

“Who Are You Looking For?”

Interviewee: Kris Engskov

Interviewer: Russell L. Riley

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As President Bill Clinton’s trip coordinator and personal assistant, Kris Engskov would travel with the president. Engskov talks about Clinton’s disinterest in “the trappings of the Presidency” and recalls an unexpected phone call to the Presidential Suite at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel.

Kris Engskov: I’ll tell you one other quick story that also illustrates that about [William J.] Clinton. Six o’clock in the morning, Waldorf Astoria Hotel, Presidential Suite. I’m standing in the kitchen of this thing. I don’t know if you’ve been in there, but it’s a huge suite. It has six or eight rooms. It’s where he always stayed. I’m standing in the little kitchen there and I hear the phone ring. I was just making sure he was awake. We were getting ready to leave in an hour or so. Now, when a phone rings, it can only be a couple of people, because they can’t ring through. The way it works is the only people who can ring directly through to the President are the Chief of staff, the National Security Advisor, or his family.

Riley: Right.

Engskov: So I was thinking to myself, *Who is that?* Because they install these special phones and it’s got a seal on it. It’s this crazy infrastructure they install for the President. I think to myself, *Where’s Mrs. Clinton? She must be in China; she’d call at an odd hour to reach him.* I hear, Hello? I hear him in the back room. He goes, No, you must have the wrong number. I mean, these were just normal exchange lines. No one knows the number but they’re normal phone lines.

Riley: Hotel phone lines?

Engskov: No. These are real, hardline phones. They have to use existing phones, but they’re just unused. So someone in New York City has accidentally, of all the numbers being dialed, rung the wrong phone and he’s picked it up.

Riley: At six o’clock in the morning.

Engskov: At six A.M. I'm listening to this conversation and I'm thinking, *Holy cow!* I hear him say, Who are you looking for? I don't see him, but I hear him kind of fumble around like he's going to try to find the phone book. Ultimately he says, "Well, I'm sorry, I don't think I can help you." He hangs up. What's amazing is that somebody out there in New York City had the President of the United States on the phone and didn't know it. He was perfectly happy to try and help them at six A.M., which I thought was just hilarious. It says a lot about him.

End of excerpt.

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