come out to tell us this was that news of this had broken—their hand had been forced by a tiny paper in Beirut. So, basically, the entire United States press

corps, with all our self-importance, had been scooped by a little rag in Beirut, an Arab paper, that had gotten the news. We all, I thought, looked like clowns. It made me realize that we, while sitting there, again, like stenographers, being manipulated and used, we were really unable to get the real story of the Reagan administration. I felt like I wanted to take a leave of absence on the spot; go back in time and reconstruct, "What's the real history here and what's the history?" and get it right, because I thought it was kind of disgraceful that we had missed all of this. And I thought it would be really interesting to find out what the heck had been going on.

I wanted to get a book deal to do that and I told Al Hunt, who was my boss—the Washington bureau chief—and he said, "You'll never be able to write that book. It's way too hard. You don't have the sources and you don't know the material."

I said, "Well, I really want to do it."

He said, "Well, at the very least, you're going to need a co-author." He gave me the name of a couple of people and I met with them. Doyle McManus, who was at the *Los Angeles Times*, had been covering the Contra story, had been down in South America a lot and knew the foreign policy part of it. Between the two of us, we kind of had two parts of the puzzle. He was game to join me and get a book deal. I then took it to an agent and we got a deal. We didn't get a lot of money for it but we got something that mattered more than money, which was that we got one of the best book editors in New York—John Sterling, who was then at Houghton Mifflin—who taught me how to structure a book, in the course of doing that. The idea was just to stop the

clock, go back in time, interview everybody we could possibly get access to and figure out what had happened inside the White House.

The Iran-Contra affair just cratered Reagan's second term, almost to the end. He recovered in the end but it brought him down into a ditch and we wanted to know how the White House had decided that they had the right to fight a secret war against the will of Congress. It seemed illegal. And we wanted to know what had really happened and what was going on inside. So that became, basically, an effort to reconstruct the real history there.

Q: The picture of Ronald Reagan is as totally inattentive to anything.

Mayer: Well, he was losing—this was a period when he was depressed. I think, having interviewed Walter [F.] Mondale, who debated him in the 1984 presidential election—and others who were around Reagan at that time—that he was having as what people talked about as good days and bad days, already. I think it was the beginning of his Alzheimer's. That's a controversial theory to some extent but not completely if you talk to people who were around him. They talked about him having good days and bad days even then and I think some days he was more on-point than other days.

Mondale told me, just recently, really, that he was really alarmed when he debated Reagan. I can't remember whether it was the first presidential debate they were in. It may have been. But it was the one where Reagan started an anecdote about driving down the Pacific Coast Highway and he just lost his train of thought and rambled off into the ether. Mondale said he was

frightened for him, it was just so strange. That is the Reagan that some of the people around him were describing to me.

It was around the same time—1984, 1985, 1986. No, I guess it was later. It was 1986, really, when I was doing this book, so, if anything, it might have been worse. I open the book with a description of the new team that came in to try to take over the White House and to steady it, after Don Regan fled. It was Howard [H.] Baker, the new chief of staff and his assistant, James [M.] Cannon. They interviewed the staff and the two newcomers were so alarmed by what the staff around Reagan were saying that they actually contemplated invoking the 25th Amendment, which would be because they were afraid that it was possible that Reagan was not up to the job and that they might have to forcibly replace him. No one would believe it now but it really was very much on their minds—what they were researching, thinking about and talking about doing.

Q: That's the part of the book where the press really zeroed in on it?

Mayer: Yes, it was so startling. I went over it and over it with them to see if I really had it right. It is right. Nobody ever challenged it. The upshot was that when Baker and Cannon, after interviewing all the aides, who really raised this question about Reagan's mental competency—after they got to see Reagan themselves, sit him down and talk to him and test him, basically, they came away reassured and felt he was okay. So it didn't go to any more worrisome phase but it reflected how worried his staff really was about him at that point. And they were. I interviewed them, too, so I know they were. I think Reagan was in something of a depression about the whole disaster that the Iran-Contra affair was and I think by the end of his presidency and with the arms

control agreement, he managed to change the subject and work his way out of it. But it was a dark time in the Reagan presidency.

Q: What was the reaction to the book, first from the White House and then from the *Journal*?

Mayer: Hmm. I'm trying to remember. The White House—Doyle McManus and I did something that I've done with subsequent books, which was we were very careful to interview everyone from all sides and we went over the material in the book when we wrote it with the people who were featured in various sections of it to make sure—we fact-checked with them to make sure it was accurate. So by the time it came out, most of the people in the book—which included most of the people in the White House, other than the president and Don Regan, who didn't give us interviews—they had a chance to go over the material. So we were un-attacked by the White House. I don't think they loved the book. I think it showed a White House that was, in many ways, dysfunctional and it laid out a story that was about a kind of secret and extra-legal policy-making machine—a rogue operation. But they did not attack it. I think it was considered accurate, which was what our key was. That was our aim—to have it be accurate.

I don't think, probably, the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal* loved it but—

Q: There's a kind of schizophrenia there. [Laughs]

Mayer: I was their own reporter and what was the point of pride was that nobody could find anything wrong in it—that I can remember anyway. It was considered accurate. Really, it was

based on the accounts of the people in the White House, who were sometimes some of Reagan's greatest critics. I think one of the best things in that book was, also, that we got a tape, an incredible tape, of Reagan's political aides planning the 1984 political campaign, sitting around trying to figure out what on earth they could run on. You really get a view into their thought process and the process in 1984 was that they felt they'd done everything they wanted to do and they didn't really know what else to do. The thesis of the book was that they coasted to reelection with a landslide—and it gave them a sense of hubris—but they really didn't have the policy mandate to do anything. It was kind of a dangerous combination. All that popularity and no policy program. It empowered them to kind of overshoot, overplay their hand and do whatever the heck they wanted to do, which they shouldn't have done, because they really hadn't really gotten a legitimate mandate for it. What that was was this crazy secret war in Latin America.

Q: I wonder if we can break for a couple minutes.

[INTERRUPTION]

Mayer: I hope someone, when they write about Reagan, someday, goes back and looks at some of this though—in the midst of all this hagiography.

Q: Pardon?

Mayer: I hope that somebody, someday, that there will be a revisionist review, in the midst of all the Reagan hagiography and they'll go back and look at this again. It could be that I was

wrong—that you're too close to the president and his staff and you don't see the greatness, maybe. Maybe there are ways that he was greater than those of us around him at the time saw, in his simplicity and his optimism, all of that. I just don't know. It certainly didn't look so impressive at the time. Meanwhile, he had these people that he's kept—who are his kind of paid acolytes at the Hoover Center, who do nothing but burnish, burnish, burnish. So I don't know.

Q: Toward the end of your tenure at the *Wall Street Journal*, you came back to New York.

Mayer: Right. I was assigned to the front page as a feature writer and editor.

Q: What drove you out? Wasn't it a great change for you?

Mayer: Yes. They allowed me to sort of rove the world, writing stories, and it was an amazing gig. This was back in the days when newspapers had money and they could let you do anything. It became a license to just write what was interesting or go report on what was interesting. It ended up with some amazing stories. The most amazing to me, I think, was probably one day I was sitting around talking to the foreign editor, whose name was Lee Lescaze, and we were sort of marveling over tiny accounts that were running inside the paper, saying that in East Germany, the head of East Germany, whose name was [Erich] Honecker, was allowing little demonstrations, political demonstrations, to take place, which is really unheard of behind the Soviet bloc. We were wondering what was going on and why he was letting this happen.

I said to Lee, "Well, how about if I go over and just do a story about what's happening in East Germany? We'll try to see what's going on." So he said, "Sure." I lined up—I didn't speak any German but I lined up a translator in East Germany and I got a bunch of—or, in Berlin, in West Germany. The translator was—and I got a bunch of names from Christopher [E.] Hitchens, who was a friend and world traveler. Christopher put me in touch with a kind of lefty professor named Norman Birnbaum. Norman gave me twenty names or so of people in Berlin, East and West, whom it might be worth talking to about all of this.

I flew over there. I guess it was 1989, in November, I guess, and I started reporting. We weren't thinking it was going to be such a big deal but while I was there I was having dinner with a friend of Norman's. She spoke German and had the radio on and she said she lived in Berlin. She said, "Oh, my god! They're going to open the Berlin wall!" I said, "Really?" So we drove over. We got into her car and drove over to Checkpoint Charlie. There was nothing going on and we thought, "Oh. It must be a mistake." We were just about to leave when people started coming right over the wall, while we were watching it. It was the most astounding thing. I had already been back and forth through East Berlin, interviewing, through these members of the Green Movement, for this story. They seemed to be kind of flaky artists and dreamers and not people who were going to be likely to take on the Soviet power establishment, somehow. But the wall came down, right in front of my eyes. For a kid who had said early on, when the White House called my grandfather, "I want to be able to touch history somehow. That's all I want. I think that will make it interesting." To be there and see this happening in front of your eyes was the most spectacular thing and *the* reason why someone becomes a reporter.

First it was one or two people who were helping each other over, hands on top of feet and struggling over the wall. Then it was a torrent of people. Then they were flooding into Berlin and everybody was marching and singing “Deutschland Über Alles.” There were bottles of champagne popping everywhere, just flowing in the streets. I had to go file a story for the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*. I barely knew what to do. I was there with it happening all around me. It was just extraordinary. It was one of those things where having a little instinct or the right question, as a reporter, gets you to the right place.

The next day, of course, all the big shots came in. I was staying at the Kempinski Hotel and suddenly there comes Tom [Thomas J.] Brokaw in his Burberry raincoat. All the hotshots were there. But I was there when it actually happened, so I lived to tell the tale.

The *Wall Street Journal* let me stay on for about, I think it must have been a month or six weeks, to do stories about the fallout. Those were some of the most interesting coverage I ever did. I had a fantastic front-page editor at the time, Jim [James B.] Stewart, who was wonderfully imaginative and just gave me one great assignment after another, to try to think about the clash of these two cultures as they came together. You had the East and the West bloc finally talking to each other. It was kind of amazing to see what happened. Basically, the East Berliners came in. They'd all heard about McDonald's. They all wanted Big Macs, because that's the only thing they've ever heard of. [Laughter] Nobody ordered the Fish Mac or whatever, because they hadn't heard about that. They just went for this one thing they'd all heard of. They all flooded into the blue jean stores. They went to book stores and got all the banned books that they hadn't been able to see on the East side. You could instantly spot them. The people in the East had terrible hair

dye. They all seemed to have orange-colored hair. They also went to the stores and bought bananas because they didn't have enough potassium on the East side.

At first there was this great excitement and it was all sort of in favor of the West having everything and the East trying to get its share of these goodies. As time went on, the East sort of resented the West to some extent and what they regarded—. They had a German term for it—the "elbows out" society. They became resentful of the pushiness and the getting-ahead aspect of the kind of capitalist culture. In truth, they'd been able to live kind of a lazy life. It was deprived but lazy, in East Germany, because they didn't have real jobs. Their saying always was, "They pretend to pay us and we pretend to work." Nobody was really doing much of anything. They were state-supported, which allowed them to, at least in East Berlin, stay up late. They had salons and the artists hung out. They could be sort of counterculture in their own weird way.

That was all swept away when the Western culture took over and people had to kind of support themselves and make it. I did a piece, also, about what happened to the East German Olympics, which was their one area of success, almost. I got into the Olympic Village that they had and wrote about all the drugging that they'd done of people, and how they had, in this kind of Orwellian way, culled the children—the babies, practically—that had talent, practically, from the earliest years, looking for the best specimens they could build up. They gave them all the best food and fed them in ways that other people in the country couldn't have access to.

Anyway, it was a wonderful, wonderful story to cover and the cultural outpouring and the social clashes that came out of it were the kinds of things reporters live for. Anyway, that was one of the things I did during that period.

Q: Have you ever speculated about how much of your profession is just being at the right place at the right time?

Mayer: Tons of it is. There's so much luck to it. I began to feel a little bit like Typhoid Jane, because I kept showing up in places—and it wasn't because I'm so amazingly smart. It was just taking opportunities as they presented themselves. So, going to Beirut, who knew that the Marine barracks were going to blow up? Which was a horrible thing, but for a reporter, the place you needed to be. Then covering Reagan when his administration fell apart and going to Berlin when the wall came down. I then went to—

Q: The grandfather [George H.W.] Bush—the older one.

Mayer: Yes. Right. The Kuwaiti invasion. When Kuwait was invaded—

Q: Operation Desert Storm.

Mayer: Desert Storm. I kind of was not part of the main action. I was sent, instead, first to Israel and then to Cairo, by the *Wall Street Journal*, to do different stories that were sort of off. I

always like to do the stories that are on the edge of the main story, because I think you find more interesting things there, sometimes.

Anyway, I wound up in Cairo and I did such a memorable story that was about all the rich Kuwaitis who were there, celebrating as the Americans came into the war to fight it for them. The draft-age Kuwaitis, who should have been soldiers, by many standpoints, were, instead, hiding out in Cairo in their fancy discos and cars and tooting their horns wildly with excitement that America was going to go fight their war for them. I wrote a story about the Kuwaitis in the disco that became one of the emblematic stories of that war.

Anyway, again, it's total luck. Frankly. [Laughter]

Q: Why did you leave the *Journal*?

Mayer: Well, let's see. I left the *Journal*—I didn't leave it knowing I was going to leave it. I took a leave to do a book about Clarence Thomas. I was still at the *Journal* but part of it was geographic difficulties. By then I was based in New York and I was engaged to Bill [William B.] Hamilton, who was based in Washington. He was an editor, a political editor, at the *Washington Post*. In order to get married, we had to be in the same place—or, we wanted to be in the same place—so I got a book leave and came back to Washington and got married and lived with him. Soon after, I got pregnant with our daughter, Kate.

Q: Who is Charlotte Hays? She mentions your private life four or five different times—who you were dating and who—

Mayer: I don't know. She was a gossip columnist, I think for the Moonie paper in Washington. She was kind of a right-wing gossip columnist. I don't know why she got fixated on me but she was writing nasty little things, putting in digs about me and about Bill, whom she described as "Stay-at-Home Bill," as I remember. I was much more socially out-around-town and I married a guy who, among other things, had almost the same history in American politics books as I did, so we knew we had a lot to talk about. He's much more of a homebody and the nicest person on the face of the earth. Again, I got incredibly lucky that I found him. I don't know why she was writing nasty little things. Just for fun, I guess.

Q: What's the genesis of the Anita [F.] Hill book?

Mayer: Basically, I was looking for a way back to Washington. I was based in New York, so I needed something to help me get my home life together. Meanwhile, I had reestablished a great friendship with Jill [E.] Abramson, who was at the *Wall Street Journal*, who had been a friend in high school.

Q: She was at Fieldston.

Mayer: She was at Fieldston, a year ahead of me. We had been friends but not close friends. She was in a different class than I was but we knew each other a little bit, off and on, through the

years. Once she became a *Wall Street Journal* editor in Washington—she was both a reporter and editor—we saw more of each other in Washington and we became great friends and admirers of each other's work.

Jill and I had decided, sometime earlier, that we'd love to work on a book together. It would just be fun because we were such good friends and we thought we'd help each other's work a lot. I was just watching the Anita Hill hearings and Jill was actually covering them. I was just watching them on TV and I was riveted. I couldn't believe these opposite stories, two completely compelling people—Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas—with these crazy stories about each other, that they were both absolutely certain of. One had to be lying. And they both had their lineup of witnesses with them and one team of witnesses had to be lying. You couldn't tell—they were both so emphatic, it was really hard to tell who was telling the truth.

I called Jill up as the hearings were going on and I said to Jill, "This is it. This is the subject we've been looking for. This has got to be the book. It's got everything. It has race; it has sex; it has gender politics; it has power; and it has truth and lies. You can't get a better package in one subject." We were both investigative reporters and we both were very committed to the idea of figuring out what the truth would be. So we said, "Let's do what I did in *Landslide*. Let's stop the clock, go back, interview everyone, and see if we can't find what the truth was."

At the time, it was really not clear what it was. It could have gone either way and we were prepared for it to go either way. So we wrote a proposal—which was only two pages long—saying that we were going to try to interview everybody who would talk to us on all sides of this

thing and see if we couldn't get to the bottom of it. We went back to John Sterling, who was my editor from *Landslide*. He bought the proposal and said, "Go for it."

We were terrified. We really didn't know if we could get anywhere on it because it was very polarized and we weren't sure we'd ever get to the bottom of it. It actually took three years. It wasn't a short project. But it was a good time for me, especially. Jill would say, "Take a break," so I took a break from the *Wall Street Journal*. I was soon pregnant and had my first baby, so there were a lot of reasons why being at home with a book was a great project for me to do. My husband took a job with the *Washington Post* as the West Coast bureau chief and we moved to Santa Monica. Jill stayed in Washington and kept working with the *Wall Street Journal* because she's much better at multitasking than I am.

She did her part. We divided up who to interview and we started interviewing everybody who walked and talked and sent transcripts back and forth. She was fantastic to work with. Jill is one of the smartest people you will ever meet in journalism. I'm not surprised at all that she became editor of the *New York Times*. Her judgment is amazing and she's a killer reporter. She gets right to the nub of it and kind of knows what to look for. She has a great nose. She's tough. She's tougher than I am. I sort of soften people up and I worry about how they feel. She just plain goes right for the heart of it.

Q: There was a lot of travel, then, if you're on the West Coast, doing the interviews all over the country. A lot of them were Washington-based.

Mayer: Some we did by phone. I stayed in the East almost until I couldn't fly any further—because I was pregnant—and Bill went out there ahead of me. We interviewed as many people as we possibly could before I went out West. Then I flew back, after having the baby, to interview Anita Hill, who had been holding out about giving us an interview. Clarence Thomas never gave us an interview. We tried with him but he didn't. But we did talk to a lot of his people, people on his side and people around him. But Anita Hill took a long time before saying yes. It was after I had had the baby and I remember I had to fly back, leaving the baby, who was just six weeks old, I think. I had to bring a breast milk pump with me and people looked at me—I had to go through the magnetometer with it to get on the plane—and people looked at me like I was doing kidney dialysis, on the plane. I remember I had to go to the bathroom with this machinery and everybody had this kind of horrified look on their face. And it was really inconvenient and weird.

But we did manage to get to Anita Hill, to talk to her. She was very wary of both of us. She especially disliked me, I have to say. Again, critics may not understand this. Jill and I regarded ourselves as non-ideological investigative reporters who were looking for the truth. We weren't on anybody's side in this story and we had a lot of tough questions for her. We were trying to figure out who was telling the truth, including Anita Hill, and she was still—as far as we were concerned—possibly lying. So we asked her a lot of tough questions and I, in particular, kind of grilled her. She recoiled, I think, and felt that she'd been through enough grilling. She had her lawyer with her. I think she threatened to cut off the interview at some points during it and I realized that I was not helping matters, so I had to shut up. Jill basically carried the load. Even though, as I was saying, Jill is a tough interviewer, she proved to have better chemistry with

Anita Hill, so we did get some information out of her. We came away writing a book that was much more favorable towards her but we were prepared for anything, really, and would have written it whatever way we thought was true.

Q: How did that process work? You went in without a slant but you became favorable to her over time. How does that process occur?

Mayer: Well, what happened was—it was a multi-step process, since it took three years. One of the things that was a turning point was being able to see through the lies and recognize the lies from Anita Hill's detractors—the chief one of which was David Brock, who was writing in the *American Spectator*. He wrote a piece that was eventually a book called, I think, *The Real Anita Hill*. By the time David Brock wrote that book, I had interviewed many of the same people he was interviewing and I could see from what he was writing that he was lying and twisting what those people were saying. He was representing some people as experts who were completely partisan hacks who had no real authority, whom I had interviewed. And I had been able to see where things like students that Anita Hill had had at Oral Roberts Law School, who had joked about stuff like one hair from her head had fallen into a term paper that she returned to these students. Their joke was that it was pubic hair. They then told this story to David Brock, who used it to suggest that she had some kind of literally kinky sexual perversions and was putting pubic hairs in the term papers. But when I interviewed these kids, I said, "How did you know it was pubic hair?" and they said, "Oh, it wasn't really." One of the kids said, "That was just a dirty joke we had among each other. We made it up."

I had interviewed them. They had basically backed off the story and I could see it was just this juvenile, racist thing they had going. They didn't even back each other up on it but he was portraying it as some kind of fact about her personality that showed sickness.

There were many instances like that. So by the time this book came out, I looked at it and I knew, "Oh, my god, this guy is a liar. He is doing it for political purposes, to advance an agenda. And it's ugly." There was a real dilemma about whether to blow the whistle on him. I had been asked at that point by the *New Yorker* to review his book, *The Real Anita Hill*. I didn't have any connection with the *New Yorker* but Rick [Hedrick] Hertzberg and Luke [Louis] Menand were two writers there who knew me a little bit and they'd asked me to do it because they knew I was working on a book on Anita Hill. At first I said no because I thought it was a conflict of interest for a writer writing a rival book to review something like that. I wasn't sure what the professional ethics were. I just thought it was a bad idea. I just was uncomfortable with it.

But as I waited and watched, the *New York Times* reviewed David Brock's book and Christopher Lehmann-Haupt did the review. I was really horrified because I figured others would see through this and they didn't. Lehmann-Haupt gave it a very respectable review and I realized that he didn't have the expertise to evaluate it because he hadn't been working through the subject the way I had. Then I began to think, "Oh, my god," as this thing started snowballing and this lie about Anita Hill being a pervert started gaining momentum—I thought, "Oh, my god. I've got some moral responsibility to speak out for the truth and correct it." Which, I thought, outweighed whatever the professional rules are about reviews—and I wasn't really clear what the professional rules were anyway. At that point I agreed to do the review, with Jill, and we did a

review called “The Surreal Anita Hill” that was about how surreal David Brock's book was. We basically busted him for lying and, boy, that review was a review that took us out of the category of being non-ideological reporters and made us targets of the right wing ever since. They went after us, boy. It was a real wakeup call to me about the partisan warfare taking place over issues such as Clarence Thomas.

Obviously, ever since the [Robert H.] Bork fight, there were huge partisan divides and a very bloody kind of war going on about many things in American politics. But, as a reporter, particularly a *Wall Street Journal* reporter, who hadn't really been seen as a combatant in this before, I thought we would be able to write the truth as we saw it and be believed for telling the truth; that there was such a thing as fact that would be respected by all sides. What I learned from this was that the neutral ground had disappeared and the press could be basically given a black eye just like anybody else in politics. If there wasn't dirt on you, they'd make up the dirt on you. That was the other thing.

It was really an interesting lesson in how dirty the politics was—because David Brock, soon after, went after both me and Jill. When our book came out, I think there was an eight thousand-word piece in the *American Spectator*, kind of doing to us what we had done to him. The difference, certainly from our perspective, was that our facts were correct; his were lies but he tried to portray us as the liars. He said that our book was the greatest hoax since Janet Cooke's phony Pulitzer Prize-winning story in the *Washington Post*.

He played a game of dirtball that I've never seen before or since in politics, which included going to one of our sources, who he tried to blackmail into recanting. He went to this woman, who was on the record in our book saying things that showed that Clarence Thomas had a history of a deep interest in the kind of pornography that Anita Hill had described. David Brock went to this woman—because it kind of blew a hole in David Brock's defense of Clarence Thomas—and he told her that if she did not sign an affidavit that he had prepared, which recanted and said that Jill and I had gotten her story wrong, he was going to write a piece in the *American Spectator* about a custody battle that she had had for her child that showed that she had behaved poorly as a mother. It was going to embarrass and humiliate her in front of all the world and she was about to sign this affidavit when we got wind of it. She called and said this awful thing was happening; she didn't know what to do. Jill and I were in the Washington bureau of the *Wall Street Journal* that day and Jill literally ran from there, about fifteen blocks, over to where this woman worked; arrived there just as the affidavit was coming through the fax machine, that she was about to sign; grabbed it and said, "Don't sign it. We're calling a lawyer."

Meanwhile, I had been trying to find a lawyer who would take this woman's case and defend her against this blackmail. We found Jamie [B.] Raskin, who was a professor at American University Law School, who took her on, did it pro bono and got a hold of David Brock and said, "What you're doing is a crime. You're trying to blackmail someone. You'd better back off or we're going to bring it to the U.S. attorney's office and have them charge you." David Brock backed off. The woman didn't sign the affidavit. I'd never seen anything like that—someone being blackmailed into lying.

It took David Brock, I think, eight years until he came out, after that period, after his book came out—he wrote a mea culpa piece and another book in which he admitted he had lied. He made up the stuff about us. He apologized to both Jill and myself, personally. He sent us notes and he admitted that he had made up and distorted the story about Anita Hill and had made up things to make Clarence Thomas look like the truth-teller, when he wasn't.

But it took him that many years. We lived with this cloud over us. It was after the statute of limitations ran out on libel, so there was no way we could legally go after David Brock. But it was such an education in how dirty American politics can be and how basically—I don't know about the left wing, because I haven't tangled with them much and I don't know what they do—but the right wing will lie. They lie and lie and lie and they will blacken people's reputations if they have to, to advance an agenda. That's what I learned from that.

Q: Sad story.

Mayer: Well, it ended up a happy story, because the fact that David Brock told the truth in the end—I actually feel, how often in life does somebody come out and admit that they lied about you? It almost never happens, that people have a crisis of conscience and tell the truth and apologize. That final chapter was a very happy chapter. It's quite amazing to me that he did that. And, more important than about what he said about me and Jill—because I think most people's reputations survived intact, mostly—but he told the truth about Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas, which was about history by then and about what he'd been part of. I don't know who believes him, after having lied the way he did, but to come back and correct the record was kind of an

extraordinary thing. Actually, it came out to be a very positive story in the end. Anita Hill, meanwhile, has turned out—I just saw her for the first time in years, giving a speech.

Q: I was going to ask you if you'd kept contact with her.

Mayer: We didn't. We were never close. But she spoke this year and I went to see her, a couple of months ago, and I thought she'd completely blossomed. She was so different from the person I interviewed back when we were doing this book. She has become self-confident and outspoken and her sense of humor is out there for everyone to see. She's comfortable now in this role. It wasn't a role, I think, that she ever really wanted in the beginning and I think she was really on defense after being described the way she was by these people as "nutty" and "slutty." But she's really grown into it and I felt great when I saw her—that she really was the person that we thought she was. Watching Clarence Thomas all these years—he's barely spoken from the bench—I think he's a very sad person in many ways and fascinating. I don't know how the story will ever come out for him.

Q: And then you went to the *New Yorker*.

Mayer: So we wrote this book and it got nominated for a National Book Award, which was really a thrill. Then I thought I'd go back to the *Wall Street Journal* but that review we did for the *New Yorker* ended up with Tina Brown offering me a job. I decided that it would be better to go to the *New Yorker* than to go back to the *Wall Street Journal*. The *New Yorker* offered me a flexible situation—less than full-time work—and that's what I was looking for with a new baby.

So for the next dozen years, I just worked part-time there. It turned out to be a mostly great place to be.

Q: Had you met Tina Brown before?

Mayer: I got interviewed by her before she hired me. I flew from California to New York to be interviewed by her. I certainly knew her reputation and was somewhat intimidated by her. She was known as such an incredibly stylish and witty and powerful—"Editrix," as they call her in the tabloids. I went to meet her at the W Hotel, they paid my way to come East and have the interview. To my dismay, she spoke really quietly and, with the English accent, I couldn't hear half of what she was saying. So I just kept trying to nod and look like I knew what she was doing but luckily it didn't get in the way of them offering me the job. They offered me the job and I said yes. It started in the spring of 1994.

Q: And what was your idea of the *New Yorker* at that point in time? When somebody said the *New Yorker*, what came to mind?

Mayer: Nirvana! I grew up with the *New Yorker*. My parents kept the old issues because my mom, who's an artist, loved the covers. We all loved the cartoons. You know, John Hersey had written for the *New Yorker*—my amazing writing professor—and it was the place where brilliant writers worked and where the best non-fiction and fiction appeared. It was the ultimate place to be. I had long ago said to my mom, back when I was trying to be a reporter, that I'd love to work

for places like the *New Yorker*, and I remember her saying, "Oh, you know, nobody gets to work there unless they have connections." It was the impossible. I didn't have the connections.

But all my life, when people—maybe it's because I had to compete with an older brother who's something of a genius—all my life, when people have said, "You'll never do it," it's always been, to me, the thing that's made me want to say, "Oh, really? Let me give it a try." I felt honored and terrified to work there. I wasn't sure I'd be up to it. It's very intimidating. I was a huge fan of the writers there and the two writers that I knew—Rick Hertzberg and Luke Menand, who had assigned me that review—are both geniuses and beautiful stylists, just of an order that I have never been on. So I was really honored to be offered this job and worried that I wouldn't hold my own in it, basically.

Q: Were you aware of the turbulence of the first couple of years with Tina Brown?

Mayer: I knew she had taken over and that it was considered a sea change. I wasn't really sure what to expect. I just grabbed the chance there. I actually found Tina, as I got to work for her—she was both terrifying and impressive. She had a fantastic love of sort of casting people in stories. She's a born editor. A lot of people who become editors would rather just be writing their own stories and they kind of resent the role. But she was kind of like Cecil B. DeMille. She loved to think of who would be best for this or that particular story. Then she'd go around the world to find the best writer for that thing. She had fun with the creative process and lots of wild ideas.

She was also very fickle, though, so you would never know if you could hold her favor for more than ten minutes. You would find that you were off doing some project that she loved at one point and hated when it came in. You never were sure where you would stand with things. Sometimes she would call me in, I would be in good standing and she'd be, "You know, I loved this. I loved this." A bottle of champagne would arrive and there might even be flowers and a wonderful note. Then, the next time you saw her, when she came down the corridor, she wouldn't say hello and would look sort of like she didn't know who you were and you were in bad standing then. This kind of thing had the feeling of a royal court; you'd be up or you'd be down.

But when she was good, she was great. She was really fun to work with and she gave me a lot of running room. She hired me and she was fun. The meetings were fun. She was a hoot. She was witty. But there was a lot of turmoil in terms of the politics coverage at that point. When I joined them, I was in the Washington bureau—because my husband had come back to the *Washington Post's* editorial staff, so we had to be back in Washington. The bureau had working for it two people who loathed each other. There was Peter [J.] Boyer, who was conservative and Sidney Blumenthal, who was very liberal. They just couldn't bear each other. They literally, at one point, came to blows, which was very un-*New Yorker*-like. Believe me, it's not the kind of place where you have muscle men who are ready to duke it out with each other.

But they did. One pushed the other one up against the bookshelves in our office. I can't remember which one was pushing and which one was receiving but books came flying down. It got so that they couldn't be in the same room at the same time. So when we had meetings with

Tina, editorial meetings, one of them could be invited but not both of them. They were so sarcastic with each other when they were in the same room. It turned out that Sidney was very close with the Clintons and Peter Boyer saw conspiracies of evil among the Clintons. He was one of the people who believed that Whitewater was some kind of terrible, scandalous crime and that Travelgate was another crime. He saw conspiracies in all of this. Sidney just saw him as a tool of the right wing, which was trying to bring [William J. "Bill"] Clinton down. They were just on different sides of a war.

Q: It's kind of like what you describe with the Anita Hill book—you're now describing it as a personal battle in that small office.

Mayer: Inside the bureau. Right. It was. The rules about objectivity, in my view, at a magazine are different from a newspaper. I see the newspaper's role as that of writing the—cliché—the "first draft of history." It's the record, the public record, and its job is to try to get all sides, get all facts, get it out there and get it right and really not push some kind of ideological agenda or some sort of point of view too much. There *are* personal essays in newspapers and those are sort of different but basically I viewed things like covering the White House as just trying to get the record straight. Get it out there. At the *New Yorker*, it's less surprising that there would be an ideological fight going on because the magazine tries not to have any single voice but, rather, give its writers lots of different voices. They saw things differently and there's more leeway there to have opinion, to argue a point. It's a different art form, a slightly different kind of journalism at the *New Yorker*. It's given me more space to—as I've grown older, I've probably gotten more

opinionated and it's given me more of a chance to get to the bottom of things, instead of just doing a rough draft at the top and then pronounce on things a little bit more.

Q: Yesterday, at the doctor's office, I happened to pick up a copy of *New York*, the magazine.

Michael Kinsley is interviewing Tina Brown. They were talking about when she first came to the *New Yorker* and he posed—they were talking about people quitting or leaving or some such or the other—but he said that he thought that she was faced with a lot of dead wood that she had to get rid of. Is that unfair?

Mayer: I just don't know, because I wasn't there to see the dead wood. I came in not just at the minute she started; I came in a little while after she had started. I don't know who, really, she dispatched, completely. One of the things that happened under Tina, though—. Between Tina and David Remnick—they restructured the way the writers were paid, which actually sounds like nothing but is very important. At least the pre-Tina—what she had inherited was a structure where writers were given a salary for being on staff, every year. It was kind of in perpetuity and they didn't really have to produce any amount. It could be tons or it could be almost nothing. Some of them, I think, were doing almost nothing. But maybe it was the gem of all time when it was produced. But it was a really incredibly generous way to treat writers—enviable, as a writer. I wish we still had it.

But Tina came in and somewhere along the way, under Tina, they became annual contracts. They were for a certain number of words. You're called a staff writer but, in truth, you're a freelancer. You're given no benefits; no healthcare; no 401k; you have to pay your own Social Security

payments. You have no security beyond that one-year's contract. You have no office, unless you're lucky in New York and they give you one. And you are contracting with them for a certain number of years, like piece work. It's like you're in the garment industry and you've got to make a certain number of suits. You've got to do a certain number of words. You're paid per-word and they figure out, on your word-count, how much to pay you at the end of the year. If you come under what you've contracted for, you owe them money. If you come over, they pay you a little more—whatever they owe you.

But, basically, you are no longer treated to this kind of open-ended, cushy deal. They modernized the relationship with the workers—that is, the writers—to the magazine. In a way, it was the beginning of the strange new world, the cold new world, of the workplace that we're all seeing now where everybody's an individual contractor and nobody's got any security. It's in some ways very exploitative and almost illegal, because, basically, under labor law, you're not a freelancer if you only work for one place and you do it year, after year, after year. I think they know that people would pay to work at the *New Yorker*, so there's really not much leverage on the side of the reporters to change anything. And they pay us well for the work that we do. But there's no security in it.

That was the deal that I was offered and that's the deal I took. For me, actually, to tell you the truth, part of the reason I don't complain about it is, as a mom, it was ideal. Because every year, depending on how much I wanted to work, I could decide how much I wanted to do—which gave me the flexibility to take summers off, run lemonade stands, and go to school plays and

really enjoy family life in a way so few people get the chance to do. But still, to work at the highest level when I was working, it was wonderful for that. But it's not the old *New Yorker*.

Q: When you say that she would try to match the writers with an idea, did she hand you assignments or did you approach her for assignments?

Mayer: Basically, they have articles' editors who are under the top editor and we would come up with story ideas. I'd pitch them; the editor would show Tina and Tina would say yes or no, depending on it. I wasn't really sure what my role would be there. It morphed over time. I think with almost all *New Yorker* writers, it takes a while to find your niche and your voice, when you're given that much latitude. It took me a while to figure it out. It also took me a while to figure out how to get any work done with a baby. I thought that babies got easier but I discovered that toddlers weren't any easier than babies and preschoolers were hard, too. Then, soon, they had homework to do and everything else. So it took a while to figure it all out. It really was, in some ways, not until maybe 9/11 that I really began to see the possible story that I wanted to grab a hold of, that mattered to me.

Q: It struck me that there were a number of profiles, Washington profiles.

Mayer: I did a lot of profiles. The one that fits in with the later coverage and the earlier things I had done was the profile of Ken [Kenneth W.] Starr, which was about runaway independent prosecutors. He was something of a zealot and that was interesting to me. But the subject that has run through all of this coverage is, really, kind of an inquiry about power and the abuse of power,

which includes whether people in power tell the truth to the public and whether there is any accountability for the people in power. That goes from start to finish, through all of this.

Q: Was it a major change when David Remnick came in? From your own position?

Mayer: Yes. For a little while, I think I was uncertain whether he would keep me on, so I felt kind of tenuous. I think the year he came on—I had decided, for a while, to do a huge number of "Talk of the Town" pieces because they were easier to get done. They were great fun but—

Q: What's the difference between a "Talk of the Town" piece and a regular piece?

Mayer: Well, they're really short. They're eight hundred words or so and you do them in a week or maybe two weeks.

Q: If you get paid by the word, isn't there a tendency to write a lot?

Mayer: Ever wonder why most of those stories are so verbose? Now you know. Sure. But the thing is, it's hard to keep your concentration. Those pieces, those long pieces, are monsters and to do them and organize that material and have it all in your head—it's really hard to do while you're juggling a family and everything else if you're the main, spot-on person. So I was just doing shorter pieces and I wasn't sure—I was kind of worried about my tenure there. But David eventually kept me on and I just kept turning out pieces. I think he grew to like my coverage more and more, basically, and I think my coverage was getting better.

One of the things that made a big difference to me was I was assigned, at some point, to a new editor at the magazine. My particular editor, who edits my articles, is Daniel Zalewski, who was fabulous. He really got what I can do and saw things that I wasn't sure I could do that he thought I could do, and he brought out the best in my work and still does. There's a kind of mind-meld there. Also, he's a great defender. So, inside, there are a lot of internal politics in a place like a magazine. I wasn't in the office in New York; I was always in Washington, where you can't speak up for yourself. But in Daniel I've got someone who will speak up for me and he's very protective of his writers. And, unsurprisingly, he's become one of the most beloved editors in the magazine. So that was a great turn for me, to get him.

Q: What kinds of ideas would he give to you?

Mayer: I think what he saw was that I'm really interested in going to the ends of the earth to get the story and to get the facts. I just want to turn over every last stone. Some writers are beautiful essayists and some writers have spectacular epiphanies to offer. There are all different ways to be great *New Yorker* writers but what I can do is—I'm sort of an indefatigable reporter. I like to talk to everybody. I really want to hear what they have to say, which is the one thing that makes most people want to talk. He realized that he could give me stories that were really hard to figure out what really happened—investigative projects; things where you wanted to know—the mysteries. What happened? That I was very interested in ethical issues and moral issues about power and right and wrong.

The other thing I can do is tell it as a narrative. There are better investigative reporters than I am—people like Bob Woodward, who are just amazing—but not all investigative reporters can write a narrative. I learned from John Sterling, mostly and to some extent from John Hersey, about how to structure a narrative—and maybe from my grandfather, who was a historian—that telling stories is the way to keep the readers interested and that it's very important to look for character and chronology. A lot of investigative reporting loses readers because it's so detailed. You just can't stand it when you read it. You feel like you've just got to get up and leave the room and get a cup of coffee and do something else. It's just mind-numbing. So what I was able to do, that Dan could see, was both get the details and try to tackle the big history, the narrative; bring some analysis to it; bring some character and color to it; and try really hard to make it a page-turner. That's what we set out to do in the stories that we've done together.

Q: My next question is about 9/11. But why don't we break for lunch now. And when we come back this afternoon—we can do it this afternoon or we can make another appointment to pick up 9/11.

Mayer: Do you think we could do it over lunch and just do it? I mean, I'd love to just get it over with. I hate to have it hanging over me. But you want to take a break?

Q: I don't like to do things over lunch.

Mayer: Too much smacking and chit-chat. Okay. Well, let's just get a quick lunch then and get it done with because it's hard to get up to New York and my family's not here to distract me right now.

Q: Well, I can come to Washington.

Mayer: Oh, you want to come to Washington? Well, if you want to come to Washington, then let's do it then. That would be great, because I can then reread my book.

Q: Okay.

[END OF SESSION]

VJD

Session Two

Interviewee: Jane M. Mayer

Location: Washington, D.C.

Interviewer: Ronald J. Grele

Date: July 24, 2013

Q: This is an interview with Jane Mayer being conducted for the Columbia University Center for Oral History. Today's date is July 24, 2013. The interview is being conducted in Washington, D.C. Now if you would just say a few words.

Mayer: Hi, it's Jane here and I'm glad to be able to finish up the project with you.

Q: Okay. I sent you this interview outline. It seemed to work. Why don't we just follow it? The first question is, somewhere in 2003 or 2004 or something, you began to work around and do articles here and there on various aspects of the war on terror.

Mayer: Yes.

Q: When did that kind of gel in your mind—that this was something you should work on as a book?

Mayer: Well, really, not for quite some time. I can't remember—did we talk about 9/11 specifically and what was going on that day that caught my attention?

Q: No, no.

Mayer: Because that was important, too—what happened with this.

Q: No, we ended a little earlier than I have here. Yes.

Mayer: Basically, on 9/11, I was in the Washington bureau of the *New Yorker*, along with Jeffrey [M.] Goldberg. We were basically the two reporters who were downtown that day. I remember Jeff Goldberg turned to me and said, "You know, everything is going to change from this point on. We're going to be covering this for a long time." It was so big that we didn't know, really, how to cover it—particularly for the magazine, which doesn't come out instantly, and it was clear there was going to be so much daily coverage.

Anyway, we both set out all over town on foot to try to find stories and just cover what was happening in Washington—which, of course, was also hit but people don't remember this that much. The Pentagon was hit and it was a very dramatic scene. I won't go back and recreate that because I think it's been done by many people. Suffice it to say I spent all day on foot, walking all over the city because the traffic was completely clogged. You could barely get anywhere and there were tanks in the street. After trying to reach and see as many interesting people as I could who were experts who might be able to shed some light on what was going on, I ended the day up at the Washington [National] Cathedral, thinking it would be interesting to see whether there was some kind of vigil taking place. They have a small chapel there that's the St. Alban's Chapel [St. Alban's Parish] with St. Alban's School. It's also a community chapel, really. It's up there. They had a famous Episcopalian minister who I think was the one speaking. His name is Frank

Wade. I was just really taken by his remarks at that point. It was this little chapel and people just sort of spontaneously showed up to try to find some kind of solace in everything going on. He basically said, "This is going to be an epic test of our country, of our values and of our faith and morality. The question is, how do we defeat this completely uncouth, immoral enemy without becoming uncouth and immoral ourselves?" It was kind of a meditation on—

Q: He used the word "uncouth?"

Mayer: I doubt that he used the word "uncouth" but the gist was—it was sort of a meditation on not losing your civilization in the course of fighting back and on when to turn the other cheek as Christians and when to fight and how to fight in such a way that you're honorable. To me it was just a meaningful moment and it set the challenge that, in a lot of ways, continued to fascinate me as I was covering the unfolding war on terror—which was, "Okay. How are we going to win this without losing ourselves and our own culture?" Because there was, of course, instant talk of vengeance in the air and "We're going to blow them to smithereens so just wait 'til we hit back." All that kind of thing—which is of course very heady, but the question is, "What are the limits to what you should do?" I think, in a lot of ways, that set my thinking on what would be interesting to follow from there on out. That really became the theme of the book.

It was a question of, "Where do you draw the line between national security and civil liberties?" How do you keep this fantastic American culture and fight back against an enemy that doesn't respect it? To get to your project—how do you deal with an enemy that has no sense of or

respect for the rule of law, when you are most fundamentally a country built around the rule of law? Does it make you stronger or weaker to have those kinds of restraints?

So that pretty much began—I began thinking about it that night.

Q: Do you recall your first assignment in that—?

Mayer: In that vein?

Q: Yes.

Mayer: The first story I did—I was curious about who the bin Ladens were right after that. I wondered, “What kind of family raises Osama bin Laden?” [Laughs] I started digging, trying to figure out who were they, really? Who are these people and what formed them? That was kind of a surface-y first dive. It was interesting.

I think the story that really began to follow this theme—the first one, maybe, was the one I did about rendition. I think that was pretty early on. I haven't gone back and looked at all the pieces but there was a story I did where I interviewed a couple of former FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] agents, including one named Dan Coleman, about when the U.S. had begun brutalizing detainees—suspects in the war on terror. He had been involved in a couple of cases, even before 9/11, where he had seen some things that were disturbing. Basically, what interested me about Dan Coleman was that he was not the kind of person you would expect to be voicing

the sentiments he was voicing. He was a hardcore law-and-order guy, an FBI agent from New Jersey from an Irish Catholic family, whom you would expect to be just a rough, tough—not a civil libertarian, in particular. This wasn't the ACLU I was interviewing. And he was making this amazing argument, on moral grounds, for not brutalizing prisoners. He said, "Both from a practical standpoint it's not going to work. People whom you brutalize are going to say anything. And from a moral standpoint—you know what else? You lose your soul." To me—that just rang in my ears.

So the idea that this was not a partisan fight—I don't know if Coleman was a Democrat but he certainly wasn't a typical—not a typical liberal anyway. It was, again, about the rule of law. He very much believed in following the law and his argument was interesting, which was, "It's not making us weaker; it makes us stronger. It makes us better as people and it makes us better able to get the information we need and we can make the cases we need to. You're going to obliterate your chances of putting these people away, legally, behind bars, if you brutalize them."

Anyway, that was one of the earlier pieces. There were many other people like Dan Coleman whom I met who were, again, sort of unexpected voices for the rule of law and American values, who were not liberals and not civil libertarians, necessarily. They were in the military, they were in law enforcement and I thought they were just really fantastic characters.

Q: Did he give you any sense of the depth of the conflict between the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] and the FBI over these kinds of issues that you later explored—?

Mayer: A little bit of it. That was a growing story.

[INTERRUPTION]

My magazine editor might want me to go interview Snowden.

Q: Who?

Mayer: Edward Snowden.

Q: Oh, really?

Mayer: I'm not sure. I'm in the midst of other things right now.

Q: You were talking about getting a sense of the differences between the conflict the FBI and—

Mayer: —the FBI and the CIA. Yes. All these things developed more and more as I kept reporting. It was very much like, as the CIA calls it, the "mosaic theory," where you have just little shards of things and you begin to put pieces together. You were talking about—one of your questions was about the genesis of the book. What I was going to say there was that, basically, I felt like there were two reasons to write the book. One was sort of the story of the people I felt were doing the right thing, and they were people like Dan Coleman, the FBI agent, and Jack Cloonan, another FBI agent. But there were a whole lot of others—I was just unusually

impressed. As a reporter, your reporting doesn't always mean a lot to you. But in this case, I just felt there were these people who were risking their careers to stand up, speak truth to power, try to hold the line and defend the rule of law against what was a massive sense of a kind of fear that was gripping the government. They were sort of the voices of reason and enlightenment, I thought.

So I wanted to write their stories, to some extent, because I wasn't really able to do it completely in the reporting I was doing. They would just be serial characters but you couldn't really put the whole story together. That was the other thing—the reason for writing a book like this—that it was just a really complex piece of history. It broke in the news out of order so that people couldn't really understand how one thing connected to another. So what I was able to do by turning it into a narrative was to make some sense out of it for people and show that people's characters and their choices affected the events moving forward in the war on terror. A lot of what I did was simply weave together what was known and then try to fill in the gaps. But the challenge was to make it into a story that made sense and that's what you can do in a book that sometimes you can't do in magazine reporting or daily news reporting. It was too big a subject to handle in a smaller style.

Q: As you were talking, it just struck me that a great deal of the book is, indeed, personal stories, not only the FBI and the CIA. You have the story of John Walker Lindh, [Ahmed] Chalabi, and [Alberto J.] Mora.

Mayer: Alberto Mora.

Q: Yes. Even the [David S.] Addington parts.

Mayer: Addington was a very important character.

Q: A focus on just personal stories—people up in the issues.

Mayer: Yes. I think that in history, character has a huge influence. These were decisions made by just a relative handful of people that affected history. So it was important to flush out who they were and why they made the choices they made. That's what I was interested in. Who is David Addington? Why does he feel so strongly about the things that he does? He was such a powerful character. And [Richard B. "Dick"] Cheney was a powerful character, too. They don't come into this thing cold; they come into it with a history of their own and reasons for believing what they do about the importance of the executive power and their irritation with Congress and their sort of disdain for soft power. Of course, they were—in Cheney's case, he was not a lawyer and they sort of looked at the international law, in particular, as they put it, "quaint."

Anyway, I was interested in the characters. I think they bring the story alive. And I was impressed by a lot of the characters. It was really fun to try to tell their stories.

Q: As an oral historian, I have to ask this question—how did the interviews either conceptualize the problematic or how did these contextualize the interviews? That kind of dialectic?

Mayer: Well, you know, there were some main characters that I never was able to get interviews with. David Addington was one of them.

Q: Did you try?

Mayer: Oh, yes. Sure. And Vice President Cheney. I sent them various entreaties to talk to me and finally got back a note saying that the vice president would be "busy for the foreseeable future." [Laughter] Which was, I guess, a sort of nice way of saying, "Forget about it." So I wasn't able to interview some of them—though, in the case of Cheney, of course, he gave many interviews. He was on talk shows and things like that, so you could get his voice. And he gave speeches.

But the interviews—they were eye-opening. Every interview, to me, almost, was some kind of revelation. Some of them were revelations—unintended ones—by the people. I interviewed the head of the health division at the Pentagon, who—I'll have to look up his name for you. The funny thing was, I was not expecting him to say anything terribly interesting. I was trying to figure out where this program of brutalization came from and where the psychological program came from—because they had these teams of psychologists working with the military interrogators—so I just kind of idly said to him, "So where does this come from?" And he said, "Oh, you know, there's an acronym. There's a program. I can't remember the whole thing but it's something to do with survival and evasion." So when I finished the interview, I went back to my house and I Googled for "survival and evasion and military," and up came this thing called the

SERE program. It's Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape, what the acronym stands for. It was a Rosetta stone, really, for this program.

So I don't think he had meant to hand over some kind of huge key for opening up the secrets of the crypt but he did. [Laughs] Then I began to try to figure out, what is the SERE program and where did it come from? And what it turned out to be was a program that was based on studying the absolutely worst and most illegal torture methods of our worst enemies in the Cold War, and the military studied it so they could teach our soldiers how to survive it, if they were subjected to it. But, as the people were telling me when I started digging into this, after 9/11, SERE was reverse-engineered and lo and behold, America started using these same techniques—the worst and most illegal torture techniques—to break down our own prisoners. That was astounding to learn.

So, anyway, that was one of those interviews where you don't expect something and somebody just blurts it out.

Q: Did that lead you to the [Alfred W.] McCoy book?

Mayer: It led me to McCoy and others. I don't know whether I got to McCoy early. It led me to understand and know what questions to ask when I went down to Guantánamo, where they had these what they called BSCTs [Behavioral Science Consultation Teams], which were the psychology teams working on the interrogations. I was trying to figure out, who were they? It led to Fort Bragg, also, because that's where this program was and it began to lead to a couple of the

people whom I considered the most interesting characters in all of this—the psychologists who were brought in by the intelligence agencies to come up with the psychological techniques that would break down the U.S.-held terror suspects. I was just flabbergasted that people would have listened to them. They were not expert in interrogation. They knew nothing about Arab culture. They knew very little about the war on terror. All they knew about—they were SERE instructors; they were just people who knew about ancient torture techniques and they became our guides on how to interrogate prisoners.

Q: Were you able to get interviews with any of them?

Mayer: I did reach one of them and he declined to be interviewed but I talked to him on the phone for a little bit. Some of it was off the record. The CIA begged me not to publish his name but I went ahead and did it anyway. The reason was that he had put out some sort of promotional materials about his business where he had sort of boasted of the fact that he did this kind of work. So I figured if he was out in public about his work, there was no reason for me to keep it secret.

Q: Have you followed the dispute in the American Psychological Association about it? Whether or not they should be condemned?

Mayer: Yes. I think it's been very interesting. I mean, it seemed to me—I'm not a psychologist but the work they were doing was fraught with ethical issues and probably legal issues, too, if it was ever subjected to any kind of legal scrutiny, really.

Q: Let me turn the tables on you. You asked me who was my most interesting interview on this subject. Who was your most interesting interview?

Mayer: It's hard to say but there were very eye-opening interviews all along the way. People were amazing to interview for this book, I have to say. You know, there is now this kind of crusade against leakers. This book would not have been possible to write without what might be defined as "leakers" to some people. What they were, in some ways, was conscientious objectors, from various walks of life, who just thought that the program of interrogation was wrong. So they really wanted to talk about it. There were all these people who were very passionate about it.

Among them was somebody who I can't name, who, pretty early on, when I took him out to lunch to talk about—he was an expert on international torture and he had some access to the information about what the U.S. government was doing to detainees in the way of interrogation. He wasn't allowed to talk about it but he knew something about it and he couldn't tell me exactly what was going on but he looked across the table at me, his eyes widened and he just said, "It is the most sophisticated program of torture that the world has ever seen." This is someone who knew all about international torture, so he knew what he was talking about. He said, "The entire global information bank on what you can do to break down a prisoner—everything that has ever been learned in the world about how to destroy a prisoner in interrogation is being focused by the United States government on a small number of prisoners who are completely falling apart."

I said, "Well, can you tell me more about this?"

He said, "I can't."

But it was like being told that Moby Dick is right out there. It was there and I just had to somehow find it. So that was an incredible interview. Then there were people along the way—there were people like Alberto Mora, who—I was able to piece together bit by bit that he was very high up in the Pentagon. He was the general counsel to the Navy. He was a conservative, [George W.] Bush political appointee. I began to be able to get the sense that he was against what was going on and from other reporting I was doing. It took a long time to be able to get to interview him and the first interview I got with him was over coffee and it was off the record. He started talking about why he objected to some of the interrogation program, particularly the brutality, and as soon as he started talking, I thought, "I've got to get his man on the record." Because he is one of the most eloquent people you will ever interview. He's a Cuban refugee. He is a lawyer. He is someone who really believes in the Constitution. He came to America because his family wanted to get away from a dictatorial, totalitarian state and he understood what the stakes were in this because his family had been in a country where they'd been treated outside the rule of law.

Anyway, he was a fantastic voice. I thought, "I've *got* to get him on the record. People have to know who this person is." So it began a kind of courtship where I, bit by bit, tried to get him to speak on the record. Eventually, he left the government and then he was willing to speak on the record about what was going on. I managed to get a memo, too, that basically laid out the

chronology of his objections all along the way. It told the inside story of one particular prisoner, whose name was Mohammed al Qahtani, who was being tormented in Guantánamo in just the most bizarre ways. He was made to bark like a dog; filled up with bags of water and not allowed to urinate; made to put on bras; sexually humiliated. It was hideous. Mora had seen the interrogation logs and gone through every step that a careful person would do to try to keep it inside and stop it the right way, without blowing the whistle in a public way. The truth was that he was unable to convince the people at the top of the Bush administration to shut it down—shut the program down. Eventually, I think, that's why he went public.

Anyway, there were people like Philip Zelikow, whom I interviewed, who was interesting because he was a historian. By the time I interviewed him, he was teaching history at the University of Virginia and he had a terrific sort of historic context in which he looked at these questions of the international law. I wasn't sure if he would let me use any quotes. I went down to him, in some ways, to talk to him as a wise man who would help me understand this subject. I wasn't at all sure, as I said, whether I could use any of it, but he said a few things that were just so memorable, including—he's got the last line in my book, which is that he felt that, over time, this program would be looked at as a disgrace, kind of like the internment of the Japanese in World War II—the Japanese Americans. He felt that it was driven by a lot of the same factors, which were, as he put it—I won't get it—for one second—he said—sorry. Well.

Okay. So he said, "Fear and anxiety were exploited by zealots and fools." He was, again, a Republican insider. This is not a partisan book and it was important to me not to have it be a

partisan book. I wasn't sure if he would go on the record with that but when he did, I just thought, "Okay! Hallelujah! This is great." [Laughter]

There were many people like that, though. There were just so many impressive people to interview for this book. So I felt so fantastic that I was able to give their voice a place to be heard.

Q: Didn't you also interview a couple of scoundrels?

Mayer: Which scoundrels were you thinking of?

Q: Well, some of the CIA people. Did you do Cofer Black?

Mayer: Oh, yes. I interviewed Cofer Black. He's a mixed bag. He's not pure scoundrel, really. Most people are not. He's a colorful character. Again, he sort of was a braggart about what they were going to do. They were going to put the heads on stakes. They were going to deliver eyeballs to the White House with flies walking on them. Things like that. He served what the White House was hoping for, which was a good piece of vengeance, basically. That's what he was promising to Bush and they loved it in the White House. They couldn't get enough of him for a while there.

But even Cofer Black actually put on the brakes at some point. He pulled back a little bit toward the end. I'm trying to think what other great scoundrels there were in the book.

Q: You mentioned Hayden.

Mayer: Hayden. To some extent, one of the heavies in this book is—Hayes. Is that it? I'm sorry. It was Jim Haynes, who was the general counsel at the Pentagon. He would have been Alberto Mora's boss. Alberto Mora was the general counsel to the U.S. Navy. I depict him as something of basically a politically empty suit—someone who wanted to go along, get along. He was hoping to get appointed to become a federal judge. He wanted to please the White House. He's a Washington character. But faced with various, big, moral questions—and even complicated legal questions—he kind of just shuffled along and just tried to not rock the boat. He was kind of an antihero here. He was somebody who just wants to go along. The people I admired were the people who really stepped up to the big questions and who put their feet down and said, "No, that's not what America's about." He was not one of them.

Q: One of the things that impressed me about the book—which I knew—is the complexity of the federal government. It amazed me that buried in all of these agencies and sub-agencies there's this legal counsel and there's this legal counsel. It's an incredible, complicated web.

Mayer: It is. And it was complicated for me to figure out. But the truth is that, in some ways, this policy was driven by a relatively small group of people who decided they really had contempt for most of the bureaucracy and they made these decisions in secret, by themselves. They were the group that called itself the "War Council" inside the Bush White House.

One of your questions I saw on this list was why didn't I spend more time looking at Congress? The reason was that Congress was asleep at the switch for most of this. It really didn't play much of a role. The White House had very little respect for it, it seemed like. Basically, the people driving these policies believed in executive power and felt Congress had no right to meddle, so they were excluded from most of the important decisions.

Eventually, at the end of the book, you get more and more of a portrait of John McCain, partly because he had moved from just being a senator to running for president in 2008. He was a great character—again, a Republican who disagreed with the Bush White House over their torture policy. Of course, he had standing like no one else because he had been a prisoner of war who had been horribly tortured during the Vietnam War. He had kind of a moral authority on these issues that almost no one could match and he did speak out about it. And even though he's a super hawk, he pushed back on these issues, as did Colin Powell.

So he was someone from Congress who mattered, who threw his weight around in a way that mattered. But there weren't many of them.

Q: When you were writing the book, what was out there already? What was the field of study like when you went to look at the bibliography and read Bob Woodward and this one and that one?

Mayer: There was more—there was some fantastic reporting done on this subject. Dana Priest did amazing reporting over at the *Washington Post*. Bart [Barton D.] Gellman did incredible

reporting about Cheney. His book is one of the great books. Woodward—he's controversial in some ways but if you go through his reporting on the Bush administration—some critics have found it too fawning, but if you go through it carefully, he's got an incredible amount of damning information in those books that is just plain plopped in there. What he does is, he puts the raw material in and often doesn't draw conclusions one way or the other. So, sometimes, there is context missing. But if you go back through his work, it's invaluable because he gets the actual documents, he gets the meetings minutes, and the quotes from the people on the inside. So I found his work really valuable for my purposes.

You asked about Steve Coll's book. *Ghost Wars* I thought was an amazing book. It was very much important in explaining the frustrations building up at the CIA and the long history of assassination policy—when to use force, when not to, when the CIA could. There had been so many breaks on the CIA before 9/11 that there was kind of an explosion after 9/11 where they threw all the rulebooks out because they felt that the rulebooks had gotten in their way. So, basically, the CIA just completely transformed itself after 9/11. It really had not been involved much in using lethal force. It had been almost entirely an intelligence-gathering agency. It became militarized after 9/11. Weaponized.

Q: Did you do research on government documents?

Mayer: When I could get them, yes. So much was classified during this period. As I said, a useful document for me was Alberto Mora's memo—the Torture Memo—which others got. Both the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal* seemed to get a copy of the Torture Memo.

Time magazine got a hold of the al Qahtani interrogation logs and put a great deal of it out, anyway, which was just a vivid and terrible thing to read. Just awful. I went to hearings. Senator Levin eventually held hearings that were about the SERE program that were very valuable. Because they have subpoena power. I would say, as a reporter, I have subpoena envy. [Laughter]

So I got my hands on everything I could. I saw some classified documents that were very interesting about what was going on in Iraq. There was a lot of great reporting being done at this period. I was drawing on as much of it as I could. One of the things I loved about working on this was that nobody could get the whole story. There was this patchwork thing. But it was because of the internet—which, by this point, was this international information-sharing engine—you could put up a story and halfway around the world somebody would be able to pick it up, run with it and add to it. So it began to take on a kind of international relay race feeling, where you would throw the baton out and somebody would catch it.

In Scandinavia, for instance, there would be people looking at renditions taking place there. There was somebody who was rendered right out of an airport in Sweden. They would see something about rendition and they would just add on to it. Then somebody would be snatched in the Arab world; they would just disappear from the luggage carousel in an airport. There would be a small news story about it but it would add to this picture. But because you could share information internationally, you could begin to piece this wonderful, incredible puzzle together. Then, after a while, when rendition became known, there began to be international plane spotters who were looking for the tail numbers of the rendition planes. They would be out there with binoculars on airfields all around the world and it began to be this unbelievable

situation where the CIA could run but it really couldn't hide. Because if it landed in Shannon to refuel, in Ireland, someone would be there looking for the tail numbers.

Anyway, it became this international sleuth business that a number of people were working on, both real reporters and sort of amateurs spotting it.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: I was wondering—because I read that section in the book about the Swedish—but there doesn't seem to be attribution. I figured somebody had told you that story in an interview, but it's interesting that it came out of the internet.

Mayer: Well, I think what happened in Sweden was eventually there was—I think Swedish television or a documentary crew did some kind of reporting on it. There was local Swedish reporting in the newspapers. Then I wound up talking on the phone with people there. We were swapping information back and forth and that's how it was all over the world. I was dealing with people who would come through the United States and I would wind up talking to them. There was a Stephen Grey, who did a lot of reporting about the rendition flights. He got a lot of the flight logs. He's a British reporter and at some point he showed up in Washington and I had him over for dinner. He had a duffel bag that was filled just with the flight logs. It was kind of incredible. He and I also shared tips and reporting back and forth and I think he's credited in the book, as were many people, because there was just incredible reporting going on. You couldn't do this on your own.

Q: For the book itself, how did you secure the publisher?

Mayer: That's a good question. It's been a while since I thought of it. I had done a number of stories and they were getting some attention. I felt there was this bigger, book-size treatment of it to do. I wasn't really sure what it was but I wanted to tell the stories of the people who I felt had sort of stood up. I spoke with my agent, Sloan Harris, at ICM [Partners] and wrote a quick proposal, a really small proposal, up. It was circulated first to my former book editor, John Sterling—who had been at Houghton Mifflin and then had moved to Broadway books, which is part of Holt—and it was submitted to Bill Thomas at Doubleday. Thomas offered to pay more. [Laughs] So I went with that, although I love John. But Bill Thomas turned out to be fantastic, too.

Q: When you were writing the book, I know sometimes that you're writing a book and something comes up. Something else is published. Did that happen during that period?

Mayer: Well, I wasn't really sure how it was going to turn out. You never know. It's an overwhelming thing, to write a book. But what I started with was—I put together a chronology because this is really a narrative. I think it came out to be 380 pages long, the chronology. What was great about this—and anybody will tell you this—when you start doing something chronologically, you'll see connections between things that you didn't see before. I began to be able to understand why things happened the way they did once I did a chronology. And I had my stories to work from but I had to basically break them into pieces and redistribute the material in

the larger narrative. Then I needed to fill a lot of holes, so I was busy doing a lot of extra reporting for the book, too.

Q: What was the reaction to the book?

Mayer: You mean after it came out? One of the things that meant the most to me was that I got a call from one of the characters in the book who was very deeply involved in the military in all of this and he just left a message for me saying that it was just completely right. [Laughter] And I thought that that was the best thing I could hope for—that somebody who was on the inside and was not a political person one way or the other said, "You got it right." It was just so gratifying to hear that.

So the reaction was great. I think this was everything a writer could ever hope for. I got amazing reviews and nominated for prizes. It was just amazing. Mostly, I just felt good about it myself. I really felt it was the kind of book that needed to be written, so I felt like I did the best I could to get it out there. I probably would have taken longer on it if I could but my editor wanted me to finish. The problem is—if you give a writer as long as they need, they'll never finish, so he basically said, "No, I need it in two weeks." I was trying to get more time.

Q: Was the *New Yorker* supportive?

Mayer: Yes. They were fantastic. They gave me a book leave. That's what you need. It ended just in time, actually, for me. I was just getting a frozen shoulder and I was unable, by the last

week that I was typing, I was unable to lift my hand above my waist. So I thought, "Thank God it's over," and I could get back to moving again. Because it was hard. I'd get up in the morning and stay working well past midnight. It was a complete obsession.

Q: I remember reading the reviews, which were mostly positive, but then again I read a certain literature. I'm sure there was another literature that must have been critical.

Mayer: It miraculously evaded being slammed. I think the reason is that it isn't a partisan book. I'm sure there are people who disagree with it—probably people like Dick Cheney—but it's accurate. They may not like the way I interpreted the facts but they can't argue with the facts in this book. It is just plain accurate. And it was very important to me not to make it into some kind of partisan screed. I tried to understand why people were doing what they were doing, even if I disagreed with what they doing. I tried to credit them with being smart when they were, even if they were doing things I didn't think were smart in that moment. As I said, just so many of the sources are not sort of typical critics of the Bush administration; they were members of the Bush administration. It was very important to have them speaking out, because it gives it an unassailable credibility.

So it never really got slammed, which is kind of remarkable and probably will never happen to me again. [Laughs]

Q: Now, did this book change your life as an author in the way the other one—the Reagan book—did not necessarily do?

Mayer: You know, I think it meant more to me. It connected with things I care about in a very serious way. It was personally something that I was very involved in and still care a lot about. I think it transcended journalism, to become something that was a book where I was trying my best to express—use everything I had to try to tell something that I thought was important to the American public. It felt great. When it hit, it became a bestseller, and the closest thing I can think of to describe it is when you're playing tennis and the ball hits right in the middle of the racquet and it just takes off. It's sort of like, "Wow. Look at that thing go." It was such an incredible feeling. Eventually, it ended up sitting on the shelf, gathering dust. [Laughter]

Q: And then people like me read it and come to interview you about it.

Mayer: And then I can't remember it anymore.

Q: Well, it's been a long time. But you did the talk shows, a number of them I saw. I remember your talking to Bill Moyers.

Mayer: Yes, and some of the more unusual talk shows. I enjoyed doing Stephen Colbert, the comic show, who kept saying, "What's wrong with torture? I don't see anything saying it's illegal in the Constitution. They don't even have the word in the Constitution." [Laughter] Just all kinds of talk shows, basically. Anyway, it was a good run for a book. It hit at just the right time, maybe, too. It came out during the campaign when people were discussing these subjects and

both the Republican candidate and the Democratic candidate—John McCain and Barack Obama, the two nominees—agreed that they wanted to get rid of this program.

Q: Of all the talk shows, who really got it and who didn't get it?

Mayer: I'm trying to remember. It's sort of a blur to me, Ron. Well, Moyers certainly got it.

Q: That's a very interesting dialogue.

Mayer: You know, I got somewhat—I always feel somewhat uncomfortable when people are trying to make it into a partisan slam at Bush and just kind of make fun of him or whatever because I was trying to do something that was not so partisan and small-minded. When people from either side were looking at it as partisan, I found that uncomfortable sometimes. Then, later, there were books written that were completely taking issue with everything in it, practically. Marc Thiessen, who was a speechwriter, I guess, for [Donald H.] Rumsfeld and maybe briefly for Cheney, too, came out with a book saying that it's scandalous to pull back from brutalizing detainees. So people like Mark Thiessen, as far as I was concerned, did *not* get it. They wanted to make it into some kind of partisan attack on the Bush White House and it wasn't. In fact, what they didn't seem to understand was that pretty much anybody who really understood interrogation—which included many conservative people in law enforcement and the military and the CIA, for that matter, people who were right in the room—said, "This is the wrong thing to do." He just wanted to go out and defend Bush and Cheney and that's pretty much what that's been about since the book came out. There have been some partisan defenses.

Q: Looking back now, what would you do differently?

Mayer: I would write it better. I would have taken a little more time on the writing. It's hard for people to follow some of it. I would have put a glossary in the front with a cast of characters, like in the beginning of a Shakespearean play, saying who people are. All those Arab names are really difficult for those of us in the West to follow and people get mixed up. Some of my relatives said to me, "Oh, my god, it was so detailed!" I think I would try to make it even more clear.

You've asked, "Was the conclusion too optimistic?" I did a conclusion to the paperback version after Obama was elected in which I was being quite optimistic about the ability of a new administration to bring these policies to an end. It's been hard and there's been more inertia and more political opposition than I would have expected at that point, I suppose. I disagree with the critics of Obama who say he's just basically running the same program that Bush had. He's not. He's closed down every black site. There are no more secretly held prisoners in dark holes, being tortured around the world by the United States government. They ended physical torture. You might be able to argue that indefinite detention in Guantánamo is psychological torture and I think I might argue that myself. But they have ended the kind of deliberate brutalization policies that were taking place during the Bush years and very openly so. Obama has spoken eloquently about why he has done this and how important it is to do this. They've failed to close Guantánamo and I suppose there are a number of reasons. I think the Obama administration has not pushed as hard as I wish they would on these issues. I don't think it was a priority for him

and particularly not a priority for his political staff when they came in. They looked at this as sort of Bush's problem, not their problem so much.

But critical though I am of that, I'm far more critical of Congress, particularly the Republicans in Congress who have just flogged Obama and whipped up fear all over again about what would happen if he brought a detainee from Guantánamo into the United States to either stand trial or be warehoused in an American prison. It's completely irrational in reality. I think it's just politics. They saw this as a partisan opening and it began very early on in the Obama administration with Mitch McConnell going to the Senate floor and starting to criticize Obama for wanting to close down Guantánamo. Then all the Republicans got on board, practically, except Lindsey Graham and McCain, maybe. It just became this wall of opposition. So there's a lot of blame to be shared for that.

Q: I was impressed—and you really reaffirmed that in the interview—with the number of people who disagreed with the policy and who tried to prevent it. Why were they unsuccessful?

Mayer: Well, there were a number of reasons, I think. One is, because these programs were classified, it was very hard for anyone to speak up about them because it would be a national security breach if they had, in public. That explains, to some extent, why Congress had such a hard time speaking out. So you had this strange phenomenon of somebody like Senator [Jay] Rockefeller, on the Senate Intelligence Committee, sending a secret letter to Cheney complaining about the program but the public never got to see it. So if you can't have a public debate, it's hard to muster politics against something. That was part of the reason. Then, fear is just an

overwhelming force. This country was seized and gripped by fear—fear and anxiety—about another attack. And when people are in fear, they often look at civil liberties as an unnecessary luxury. They were more interested in self-defense than they were in the rule of law.

Q: At one point in time—I think it was in "News From Washington"—about James Risen, when the judges ruled in his favor. That's a continuing case now. How is that working out?

Mayer: Well, he's in jeopardy of being forced to testify against his source in that case. I think they haven't yet decided what to do but I think probably they'll appeal for an en banc decision in that case from the Fourth Circuit. Who knows what will happen? It's possible, I guess, it could go all the way up to the Supreme Court. But Risen has said he'd rather go to jail than reveal his source. The ruling that I wrote about, which was at the lower court level—I think it was a ruling by Leonie [M.] Brinkema, which was very wise, basically saying, "There are a lot of ways you can get information about forcing a reporter to have to give up their sources." And there is a lot of information that the government already has in that Risen case about the suspect. It makes it easier if they can make a reporter rat out their sources but they don't really need the reporter, according to the lower court judge.

I think this is dangerous—this forcing reporters to reveal their sources. I think the public needs to know about these programs. It's a balancing act and there are times that you need to make sure that you, as a reporter, are not jeopardizing American lives or not jeopardizing some kind of ongoing operation that's important. But the war on terror is a war that nobody has defined the

end of yet, so we're really talking about policies in perpetuity. And to silence a public debate on policies that could last forever is not a democracy.

So I think to try to—what it means is silencing the sources, basically. If they're going to be prosecuted, they won't be speaking to reporters then. The reporters won't be able to get the information in front of the public and the public will be ignorant of what its own government is doing. How can the public make informed choices if it doesn't know what the government is doing?

Q: You, yourself, used anonymous sources. What's your feeling about an anonymous source? Did you have to make those kinds of agreements with people?

Mayer: Yes, sure. Sometimes. You want a source to go on the record because then it's unassailable in terms of its credibility. People can see who it is, why they're talking, and it's the best. But not everybody can afford to do that, especially when they're talking about secret programs, because they *could* be prosecuted for it. Yet, they may feel very strongly that some kind of crime is taking place and that there needs to be accountability. I had sources in this who tipped for me in this book—several—but one in particular who became the subject of Justice Department persecutions. It was a terrible thing. It ended with no charges being brought but this really, truly chills and silences people. It ruins their lives. They have to pay for lawyers. One particular source was in jeopardy of being charged as a traitor. It was untrue and he had not done anything wrong but his life was turned upside down during this period. The reason for him having to go through this—it's an awful consequence for someone to have to suffer just so the

American public can know what the government is doing. But I think it's really important that the government still keep going and knowing what's going on. [Laughter]

Q: I came across the transcripts of a panel put together by the Nieman Foundation up at Harvard. Those were the last four or five—seven points—

Mayer: I didn't look it up, so I can't remember.

Q: I've forgotten who else was on the panel, but at the end of the panel, the general conclusions—

Mayer: Were these the winners of the Goldsmith Book Prize? Was that what it was?

Q: I don't think so. It was a panel on journalism. I should have actually looked it up.

Mayer: I can't remember, anyway, what it was. I thought it might be that because that was up at Harvard. I think there's a Goldsmith prize for investigative reporting, too. So this was the person from *ProPublica* who was talking about fracking? Yes. That's what it was. It was the Goldsmith Prize program.

Q: Well, these are some of the general conclusions out of it that involve journalists being hesitant to challenge the president.

Mayer: Are journalists hesitant to challenge the president?

Q: How would you speak to those issues now?

Mayer: Well, I think journalists have challenged Obama pretty solidly. I don't see a lot of reluctance to challenge the president. I think it's more difficult in a national security emergency. That just changes everything. But I think the press is still kicking the White House around, getting beyond spin.

Q: Especially in Washington, how do you get beyond the spin?

Mayer: It takes time. I think the antidote to spin is fact. Spin is basically stretching the facts and it sometimes goes to the extent of lying. To get beneath it, you have to then go gather the facts. The problem is, that takes time and coverage is moving so far now that, basically, what a lot of people do is they just go and they get counter-spin. So you have two people, two talking heads saying opposite things and the public has no idea what's right and what's wrong. And I think that's not doing the job quite enough. You really have to get the facts. You have to look at the record and it takes time.

Q: Some of these problems don't apply in your particular situation because it's getting beyond the Beltway. Because, obviously, when you're writing for the *New Yorker*, you're writing for a much larger audience than just the Washington audience. But some of them do. They pose a lot of kinds of questions. One that bothers me a lot is the isolation of the blogs and the daily

newspapers. I'm on all kinds of lists, people blog and they send me these things and I know that people who disagree with my politics will never see those things, whereas, in the *New York Times*, they might. Or in a newspaper, they might, because the audiences are so different. The audiences on the blogs seem to be so specific. It's like I'm talking to my friends.

Mayer: I think it's a terrible problem. What you're getting—it's not just beyond the Beltway; it's beyond your own ideological echo chamber. You're getting this kind of ideological ghettoization where people only talk to their own kind. I was just interviewing somebody about it—Norm Ornstein, a political scientist at the American Enterprise Institute—and he was saying that the problem is that congressmen go home to their districts and their constituents are sort of lost in what he called the "lunatic loop." They've only been reading and talking to each other and they haven't even heard the other side, and frequently, they don't know what the facts are anymore. So it is a real problem. I don't know where it leads to but I miss the effort to try to reach people who don't agree with you.

Which is really something, as we've been talking about, that I tried to do with this book—which means that you have to talk to people. As a reporter, it's really important to talk to people who disagree with you, or people you think might be doing something wrong as well as the people who are doing something right. It's really important to get every side of the story and put all the sides together for readers so you can reach everybody and not have such a slant and bias on it that you're going to lose readers. I like to think we have common history, that there are such things as facts and they exist. So I think it's really important for the whole country to get this unspun information. We keep trying at the *New Yorker*.

Q: Do you still have that kind of optimistic view of journalism? That if you expose things, things will happen?

Mayer: Yes, I do. I'm pretty optimistic about it. I think that what may happen on the whole idea of the war on terror and these detention policies—it may take time. I was thinking, it took something like forty years after the Japanese internment—the American-Japanese internment—before the *Korematsu* [*v. United States*, 1944] case was overturned. It takes a long time before the country comes to its senses, particularly on national security issues.

So I still have some faith that these judgments will be made—and to some extent they have been, but nobody has been held accountable for these policies. I suppose the accountability was the election. But one of the biggest issues right now in all of this is whether the Senate intelligence committee report that was done into this program of torture and interrogation will ever see the light of day, so the public gets to see it. It took three or four years of non-stop research by an incredibly dedicated staff to the Senate Intelligence Committee. It's apparently a devastating report. It concludes, I'm told, among other things, that the CIA misled the White House about how useful these techniques were, exaggerating their use—which is part of the reason the White House dug in to defend them. The report shows that those evaluations by the CIA were self-serving and wrong. It sounds like a killer report and I think it sounds invaluable. This information should be seen by the public but, you know, I don't know if it will be. And there can't be accountability unless people know the facts.

Q: Were you looking for accountability when you wrote the book?

Mayer: Yes, I think it's a form of accountability and history is accountability. Yes. I think it is.

Q: Right. Now in Judge [Gladys] Kessler's decision the other day, she puts Obama right on the hook. She doesn't let him off the hook.

Mayer: Which decision is this?

Q: She said she would rule against torture at Guantánamo but the courts had already ruled against them, so there was only one way to solve the issue and that was by the president.

Mayer: That he, himself, needs to do this.

Q: She didn't say "he, himself," but the executive needs to.

Mayer: The executive branch. Well, the executive branch really flinched. They had an opportunity to take a couple of prisoners who were cleared, even by the Bush administration, as non-threats. These were the Uighurs. At the beginning of the Obama administration, plans were made to take these Uighur prisoners and bring them to the United States. If we allowed them to be resettled in the United States, gave them asylum—there was no charge against them that could hold and there was no allegation that they were ever involved in terrorism. It was a completely different set of issues and they were deemed harmless by the judicial branch and by the judicial

authorities in Guantánamo. If we didn't take the Uighurs, it was really hard for us to force other countries to take the prisoners from Guantánamo. What happened was, the Republicans made a big stink about how dangerous it would be to have the Uighurs brought to America and the Obama White House caved. Instead of demanding that they be brought here anyway, they gave up on bringing in the Uighurs. The Uighurs were eventually sent to Bermuda, where they are reportedly raking sand pits in the country clubs and having perfectly peaceful lives—but that decision brought a host of other bad decisions. The executive branch certainly could have done more and hasn't done it. People tell me that the executive branch could do more now but I haven't been following these issues recently.

Q: Well, I've kind of reached the end. Do you have anything you want to add?

Mayer: I hope that was useful. No—I'm just looking at my notes here. We didn't talk about the trip to Guantánamo Bay. You've got so many other people who went down there.

Q: Oh, that's right. No, tell me about going to Guantánamo.

Mayer: Guantánamo. Well, I flew down, as a reporter, in a little tiny plane. It was part of a little press junket. It was completely controlled when we were down there. It was the first time I'd felt, as an American, anything sort of reminiscent of when I was a reporter covering East Germany. You felt like you were being watched and controlled and probably your phone calls were being monitored. It was a very un-free atmosphere. Among the impressions I had were what a waste it was and how out of proportion it seemed, in that you had these couple-hundred prisoners in

orange suits being kept in what looked like dog kennels behind layer, after layer, after layer of security, and concertina wire, and guard towers, and passwords to get in. You would have thought that the threat they posed was superhuman. They were, for the most part, a very forlorn, scraggly-looking bunch of guys, very thin and pathetic. It just seemed overblown to treat them like this and it seemed wrong on some level. You could feel that the policy seemed off when you were just taking a look at the whole thing—the cost, the amount of military presence. It had been years that these people had been moldering there and there seemed to just a complete lack of proportion about them.

One thing that struck me was interviewing a military chaplain there who basically said to me—and he was the chaplain to the troops—"This is a war of the clash of civilizations. It's the Muslim world versus the Christian world and we have to fight this war and it won't end until the end of times, as predicted in the Bible." And I thought, "This is really out of control." You've got the chaplain preaching to the troops that this is about something that's not going to end until Armageddon. It just had a kind of unreality to the whole place.

Anyway. I'm really sorry—it's now how many years? Ten, eleven years and counting and still there.

Q: Tell me about meeting Arthur Schlesinger.

Mayer: It was a real treat, actually. I was very intimidated because he was sort of a great man and known for being very smart. I met him at a restaurant that I think was practically his daily

commissary on the Upper East Side. He had the bow tie that you'd hope for and he had sort of thick black glasses. I remember he ordered steak tartare—which I think he had there every day—and Bombay gin. [Laughter] We had such a pleasant conversation. It was so interesting. What struck me was how emphatic he was about how this episode of the Bush administration's resort to torturing prisoners stacked up in American history, because he obviously was somebody who had perspective on this. He'd written books about the cycles of American history and how the pendulum swings back and forth. He certainly knew the history of other, earlier national security scares, where civil liberties were suspended. So when I asked him about how he would evaluate the Bush administration's resort to torture in the long view of American history—how bad a breach it was—it blew me away that he kind of paused. He was talking slowly and when I would try to finish the sentences for him—every now and then I would jump in and he would get very irritated, because, obviously, I wasn't saying what he wanted to say. So he just paused and I just waited and he basically said that there had never been greater damage done to American's image in the world than what was being done by the Bush administration with this program. Ever. Emphatic, *ever*.

To me, it was a very important moment because, as a reporter, you're down in the weeds and you don't have that big perspective. Every story looks important when you're in the middle of it. But to have somebody on the outside of it, who, while liberal, also believed in a muscular defense, who made that strong a statement about it—it was really important to me. It made me feel that this was something worth writing about.

Q: Did he know that you were Allan Nevins' granddaughter?

Mayer: Yes. We talked about it a little bit. I think he had some funny stories about my grandfather. He certainly knew him and remembered him and that was nice to hear. I always enjoy hearing those stories.

Q: A nice vignette.

Mayer: So years later, after the book came out, I did a Sunday talk show—an ABC talk show—and found myself in the awkward position of being in the makeup room with only one other person who was also going to be on the show—he was going to be interviewed that day—and that was Dick Cheney. So I thought, "Oh, my gosh. What do you say?" We wound up talking about dogs for a few minutes, because we both have Labradors and I figured that's complete common ground that we could both agree on—that they are the best dogs. But beyond that—he then brought up the book and the one thing that was really sticking in his craw was what Arthur Schlesinger had said about how this program, that Cheney had helped create and chaperone, had done more damage to America's image in the world than anything else in American history. He said, "Oh, that Arthur. Did he really say that? I used to debate him." Then he was sort of cluck-clucking about it all and it obviously—it was interesting to me that he'd even read that much of the book. I wouldn't have suspected that he would sit down and read this book but he had at least gotten that far and it really bugged him. [Laughter]

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