

THE ECONOMIC CLUB

O F W A S H I N G T O N, D. C.

Signature Event

**The Honorable Ronald A. Klain
Assistant to the President
White House Chief of Staff**

Wednesday, March 2, 2022

DAVID M. RUBENSTEIN: Thank you all for tuning in today for our eighth Signature Event of our 36th season. Our featured guest today is the Honorable Ron Klain, assistant to the president and White House chief of staff.

So, Ron, before I go through some questions, I want to try to go through your incredible resume. It's disappointing for me to do it because it's so much more impressive than any resume I could ever have put together. It's an incredible, perfect resume for the job you have.

So, for those who don't know Ron's background, it's quite amazing. He grew up in Indianapolis, and he went to Georgetown because he was interested in politics and government and thought that would be a good thing to do, go there. He graduated summa cum laude. He then went to Harvard Law School, was first in his class the first year, which is not easy to do. And he was a member of the Harvard Law Review and graduated from Harvard Law School magna cum laude, which is not easy to do either. He was an editor of the Harvard Law Review during that period of time and also got a clerkship with Justice Byron White.

He's also served in a number of government positions and has avoided the temptation to go into long-term private equity, so he's actually served his country for many, many years. Among those positions are chief counsel for the Senate Judiciary Committee under then-Chairman Joe Biden, associate counsel for judicial selection under President Clinton, chief of staff and counselor to the Attorney General Janet Reno, staff director of the Senate Democratic Leadership Committee under Leader Tom Daschle, and chief of staff to Vice President Al Gore. In addition, he also served as assistant to the president and chief of staff to Vice President Biden in the Obama administration, and returned after serving several years in that position to serve as the White House Ebola response coordinator.

In the private sector, he has worked at O'Melveny & Myers, and has served as vice president and general counsel to Revolution LLC, which is a Washington-based investment firm led by Steve Case.

So, very impressive resume. I think you've got the perfect resume for this job. But my question is, you know so much about being chief of staff to people and you know so much about the White House; don't you know that being chief of staff to the White House – the president of the United States is a difficult job to do and usually the tenure is about 18 months? So, when you were offered the job, did you say I know I'm only going to be able to do this for about 18 months, or do you say I'm going to make it all four or eight years?

MR. KLAIN: Well, David, thanks. Thanks for that very generous introduction. I appreciate it.

Look, I was honored and flattered and humbled when President Biden – President-elect Biden asked me to come do this. It is a grueling job. There's no question about it. I think it's easy to understand why the average tenure in the job is 17, 18 months.

You know, I'm here every day working away. I'm honored to be part of this team. I have – I'm very lucky. I have probably the most experienced group of colleagues who've ever served at a senior level in the White House. I have people who carry a lot of the load every day.

That makes the job a lot easier than it would be. We're facing a lot of hard challenges, no question about it – difficult situations on the international front, a lot of challenges here at home – but I'm really lucky to be part of an A-plus team that's tackling these challenges every day.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, when you became White House chief of staff, obviously, you'd worked for Joe Biden as – when he was a senator and when he was vice president, but did you call White House chiefs of staff or did they call you up and say, here's what you should not do or here's what you should do? Do the White House chiefs of staff ever get together and give advice to someone like you?

MR. KLAIN: You know, it's funny, starting about 12, 15 years ago they started a tradition. When there's a new White House chief of staff, all the former chiefs of staff get together and meet and give that person advice. In my case, this happened in December. It was virtual, unfortunately, because of COVID, but we had I think something like 30 of the 33 former chiefs of staff together on a Zoom to give advice. And each of them gave very thoughtful, very helpful advice.

I think the funniest piece of advice, Dick Cheney was gracious enough to join the call. He had been chief of staff under President Ford. And he just said, I have one piece of advice for you: Watch out for the vice president. Which I thought was great advice coming from him. In fact, actually, I have a great relationship with Vice President Harris. Her office is next to mine in the West Wing and we meet virtually every day on something or another. But Vice President Cheney had that advice for me.

You know, I've worked for 10 prior White House chiefs of staff, and one of the ways I try to do this job is take something from each of them in almost everything I do.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, we'll talk about the job of being chief of staff in a moment, but I think everybody's really interested in the State of the Union address which was given last night. So, for those who may not be familiar with it, how much time goes into preparing the text? And is it written over, like, a month period of time? And then, because of Ukraine and Russia, did you have to rewrite it over the last few days? And how difficult was it to kind of update the speech as events were going forward in Russia and Ukraine?

MR. KLAIN: Well, David, you know as a former policy staffer here at the White House that the State of the Union isn't just a speech; it's a kind of a policy document that reflects the administration's agenda. And so, the policy work going into the State of the Union really started late in December and continued with the work of our policy councils in January kind of developing a lot of the new proposals you heard last night. So that policy work really has been going on for a long time.

Sometime in early February, that policy work started to get merged into a draft – into a draft speech, a written summary, basically, of all the policies you heard the president announce. And so, we've been working on that draft for about a month, since early February. And Mike Donilon here, the president's senior advisor, led the work on preparing the draft, with a lot of input from other people of course.

Obviously, we knew early in February that Ukraine and the situation in Ukraine was going to be part of the speech. But that, obviously, emerged in a much more substantial form and a much more substantial part of the speech once the Russians invaded. So, there was some rewriting over the past couple weeks, building out the Ukraine section, moving it to the front of the speech. But a lot of that – a lot of what you heard last night really has been months in development to get into the State of the Union.

I think people who have been in government know that Cabinet agencies submit proposals, Cabinet secretaries submit ideas. Everyone has their ideas. It's a very elaborate process to put together that speech that you heard last night.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So typically, a president will prepare by going through on a teleprompter the speech several times. I assume President Biden did that.

MR. KLAIN: Yeah, the president, as long as I've known him, likes to write a speech by reading a speech. He likes to read a paragraph out loud, think about what he does or doesn't like about the paragraph, edit it, try it again till it fits. And so, starting a couple weeks ago we started that process with him where he'd read parts of the speech aloud, rewrite parts, you know, revise parts, reorganize the speech a bit. That goes on all the way till the day of the speech itself. So, what you heard last night was the product of months of policy work, weeks of drafting, and a lot of intense involvement by the president himself in picking out exactly what he wanted to say, how he wanted to say it, and the order in which he wanted to present it.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: In recent years, we've seen Democratic presidents get standing ovations when they say something from Democratic members of Congress and Republican presidents get standing ovations from Republican, you know, members of Congress. But you usually don't see both Democrats and Republicans giving standing ovations to a president. You got a fair number of them when he talked about Russia and Ukraine. Were you surprised that was a pretty bipartisan response?

MR. KLAIN: I wasn't surprised. I think we've seen generally a pretty united country, a pretty bipartisan reaction to Russian aggression and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. I think we've been fortunate to have the kind of support we've had on Capitol Hill from both Democrats and Republicans. You've even heard Republicans who've been critical of President Biden in the past, like Secretary Gates, come out and be very positive about what the administration's done.

I'm proud of our work here. The president spent the past several months working with our allies in Europe – members of NATO, members of the EU on the economic side – other countries like the U.K., Canada, Japan, Australia, others to try to put together this alliance, this unified alliance to confront Russian aggression. And I think that alliance has come together, I think beyond almost anyone's expectations for its cohesion, for its unity, for its effectiveness.

And I think you've seen the same thing at home. We were careful all along to try to brief both Democrats and Republicans about the steps we've been putting together, about the steps we've been taking. We've been transparent about the intelligence we received, about what we

thought the Russians were going to do, what in fact they ultimately did do. And I think that worked with both Democrats and Republicans here at home, with a wide array of countries overseas has created a lot of unity behind the response we're part of with our allies in facing down Russian aggression.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Talk about intelligence for a moment. Usually, the intelligence that comes into the CIA is not declassified and given to reporters in a public way. Clearly, in this process somebody – I assume the president of the United States – thought it was a good idea to declassify the satellite photos and to declassify the information we have about what Putin was thinking or saying. So, was that a difficult decision to come to? And do you think it worked or didn't work yet?

MR. KLAIN: David, I think it was the right decision given the kind of environment we were facing. We knew that President Putin had a reputation for disinformation. We've certainly seen that all around the world. And we knew that his most likely approach here would be to create some kind of disinformation campaign, a false-flag attack potentially, a false provocation, out-and-out lies to justify his invasion of Ukraine. As it became clearer and clearer to us that that was what he had planned, we thought it was more and more important to strip him of that advantage by making clear what we knew his plans were and making it clear to the world what we thought would happen.

And I think that decision by President Biden in conjunction with our NATO allies, and other allies that are part of the coalition, a shared decision to proceed this way has been one of the reasons why there has been such a unified and uniform world reaction to what President Putin has done. There's no ambiguity about who is the aggressor here. There's no belief in any of the false stories about what, quote/unquote, "provoked" this invasion. I think that transparency, that sophisticated use of intelligence in a modern information-warfare context has served the allies very, very well. I also think it stripped President Putin of any element of surprise in the attack and helped the Ukrainians be ready for what has hit them.

So, I think what we've done has been well-coordinated with our allies and I think very effective in countering some of Putin's tactics – some of the tactics he used in Crimea, some of the tactics he's used previously.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So how do you respond to the critics that you have – and you have some critics sometimes, I'm sure you know – who say you should have sent armaments to the Ukrainians before the invasion so they were better armed than they are now that we're now sending them after the invasion and that you should have imposed the sanctions before the invasion occurred? What do you respond – how do you respond to those kind of criticisms?

MR. KLAIN: Well, first of all, we did send arguments to the Ukrainians before the invasion. We sent more arms – more military assistance to Ukraine in the past 12 months than any year since 2014. So, we did send a variety of kinds of military assistance to the Ukrainians. That assistance continues to be – to come into the country. But we did send plenty before this happened.

In terms of the sanctions, we thought that the best way to make sure we'd have the most unified and powerful set of sanctions was to make it clear that those sanctions would take effect when and if President Putin invaded Russia, and I think the results that we've seen illustrate that, David.

You've seen – there's never been a(n) effort to impose sanctions this stringent on a country as large and as complex and as interconnected to the world economy as Russia – it's really a kind of an astonishing effort that you're seeing underway here – and the impact of those sanctions has been devastating.

We've seen the Russian ruble fall to a hundred and ten rubles to the one U.S. dollar. We've seen many serious Russian banks in danger of collapse. We've seen the Russian stock market plummet in value and now being closed for the longest time since the Russian – threatened Russian default more than two decades ago.

So, the impact of these sanctions has been devastating. They're devastating because there's such a powerful group of countries unified in their application, and I think doing it the way we did is what's made all that possible.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. For sanctions, I don't know the answer to this question. This isn't a question I know the answer so I'm actually trying to find out what you actually think about this and how this works. When you impose sanctions, let's suppose the offending party – let's say Russia – says, OK, we made a mistake. We're sorry. We're pulling back. Do the sanctions go away or are there penalties that are subsequent to the withdrawal? In other words, are there ongoing penalties or are there, if effect, reparations for having done these bad things or the sanctions just go away? Or is that not decided yet?

MR. KLAIN: Hasn't been decided yet what would happen if the Russians withdrew. Again, that would be part of whatever kind of diplomacy would unwind the crisis in Ukraine.

Sadly, this, as you say, is a hypothetical question. We see no signs, unfortunately, that the Russians have any intention of withdrawing right now and, indeed, their military operations in Ukraine continue to escalate. They continue to, you know, attack more civilians, more civilian sites. The fighting continues to get more and more fierce.

So, we offered President Putin a number of diplomatic off ramps in the run up to this invasion. We offered him a number of different arrangements, a number of different possible ways in which he could meet with members of the coalition and the Ukrainians, a number of different kinds of structures to do that.

At every juncture, President Putin rejected the path of diplomacy, continued on the path of invasion, and that's what we're seeing unfold right now.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, at the moment, you would say that this could go on for weeks at this kind of pace. In other words, Crimea is already controlled by the Russians but Kyiv is not or other large cities are not controlled by the Russians.

But do you think this could go on this way, this kind of slow process, for another couple weeks before there's a resolution? Or you don't know when the resolution might occur?

MR. KLAIN: Well, what we know is that President Putin has enormous military force and intends to bring that force to bear, wrongly, on Ukraine. We also know that the Ukrainians are fighting with fierce determination, with powerful resistance, with courage, with bravery, with determination, and we've seen on TV the pictures of Ukrainian civilians standing in front of Russian tanks and stopping them, blocking their access to Russian cities.

So, we stand with the people of Ukraine. We are providing them assistance of all sorts. We're going to continue to provide them assistance of all sorts as they mount this heroic resistance to this unjustified, unprovoked invasion.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Now, the president last night wasn't quite clear whether he was saying we have a lot more sanctions to possibly impose beyond what we've already done. Are there possibly more sanctions coming or it's just we've kind of done everything we can do sanction wise?

MR. KLAIN: Well, obviously, we're always looking for additional ways we can apply pressure and punish the Russian regime for what they're doing. But I would say our major focus right now is on enforcing those sanctions. The president announced last night in the State of the Union and the attorney general formally announced today the creation of a new task force at the Justice Department to freeze and seize assets of Russian oligarchs who have benefited from Putin's actions to try to punish them for their ill-gotten gains from the Putin regime.

So, we're going to continue to work on steps we can take to make these sanctions effective. If there are other things we can do we'll, certainly, look at them. But as we said at the start, we were going to start high and stay high. We have launched this devastating set of sanctions and making those sanctions effective, really, is our principal focus.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: A final question about Ukraine for the moment is President Putin said that his – he was putting his nuclear forces on alert. It wasn't quite clear what that meant. What about our nuclear forces? Are we putting them on alert to kind of watch out for what the Russian forces are doing? It wasn't clear that he was talking about tactical nuclear weapons or intercontinental ones. But are our nuclear forces ready to go, if necessary? Are they any more alert than they were a week or two ago?

MR. KLAIN: No, David, we have seen nothing in the Russian nuclear posture that would require us to change the alert status of our forces.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. That sounds like no change for the time being.

MR. KLAIN: No change.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So, let's talk about an area you know fairly well also, which is Supreme Court nominations. You've been on the Judiciary Committee when they had some Supreme Court nominations. Who was confirmed to the Supreme Court when you were working in the Judiciary?

MR. KLAIN: Well, my first tour on the Judiciary Committee the committee confirmed Justice Scalia, Chief Justice Rehnquist. Then I was back when the committee did Justice Souter, Justice Thomas, and I worked here at the White House in judicial selection when we nominated Justice Ginsburg, Justice Breyer. And then I was back here with President Obama when we did Justice Sotomayor and Justice Kagan.

So, I've seen a number of these things, that's for sure.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Now, some of the president's critics have said that he shouldn't have said, I'm going to have a Black woman as my Supreme Court nominee, because he was excluding 94 percent of the population is what some critics would say. How do you respond to that and would it have been better for him to say, I'll get the best qualified person and then pick the same person that he did pick?

MR. KLAIN: Well, you know, I think the idea that 94 percent of population has been excluded from the Supreme Court, of course, is belied by history. We've had a Supreme Court for 230 years, over a100 Supreme Court justices. In all that time, there's never ever been a single Black woman on the Supreme Court. In fact, there have only been three women – four women total on the – four women total on the Supreme Court and only two African Americans total on the Supreme Court in the 200-plus-year history of the court. So, I don't think there's a question of underrepresentation of other people.

The president made a decision when he was running for president to make this pledge, that he would be a history maker and put the first Black woman on the Supreme Court. It's not that different than the pledge Ronald Reagan made during the 1980 campaign where he said he would put the first woman on the Supreme Court and that's what he did with Sandra Day O'Connor, and, of course, not that different than what President Trump said when Justice Ginsburg died and said he'd replace her with a woman justice.

So, these kinds of pledges are something that's happened in history before and, I think, long overdue in this case that after more than two centuries, after a 120 some odd justices on the Supreme Court, it was time to finally have one Black woman.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Presidents like to interview justices before they appoint them or nominate them, and there's always a game of how to get these people into the White House so nobody knows who's in the White House being interviewed by the president. So how did you get three people into the White House and have nobody know that they were in the White House?

MR. KLAIN: Well, see, if I tell that then if we have to do that again later I'm going to give up a trade secret.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. Are you – that won't work.

MR. KLAIN: I think that's a – I think that's a piece of tradecraft that I'm going to keep to ourselves here.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: All right. Can you tell us whether he interviewed more than three people in person?

MR. KLAIN: He interviewed three people. He interviewed three people in person, and so I'm happy to say that. On February 14th he interviewed three final candidates in person.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And when a president of the United States – any president, the ones you worked for before – when they decide to pick somebody other than a person that they interviewed – in other words, they pick somebody, the ones that they don't pick who actually calls that person up and says, well, sorry, you didn't get it? Does the chief of staff do that or the president?

MR. KLAIN: In this case, I think – in this case, the White House counsel called the other people who were interviewed and some of the other people who were considered who didn't get presidential interviews but were considered and interviewed by members of the counsel's office.

All these people are incredibly talented people. Some of them are – have been nominated to other judgeships. Some of them, I'm sure, will be nominated to other judgeships in the future. The president was fortunate to look at a list that included just an outstanding group of people and, ultimately, was proud to pick and nominate Judge Jackson.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, the people that get nominated for the Supreme Court or considered for it are, obviously, very articulate people. They have great resumes. They are really, really smart. But do you find, in your experience, that they get tongue tied when they get into the Oval Office and they're meeting with the president? Or do they – they're as articulate as they always are, or they are not tongue tied?

MR. KLAIN: Look, I think everyone's nervous when you're interviewing for a big job and this is one of the biggest of all jobs and, you know, it's a high-pressured interview. But I think everyone, certainly, that President Biden talked to did an amazing, remarkable job, were incredibly impressive, and I'm sure they all felt some anxiety, some nervousness, about it. How could you not? But they all did a really, really – really, really remarkable job.

You know, back in 1993 when we were working on President Clinton's first nomination, he came down to a number of candidates. One of them was Justice Breyer, who he didn't nominate at that time – nominated a year later. But he was supposed to come down to the White House for his interview with President Clinton, and the day before he was supposed to come down he was riding his bicycle in Harvard Square, got hit by a car, punctured a lung, and couldn't come down to the White House.

So, we flew up to Boston and a bunch of us interviewed him in his hospital bed and, you know, finished all the vetting reviews we had to do. And then he had to come to Washington to see President Clinton the next day. But because of his punctured lung he couldn't fly so he had to take the train with a broken rib, with a punctured lung, all the way from Boston down to Washington. By the time he got there, of course, everyone knew he was on the train – it was hard to keep that a secret – and it was mobbed at Union Station.

So, you know, I think all these interviews are different. They all have great stories. This time, in the end, it was Justice – Judge Jackson who really impressed the president as the right person for this vacancy.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. Well, it takes 51 votes to be confirmed. You've got 50 Democratic senators and you have the vice president of the United States. Do you think you can get any Republican votes for your nominee?

MR. KLAIN: Well, I hope we will. When Judge Jackson was up for the Court of Appeals last year, she got three Republicans to vote for her confirmation. When she was nominated to the District Court under President Obama she got a broad bipartisan vote. She got nominated to the U.S. Sentencing Commission – got a broad bipartisan vote.

So, I hope she will have bipartisan support. She deserves bipartisan support. Like Justice Breyer, Judge Jackson is a consensus builder. She's someone who's got respect from both Democrats and Republicans.

Since she's been nominated, among the people who have endorsed her confirmation a former retired judge, Thomas Griffith, who was the general counsel at Brigham Young University and named by President Bush to the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals; former Judge Luttig, who was a senior official in the Bush Justice Department, one of the nation's leading conservative legal figures, a judge on the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals who's endorsed her confirmation; the Fraternal Order of Police has backed her confirmation.

So, I think she has broad bipartisan support out in the country. I hope that will translate to bipartisan support in the Senate.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: One of the Democratic senators has had a health problem and, I think, is not in Washington right now. Do you have any reason to believe that he will not be back to vote for this nominee?

MR. KLAIN: No. Senator Luján actually is in Washington. I think he's being treated at Walter Reed, and I fully expect he'll be back in time to vote on Judge Jackson's confirmation.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And let me ask you a clarification on how the process works. You would know from your days as a Senate Judiciary Committee staff director. If you have 10 Democratic senators on the Judiciary Committee and 10 Republican senators, and you don't get any Republican senators to support the nominee, you don't get out of the committee, technically. So,

you have a discharge position – petition. But on a discharge petition is that subject to a filibuster that would require you to get 60 votes?

MR. KLAIN: So, the specific answer to your question is no, but let me walk that back a bit. The Judiciary Committee has a tradition of reporting out Supreme Court nominees even if a majority of the committee does not support the nominee's confirmation. When now President Biden was chairman of the Judiciary Committee, the committee reported Judge Bork's nomination to the Senate floor on a six to nine negative vote but made the decision that the nomination should proceed to the Senate floor. Clarence Thomas, again, had a tie vote in committee and nonetheless was recommended out by the Judiciary Committee to the Senate floor.

So first of all, I'd hope we wouldn't get to a place where you had that kind of deadlock in the committee. I hope the committee would honor that tradition and send Judge Jackson's name on to the Senate floor. Of course, I hope, mostly, some Republicans on the committee would vote for her so she'd have a clean majority. Even if not, I hope the committee would report her out.

Finally, if the committee did deadlock, as you say, there is a discharge motion that just requires 50 votes in the Senate to proceed. Again, I don't think there's any reason why we should get to any of that. Judge Jackson deserves a strong bipartisan vote in the committee, on the floor, and, ultimately, on her way to confirmation.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And you hope to get this confirmation done by what period of time?

MR. KLAIN: Well, Senator Durbin, the chairman of the committee, announced today that the hearings on Judge Jackson would begin on March 21st and go through most of that week. Hopefully, at the end of that week, the committee will set a timeline for a committee vote and then on to the Senate floor.

I think the nomination is moving along on an appropriate timeline, a timeline kind of similar to what happened with Ruth Bader Ginsburg – six to seven weeks from nomination to confirmation. But I'll leave that in the hands of Senator Durbin, Senator Grassley, Senate leadership, to hit the right schedule.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: All right. Let's talk about Build Back Better. I wondered, who came up with that tongue twister? It's hard to say that quickly. Was that something that you came up with or who came up with that?

MR. KLAIN: I don't know who came up with it. Certainly, it was the principal slogan for the president's campaign in 2020. It was the slogan for most of his policies. It was the umbrella under which most of the policies that he ran on – Build Back Better. It's, actually, gained some traction around the world. A number of European countries have now adopted Build Back Better initiatives. So, I think it's a slogan that's resonated with people. It is a bit of a tongue twister but I think it does have some resonance, and it comes from the campaign.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So, is the Build Back Better bill that passed the House likely to ever see the light of day in the Senate or are you now committed to breaking it up and passing individual pieces of it?

MR. KLAIN: Well, I think what we're going to try to do is get as many of the president's initiatives enacted as possible in the best way possible. The Senate has the option to do reconciliation as a procedural device. That takes only 50 votes to pass a bill that has tax changes and other kinds of economic changes in it, and that would probably be the vehicle we'd use to move some legislation like this through the Senate.

We're, obviously, in conversations with a number of senators about what elements have the most support, what elements are the most effective to get passed through the Senate. You heard the president talk about a number of those last night, David. I think people are very concerned about inflation and very concerned about what inflation means to everyday families, and that means they pay too much for things.

And so key parts of the Build Back Better plan address that directly. Bring down the cost of childcare. Bring down the cost of prescription drugs. Bring down the cost of elder care. Bring down the cost of health care.

So, we're looking for – and, most importantly, in some ways, or equally importantly, I should say, bring down the cost of energy by moving us to more of a clean energy economy. So, you look at those proposals. They are proposals that meet the moment of higher costs, and we're going to continue to work with the Senate to find a formula that moves that agenda forward.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. Speaking of inflation, the Federal Reserve is supposed to be in charge of dealing with interest rates and things like that as they are, and they have telegraphed that they're probably going to do something soon but they don't actually say in advance exactly what they're going to do.

But you've proposed a number of nominees to put on the Federal Reserve, and one of them has attracted some controversy, former Secretary – Deputy Secretary of Defense Raskin, and – Sarah Raskin. And is she going to be tied to the nominations of the others, or are you going to separate her out so that Jay Powell could be confirmed? Presumably, he would be.

MR. KLAIN: Well, we'd like to see all five of these nominations move together. We think it's a balanced slate. It's a bipartisan slate. It includes Republicans and Democrats. It includes people from a number of backgrounds. All of the five nominees by the president have been endorsed by the Community Bankers Association. They have widespread support from labor and business, from a variety of people across the board.

And so, we think the best thing to do would be to fully staff the Fed. Sarah Raskin, as you say, not only was the deputy secretary of the Treasury, she was the chief banking regulator in Maryland. She was formerly a Fed governor herself. It's hard to think of anyone more qualified for service on the Fed to be the vice chair for supervision than Sarah Raskin.

So, we want her to get a vote. We want all five of these incredibly distinguished and accomplished individuals to get a vote, and I know that's what Chairman Brown, the chairman of the Banking Committee, is moving towards and, hopefully, we'll get it together.

Look, it's great for people to give speeches to say they care about inflation. Inflation is a problem. If you do, step one is to have a fully staffed, fully functioning Board of Governors at the Federal Reserve, and I don't expect every senator to vote for our nominees but they should at least cooperate and allow the nominees to get a vote – to get a committee vote, and then to move out of committee onto the floor.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, Ron, you have been criticized by some for saying that you are so powerful that you really are, effectively, running the whole government. How do you respond to that? You're, like – you're the prime minister.

MR. KLAIN: It's ridiculous. I'm a staff person. I've been a staff person my whole life. I've never run for anything. I've never been elected to anything. I've been proud to work for some distinguished public servants, President Biden being one of them at several points in time in my career. President Obama, of course. President Clinton. That's who I am. And at the White House, not only am I a staff person, I'm a staff person who works with a number of other enormously talented staff people.

We have – with all due respect to the great job you did at the Domestic Policy Council, we have a great Domestic Policy Council team here in the Obama [sic] White House, led by Ambassador Susan Rice. We have an incredible national security team led by Jake Sullivan. We have an incredible economic team led by Brian Deese. We have senior advisors around the president like Cedric Richmond and Mike Donilon, Steve Ricchetti, Jen Psaki, Kate Bedingfield.

So, this is a real team effort here, team on the policy side, team on the strategy side. My job is just to help coordinate those people, get that advice to the president. So that's how I see my role.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: How do you respond to the other criticism that some people have had, not necessarily of you but of the president, that he governed as – he campaigned as a moderate but he's governing more to the left than people expected. What is your response to that criticism that some have made?

MR. KLAIN: Yeah. Look, I think that that criticism wipes out the history of the 2020 campaign. There's nothing that the president sent to Capitol Hill that he did not put before the voters in the 2020 campaign. Our economic agenda is the economic agenda he ran on and 81 million Americans voted for when they elected him.

In fact, if anything, we've trimmed that agenda back. The Build Back Better plan that we sent to Capitol Hill was significantly smaller than even the one we campaigned on. The infrastructure bill is something he campaigned on, the voting rights bill is something he campaigned on, and the COVID relief package that we started the administration with, again, is something he endorsed in the campaign.

So, he was very straightforward with voters about what he would do if he were president and that's what he's done. And, look, the proposals we put forward are substantial. Why? Because the problems we inherited were substantial. It's not any vision and not any grandiose vision. We inherited an economy that was dead in the water. Fifty-thousand jobs a month – just 50,000 jobs a month the three months before we got here. Virtually dead economy. The government hadn't even bought enough vaccinations to give one vaccine to every American, let alone two vaccines to every American, let alone booster shots. We had no system to, really, massively distribute and administer those vaccines. We face a climate crisis. We face all kinds of other challenges, now, obviously, this challenge over in Europe.

So, we've put together proposals to meet the moment, not out of some effort to kind of do something bigger than we should but because we inherited very big problems, and you've seen a lot of progress. We, obviously, then went and created more jobs in one year than any administration in history or any administration since 1939, according to a New York Times fact check. So, any administration since 1939. We see the fastest economic growth in 40 years. It was the first time in 20 years our economy grew faster in a year than China's economy.

So, we put in place the kind of recovery measures that were needed. We vaccinated over 220 – fully vaccinated over 220 million Americans. You know, these are big tasks we took on this year and I'm proud of what we've done to achieve them.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Why do you think so many Americans don't want to be vaccinated? Is this something you have, largely, accepted as a fact that you're not going to be able to vaccinate everybody?

MR. KLAIN: Well, I think – 75 percent of adults are fully vaccinated and half of those who are eligible have also been boosted. Vaccine resistance is part of American history. It goes all the way back to George Washington having to require his troops to get the smallpox vaccine when they didn't want to get it on the verge – in the Revolutionary War.

Those of – those people who lived through the polio vaccinations in the 1950s know that it took eight years to get the country as vaccinated for polio as we've gotten it vaccinated for COVID in a single year. So, hesitancy about new vaccines is kind of an American tradition. It's a global thing. We're seeing it in Europe as well. They've had a little more penetration but they still have substantial vaccine hesitancy in some countries in Europe and other countries around the world.

We're going to continue to make the vaccine accessible, available, and free. We get people vaccinated every day. You know, that's the thing. We've been more than a year into giving out the vaccine and still, every day, hundreds – literally, hundreds of thousands of people still show up for that first shot. And so, we're going to keep at it and keep at it and continue to make progress.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Now, the White House has gone mask free, as I understand it, now. Does that mean that you'll be having more people come into the White House? It's easier to deal with visitors now?

MR. KLAIN: Yeah, we're going to start to, over the next few weeks, have more people coming into the White House, mostly for business and then, ultimately, for more social events, too. We're looking to resume sometime next month public tours of the White House.

So, we are going to start to see things get back to normal here. It's going to take a while to spin all these systems back up. But we're looking forward to having more of the public back in the people's house.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So usually in the – after the first year of an administration you see some turnover in a cabinet or something but you haven't had any turnover and haven't had any scandals, either. So how come you haven't any scandals and how come you haven't had any turnover?

MR. KLAIN: Well, I think the president did a very good job of picking a cabinet and picking senior officials, and I think the lack of scandals reflects that. I think the lack of turnover reflects the fact that these are men and women who are very eager to serve, who are doing a great job, who are making a difference. It's the most diverse cabinet in history. It's the first time in history the cabinet has been evenly divided between men and women, the first time in history that a majority of the cabinet isn't white. And it's a diverse cabinet, it's an incredibly talented cabinet, and we're very lucky to have their service.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, as you know from history, the first midterm election after a president is elected is, generally, not a time where a president picks up House seats. In fact, I think the tradition is you lose about 30 House seats, something like that.

So, if that were to happen and you lost control of the House, would it not be difficult to get your legislation through or do you think you can overcome the history pattern that I just mentioned?

MR. KLAIN: Well, I'm here in a federal building so I'm going to try not to – I'm not only going to try, I'm not going to violate the Hatch Act. I'm not going to engage in electioneering here on federal grounds.

What I will say is I do believe we are going to hang on to the House and the Senate. But, probably, there should be another time and place where I go into our plan to do that.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. Well, just speaking – one final election question. The president has said he plans to run for reelection. Any change in that? You expect he will run for reelection?

MR. KLAIN: I do expect he'll run for reelection. Yes.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So, let's talk about the job of being chief of staff and how the White House works. So, the president, does he get up early in the morning and call you at home and say, what's going on? Or do you get in – what time does he get in and what time do you meet with the staff people and what time do you see him in the beginning and the end of the day? How does that work?

MR. KLAIN: So, I'm usually in the White House every day by 6:45 and I talk to the president early in the morning by phone in the residence. We have our morning staff meetings before the president comes downstairs. We have a number of different kinds of alignments of meetings, depending on the day of the week and whatnot where we kind of go over what's going to happen that day, what's going to – what the key questions are that need to be put to the president, what are the key things we need to resolve that day as a team.

As I said, this is a – I've worked in the White House many times before but I think this is the most team-oriented staff I've seen. It's a group of people, some newer, some older, in terms of their service for the president, but people who know each other, have a good camaraderie, close working relationships, a lot of veterans of prior Democratic administrations and a lot of people who, you know, kind of know each other well and can work together very well.

We have our meetings in the morning. Usually, the president comes downstairs around 9:00. I'm his first meeting of the day every day. I kind of go through where things are and some key priorities, get his reaction to the materials he's been reading overnight. The president takes with him upstairs every evening a thick binder of materials to read – decision memos and briefing memos. He usually comes in with questions, I try to come in with answers, and we have a conversation. Then he proceeds to a number of different staff meetings. I see him a number of times during the day for different kinds of meetings that are going on, whether they're national security meetings or domestic policy meetings. And then, usually, at the end of the day, I come in and kind of rap with him on, you know, what are the key, outstanding things? What are the things that he's going to see in his book that night that he really needs to focus on, and what are the big decisions he's going to have to make and some of the meetings he's going to have the next day?

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, some presidents like to work in the Oval Office, some of them like to work in the residence, and some of them like to work in that little private study off of the Oval Office, so what does President Biden like to do?

MR. KLAIN: Most of his work is in the Oval Office. He does use the private study off the Oval Office for lunchtime meetings because he's got a little table there; he can have lunch. But most of the day he's in the Oval.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And today, does anybody have the right – or the senior staff – who has walk-in privileges? Are you the only one that can walk into the Oval Office without an announcement, or are there a couple people that can do that?

MR. KLAIN: No, any of the president's senior advisers, senior policy advisers can come in and see him. Obviously, you know, he's got to not be in another meeting or whatever, but I – we run

a White House here where a lot of people have access to the president and a lot of people are able to talk to him straight and directly about what they think without having to go through me.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, the president seems like an even-tempered person but, you know, everybody gets upset from time to time. Does he yell and scream, or he's not a yeller and screamer? How does he show his displeasure at something? You write a note to him or to you, or how does he say he's not happy?

MR. KLAIN: I think one of Joe Biden's great strengths as president is that he has lived a life filled with incredible triumphs and incredible tragedies and people know his biography, they know his background, they know the successes he's had, they know the grave personal setbacks he's suffered, and one thing that is true is there is never a morning I go in there with news that's as bad or worse than the news someone else has had to deliver to him at other points in time in his life. And I think that gives him a very even keel. I think when things are going well he doesn't get too hyped up, and when we're having tougher days he maintains that composure, that demeanor. And I think that's one of the hallmarks of his temperament, one of the things he brings to the office, that steadiness, that experience, and a life that has been, as I say, filled with triumph and tragedy and that's seasoned him and prepared him for this moment.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Some people say he's – you know, 79 years old; that's old to be president of the United States. Do you see signs of his age? Is he in better shape than you are in terms of exercising, or how do you deal with the fact that he's, you know, older than anybody's ever been to be president of the United States?

MR. KLAIN: Well, A, he's definitely in better shape than I am. That's for sure. He's very fit. He works out almost every day in the morning before he comes down to the Oval Office. And I think the American people saw for themselves last night the president stand, to give an hour-long address that was filled with passion and power and wisdom and energy. They saw him hold the longest press conference in the history of presidents a couple weeks ago at the start of the year, a two-hour press conference where he took questions from all kinds of reporters. So, I think his fitness, his vigor is beyond question. People see him on the job every day and then what they see is a person who's fully capable of doing the job, fully vigorous, in great mental and physical health, and taking on the burdens of the office and executing them well.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So today you would say the president – enjoying the job or does he say, jeez, I wish I really hadn't done this?

MR. KLAIN: Well, I don't know that enjoying is the way you describe tackling the responsibilities of being the president of the United States, and particularly now where I think he has emerged as the leader of the free world, as the person who's leading this coalition that's confronting Vladimir Putin. But I think he's very glad he ran for president. I think he is – you know, been well prepared for the challenges he's tackling. I think more importantly I hear from people all around the country, Democrats and Republicans, that they're very glad he's the person in the Oval Office right now, that he's the person with the background, the experience, the judgment to tackle these hard problems. And so, I think there's a lot of confidence in him as the person who should be where he is.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK, now you were the chief of staff for two people who served as vice president of the United States, and as I know from working in the White House, the vice president of the United States is always trying to make sure the president remembers that they're around and they're given important assignments. So how do you take what you learned as chief of staff for Al Gore and Joe Biden and make certain that your vice president is deeply involved in what's going on? And how do you respond to the criticisms that some have made of her that she hasn't been as effective as some people thought she should be?

MR. KLAIN: Well, I think Vice President Harris is doing an amazing job. I think she got off to one of the fastest starts in this job. She's taking on important responsibilities on the economic agenda, on the national security agenda. Most recently she was in Munich with a lot of our key allies, the weekend that the invasion of Ukraine got underway. She is on the phone almost every day with some of our European allies managing this crisis that we're facing. And that's just on the international side. On the domestic side, she's played a key role in assembling and putting together and advocating our legislation.

As you say, I worked for two vice presidents and what I learned from that is how valuable the vice president can be in assisting a president in achieving his agenda. She – in this case she – is the only other person who's been elected by all the voters. She's the only other person who is an elected official in the White House, the only other person who has, unlike the Cabinet members, no specific responsibility with the ability to coordinate between different Cabinet departments. I saw that with Al Gore, I saw that with Joe Biden, we see that with Kamala Harris, and she's doing a great job in the job.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, the president's favorability ratings are not as high as I assume you would like and I wondered, how do you in the White House deal with that? I mean, it's hard to deal with it overnight and just say, you know, people should like me more and so forth. But how do you try to deal with the fact that his unfavorability ratings are higher than, let's say, he would prefer, I assume? So, is that something you think will turn around or you just accept the fact that people don't like presidents of the United States that much anymore and they're always going to be unfavorable, in terms of their ratings?

MR. KLAIN: Well, I think the most important thing is for the president to do the right thing and I think that what you're seeing right now is a mood in the country that's impacted by the fact that this pandemic has lasted longer than anyone thought it would, that while we've had tremendous growth on the economy and jobs, we're having a problem with inflation, and I think those things contribute to a generally – a mood in the country that's not as upbeat or confident as we would like. We're not the only democracy facing this. You've got elected leaders all around the western world with low approval numbers and I think they're facing a lot of the same challenges we're facing here in the U.S.

What I think in the case of President Biden is he made a lot of hard decisions in 2021 to put in place a new economic strategy that you heard the president talk about last night in the State of the Union, a new COVID strategy that we're again updating again today with new steps on COVID, and those hard decisions I think are starting to show results. I fully accept the fact

that the American people are more “show me, not tell me,” and what they want to see is they want to see that we really have reached a new way of managing COVID, they want to see we really have not just created jobs but the jobs are going to stay, the wages are going to go up; they want to see that these – the economic recovery is real and sustained. I think the political credit will follow from that. When I was here both with President Clinton and President Obama, we saw the recovery ahead of the politics and I think you’re seeing that now too. And so, I do think our approval rating will go up in the months ahead, as the economic recovery and the progress on COVID become more permanent, more lasting, and internalized more by the voters.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, with masks being taken off a bit and more socializing, do you expect to go to more cocktail parties in Washington where people will say, well, Ron, I have a good idea for you, or I don’t really want to tell you how to do your job but let me tell you what you should do? You get a lot of that now by emails or you get people from high school calling you up with ideas? How does that work?

MR. KLAIN: I do get a lot of emails from old friends from home in Indiana and from old friends in Washington. I think one of the consequences of having been around as long as I have is I have a lot of people I work with and they all have my email and they all send emails. And it’s great. I get a lot of great advice that way, a lot of great input that way. I’m grateful for most of it. I’m not much of a cocktail party person, I never have been, and the hours are pretty long here, and so I think it will probably still be a lot of emails and phone calls, as it has been.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So how do you stay in shape when you have to work these long hours? I mean, you can’t go spend two hours at the gym during the day, I assume, so how do you stay in shape and, you know, stay healthy?

MR. KLAIN: [Laughs.] I wish I was in better shape. I’m not very good at that. I wasn’t very good at that, frankly, even before I was this busy. I try to watch how many French fries I order from White House mess; I guess that’s the best thing I can do. But I wish I was in better shape. I guess that’s the most –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: You don’t seem to have a lot of gray hair compared to, you know, what I would have expected. How do you deal with that? Do you have good genes or something?

MR. KLAIN: I think just good genes on a full head of hair and dark hair, so I guess I’m grateful for that.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Now, one of my former partners at Carlyle was Jim Baker and he was considered, maybe up until you, the gold standard of how to be chief of staff, but he didn’t actually like the job that much and he wound up as Secretary of Treasury eventually and as Secretary of State. So, do you have any aspirations to any of those jobs or something like that?

MR. KLAIN: I don’t think so. I think when I finish my tenure here I’ll go back – when I finish my tenure here I’m going to, like, take a month and sleep and then I’ll figure out what I’ll do next. You know, Secretary Baker, I got to know him a little bit during the Florida recount when we were on opposite sides of that. He was leading the effort, of course, for then-Governor Bush;

I was our general counsel for Vice President Gore and got to know him a little bit during that 33 days down in Florida. He has been unbelievably gracious. He sent me the kindest note when I got this job. He's sent me a couple other notes since then. He's just such a – you know, he's just been – he's just such a wonderful person. And he is the gold standard of doing this job. I couldn't even aspire to that. I just try to do the best I can every day.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, as you look back on your tenure as chief of staff, is there something that you think you could have done better or the president could have done better? And people might often cite Afghanistan. Any second thoughts about Afghanistan or anything else you wish you had done better or differently?

MR. KLAIN: Look, I think there's something every day I think about that I should have done differently. I'm not going to speak for the president. I think the president's done an unbelievable job here. I try to do my job as well as I can, try to do it better every day, try to learn from what we've done. I'm proud of what we've done, proud of how we've done it. I'm sure we can always do better on things, but, you know, I think the thing I really focus on is just trying to get as much advice as we can, trying to listen to as many people as possible. You mentioned our Cabinet before. We have an unbelievably talented Cabinet. I think it's got more state and local officials – former state and local officials, mayors, governors, than any recent Cabinet. They bring an incredible perspective to the thing. We have subject-matter experts in the Cabinet. I try very hard to get advice from them. They bring their own perspectives to it. So, to me it's about listening and learning and trying to just get better at it every day.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, whenever you do finish this position as chief of staff and a friend calls you subsequently and says, I've been offered the job of chief of staff for the president of the United States, would you tell him to take – or her to take that job or not?

MR. KLAIN: I would definitely tell anyone to take this job. It is a hard job but it's a unique opportunity to work with, first of all, an incredible president and vice president, of course, at a time that's very important to our country and to work with an amazingly talented group of people here in the White House, throughout the agencies. They just blow me away every day, and I learn something new every day. It's been the culminating experience of my career and I just couldn't be more grateful for the experience, and whoever replaces me in this job, whenever my time in the job ends, I hope has the same kind of experience.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: A final question, Ron: When you do have some downtime at all – maybe you're not exercising – do you have any hobbies or anything you do just to get away from it all? Or you cannot get away from it all when you have this job?

MR. KLAIN: I think it's very hard to get away from it all when you have this job. It is kind of a seven-day-a-week job. There are things going on all the time, whether – you know, Rahm Emanuel famously walked in one day when he was chief of staff and said Friday, only two more workdays till Monday, and, you know, that's kind of how it works here at the White, and not just for me, frankly, but for virtually everyone who works here. That's the burden of working here. It's a great honor. It's a great privilege to work here. But the work never stops. You know, I do try to find time every day to call my kids. I have three wonderful adult children living in

different parts of the country and it's always a pleasure to take a few minutes and catch up with one of them and hear what they're doing. But it is a seven-day-a-week job; there's no question about it.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Your children tell people what you're doing or they don't want to tell people what their father's doing?

MR. KLAIN: [Laughs.] You know, I hope my children are living their own lives, doing their own things, and I'm proud of them, proud as I can be, and look forward to spending more time with them when all this is over.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Ron, thank you very much for giving us this much time and thank you for your service to our country.

MR. KLAIN: Well, thanks for having me, David. I appreciate this very much.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Thank you. Bye.



The Honorable Ronald A. Klain
Assistant to the President
White House Chief of Staff

Ronald A. Klain serves as an Assistant to the President and the White House Chief of Staff under President Joe Biden.

His public service career spans over thirty years. This includes his service as Chief Counsel to the Senate Judiciary Committee under then-Chairman Joe Biden; Associate Counsel for Judicial Selection under President Bill Clinton; Chief of Staff and Counselor to Attorney General Janet Reno; Staff Director of the Senate Democratic Leadership

Committee under Leader Tom Daschle; and Chief of Staff to Vice President Al Gore.

In the Obama-Biden administration, Klain served as an Assistant to the President and the Chief of Staff to then-Vice President Biden from 2009-11. Klain returned to the Obama-Biden administration as the White House Ebola Response Coordinator from 2014-15.

Klain's private sector experience includes serving as Executive Vice President and General Counsel of Revolution LLC, a Washington-based investment firm led by Steve Case. Before joining Revolution, Klain was a partner and National Practice Group Chair at O'Melveny & Myers LLP, where his practice focused on constitutional and commercial litigation.

Klain graduated *magna cum laude* from Harvard Law School, where he was an Editor of the Harvard Law Review and won the Sears Prize. Klain later served as an adjunct professor at Harvard Law School for four years. He began his legal career as a law clerk to Supreme Court Justice Byron R. White. He earned his bachelor's degree, *summa cum laude*, from Georgetown University.

Klain is originally from Indianapolis, Indiana and currently resides in the Washington, DC area with his wife, Monica Medina. They have three adult children.