

Narrator: Gen John W. Vessey, Jr

Interviewer: Thomas Saylor, Ph.D.

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Avis Vessey comments at times during recordings. Identified: AVIS

TS: Today is Thursday, 13 September 2012. This is another of our interviews with General John W. Vessey, Jr. My name is Thomas Saylor. Once again we're at the Vessey residence on the outskirts of Garrison, Minnesota.

General Vessey, we wanted to start today by going back to Korea and actually the beginning of your time there in Korea, and you wanted to add some information and talk about a few more themes there.

JV: Let's go back, particularly we talked about President Carter's announcement that he had planned to withdraw particularly the ground forces from Korea, and about that changing the atmosphere in Korea. It was clearly a blow to the morale of the Korean administration and certainly the Korean military; they simply were not ready to face the prospect of the Republic of Korea standing alone against North Korea without on the ground evidence of the United States presence at that time.

TS: Would a skeptic be fair in suggesting that twenty-X years after the conclusion of the Korean conflict and more than two decades of U.S. presence there assisting and standing by our Korean allies, shouldn't they be prepared to take care of this themselves?

JV: On the surface of it one might come to that conclusion, that that would be something for the ordinary American citizen, not knowing much about either Korea or our relationship with the Koreans, you could come to that conclusion fairly quickly it seems to me.

TS: So there is a morale issue here?

JV: For the Koreans certainly. And I think there was a morale issue for the United States military forces, who had for years been told it's necessary for you to come to Korea and serve under fairly primitive conditions. I think as we said before, the Congress had consistently denied funds to modernize housing and facilities in Korea because of the prospect that we should be withdrawing from Korea, probably fairly soon, so they didn't want to waste the money.

The Koreans, on the other hand, were struggling to grow their economy. When the Korean War ended the economy was in disastrous shape. South Korea was primarily agricultural at the time. Agricultural and fishing, with most of industrial efforts in Korea being done in North Korea, because that was where the coal was and what few minerals

they had. So the push in South Korea, even when I came back there in 1976 – which was twenty-three years after the Korean armistice was signed – was to grow the economy, and do it the way most modernizing countries did, that is by banking on exports to earn hard currency. And as we discussed before, [President] Park Chung-hee's efforts to keep the incomes of the farmers, fishermen and factory workers probably somewhere near in line so that there wasn't disruption in the economy. But the per capita GDP was still very small by the Western world's standards. So even with a healthy percentage of their gross domestic product going into defense, it was still relatively small in terms of total dollars.

So it was clear that the Korean strategy at that time was deterrence, the appearance of a strong defense, and not necessarily paying attention to the basic building blocks of a strong defense. For example, the Koreans had plenty of cannons, but didn't have a lot of cannonballs. They didn't have a lot of ammunition for them. So they were counting on that sort of thing coming from the United States, and part of the insurance of that coming from the United States was the presence of U.S. military forces in Korea.

So when President Carter made his announcement, the Koreans really needed to evaluate their own strategy. What do we do? So you had everything from, should we go back and try to resurrect a nuclear weapons program? Or what do we do for our own defenses, and how do we ensure that the Republic of Korea itself is safe? And the Koreans recognized that they lived in a neighborhood that wasn't particularly friendly. You had to be anti-Japanese if you were Korean, because of Japan's long occupation of Korea.¹

TS: Let me pick at that a little bit, the sentiments about Japan. Even three decades after the end of the Second World War, would you call this an open wound, relations with Japan?

JV: I'd say it was a scab that hadn't been completely scarred over. I think most of the knowledgeable Koreans recognized that they needed to get along with Japan. And of course we still had many Koreans, the elder Koreans, who had served in the Japanese armed forces, who had been drafted into the Japanese armed forces and served in the Japanese armed forces.

TS: And the colonial presence was a fairly heavy one, the Japanese, with education and language.

JV: With education and language, the so-called comfort women who were drafted to be prostitutes actually for the Japanese Army. So there was a lot of reason to be annoyed with Japan but by this time, by the late '70s, Japan's economy was in pretty good shape and certainly the Koreans, from the industrial policy point of view, were trying to copy what had happened in Japan.

TS: That model became, I mean in Taiwan as well, export led industrialization.

JV: Right. But also pushing for self-sufficiency with food, for example, was a major push by Park Chung-hee and his administration.

¹ Korea was a colonial possession of Japan from 1910 – 1945.

TS: How did President Carter's announcement in March 1977 impact your daily relations with Korean military and political leaders?

JV: I think it actually pushed us closer together in terms of the Koreans looking at the American military as their entre into the American political system, to make sure that the necessary help would be on the way or would be self-evident enough in peacetime to prevent a North Korean attack. And, as I think we discussed before, you have to remember that North Korea appeared to be very bellicose at that time. They were expanding their own armed forces and they were doing so in a fashion that appeared that their plans were for imminent attack on South Korea. They had many hundreds of agents in South Korea and we were able to intercept their radio broadcasts back to North Korea. There were all sorts of incidents of violence of some kind or another instigated by agents, or clashes on the demilitarized zone. As we said before, Park Chung-hee's wife had been assassinated. A commando raid had been conducted trying to get to the Blue House, the White House of South Korea. So the concern of the South Koreans, not only in the leadership positions but in the general citizenry, was evident.

But also at the same time there was political unrest in South Korea. They had a fairly sizeable opposition to the dictatorship that wanted to see more of a republic, and many of these were considered to be sympathetic to North Korea and some were in fact sympathetic to North Korea. So generally the country was not without plenty of disruptions, that is political disruptions, many caused by the North Koreans or blamed on the North Koreans. And then the understanding that their own military forces were not as strong as they would like to have them to prevent a war.

(13:00)

TS: Does this mean that South Korean military and political leaders sought, hoped that you could somehow exercise influence in Washington to modify or change this decision by President Carter?

JV: Yes. Yes. And at least mitigate it in some way or another. We were scheduled to have a U.S.-Korean Consultative Committee meeting later that year, with our own Secretary of Defense meeting with the Korean Secretary of Defense. I think we also discussed also before, and Secretary Brown coming and knowing that he had to speak to the Korean people and to the U.S. military forces.

The meeting itself caused great concern among the Koreans. Even in the time of my predecessor there had been some work on perhaps restructuring the command relationships between the Americans and the Koreans. The command relations as they existed in 1976 were simply a holdover from the Korean War, with the senior American being the commander of the United Nations command as well as the commander of the U.S. forces in Korea, but ostensibly the operational commander of the Korean armed forces with the Koreans bureaucratically having very little say on the command structure and the strategy that was to be employed and so forth, although practically they had a lot of say. But bureaucratically it didn't look as though they had much say.

TS: As the Koreans made clear to you that they are dissatisfied with this American decision, how sympathetic would you say you were to their arguments?

JV: It was a very logical argument and you had to be sympathetic to it.

TS: And yet the President of the United States is speaking different tones.

JV: Yes.

TS: So in a sense, is Jack Vessey caught in the middle?

JV: To a certain extent, yes, you're caught in the middle. As I say, some preliminary work had been done with Dick Stillwell and the Koreans on looking at changed structure, and after the Security Consultative meeting in '76 we agreed to look even more seriously at it and actually appoint some workers to look at a structure that would have more Korean influence, and bureaucratically reflect what was the existence on the ground. The United Nations command, as I said earlier, wasn't anything but the remnants of representatives from some of the countries that had fought during the Korean War; it no longer had any military presence in Korea nor necessarily any plans to reinforce Korea.

So we went to work with that. One of the members of the Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff, Liu Byung-hion, was the principal worker on the Korean side. A hero from the Korean War, and he spoke reasonably decent English. [Secretary of Defense] Harold Brown approved us going ahead with these talks and negotiations on organizing a Korea-U.S. combined forces command.

That became a major project of mine, working with the Koreans on this as well as the regular command structure in Korea. And eventually we did organize what became the ROK/US Combined Forces Command. In fact Park Chung-hee was so enthusiastic about the idea that at his instigation the Korean government provided the funds to build a new headquarters building on the old 8th Army compound in Yongsan, which would be the combined forces command headquarters.

TS: Remind us what President Carter's timetable was for this reduction of this elimination of U.S. presence.

(19:40)

JV: As I recall it was over five years. The upside of that was, that gave the Koreans five more years to get their own defenses in order. The downside was that you had five more years of the U.S. Army, particularly the U.S. Army and U.S. Air Force, telling soldiers and airmen that they had to go to Korea and serve one year tours without their families in rather primitive housing conditions.

TS: How aware were Secretary of Defense Brown and President Carter of the fact that you weren't entirely in agreement with this announced plan of elimination of U.S. presence?

JV: They knew it from the very beginning. In fact we talked earlier about my visits with President Carter in the White House. Very early – in January of 1977. And then later on in 1979, when I failed my orals to be Chief of Staff of the Army.

TS: One might ask then, if it's clear to the Secretary of Defense and to the President of the United States that you're really not entirely on board with this, why did you keep your job for so long? Pardon me for being blunt.

JV: I think first, we talked about the Singlaub incident and General Singlaub being fired and so forth. Starting almost immediately I testified to a number of committees of the Congress, and quite honestly told them of the actual situation in Korea. By this time the Congress, which was controlled by the Democrats, had the Armed Services and the Foreign Relations Committees in both the House and the Senate working to slow President Carter down on this issue. And many of the strong leaders, Senator Nunn for example; he was probably one of the most influential senators at that time. Senator Stennis as well thought it was a bad idea, and [both] made it very clear that they thought it was a bad idea.

TS: Did you actively search for or identify congressional allies whom you felt might be helpful in this situation?

JV: I don't say that I searched for them. I think that would be inaccurate. But I found out who they were.

TS: What kind of conversations did you have with Congress people or senators that would help to sort of fill out this discussion?

JV: First, welcomed them on their trips to Korea and then made sure that they were taken to the Demilitarized Zone and could see the situation there, and had good briefings on both the strengths and weaknesses of the armed forces of the Republic of Korea as well as our own. I don't think we did anything that I would call dishonest or misleading. On the other hand, we certainly didn't tell them that President Carter's plan was a good idea.

TS: Okay. One might look at this and say you're walking a fine line here between publically, in a sense, opposing the President of the United States and trying to achieve something or keep a course that you've identified as a logical one.

JV: Right. I'd say that's correct.

TS: Is this new to you, this politicking in a way?

JV: Indeed. *(chuckles)*

TS: I mean the days that we've talked about 105 guns are long in the past.

JV: *(laughing)* That's right.

TS: How many four stars do we have by this time in the United States Army?

JV: There's usually about nine or ten depending on which jobs they had in each of the services, the Army, Navy and Air Force.

TS: This is a small circle; you're in rarified air so to speak. Does politics go along with the position by that point?

JV: Certainly the interaction with the Congress – the Congress provides every dime that's spent by the Defense Department. Certainly through the years the Armed Services Committees and the Appropriations Committees and their various subcommittees, first they're dealing with the largest single chunk of the American budget, with the Defense Department. So having the interest of the Congress is understandable. They're always going to be interested, and whether it's today or 200 years ago they were interested in it. So the dealings with the Congress become obviously more frequent, and as the tension goes up in any particular part of the world the frequency and the type of relationships with the Congress go up.

TS: You mentioned speaking in front of congressional hearings, in front of congressional committees and subcommittees. How did you prepare for those kind of meetings? How do you get yourself ready to face what's coming?

JV: You know what the general subject is, so you prepare to inform the committees based on what you know of the situation. Just one illustration. I've forgotten what the date was, but Senator Stennis called me back to Washington for a hearing. I didn't have a big airplane of my own to go back and forth, but Admiral [Maurice] Mickey Weisner² was then the Commander in Chief Pacific and he did have one, and I told Admiral Weisner that I'd been called back on this particular day. It was sometime in the middle of the winter, January or sometime like that, and Senator Stennis had called for a hearing. Admiral Weisner had volunteered his airplane to haul me back, because the tensions in Korea were pretty high at that time and I didn't want to be gone very long. So I wanted to go for the hearing and then return directly to Korea. *(chuckles)*

So I went to Washington. The hearing was to be a Monday morning, which is unusual for the Congress. Usually Congress is pretty dead on Mondays. But this hearing was to be a Monday morning hearing, as I recall. The weather turned bad, and there was a snowstorm in Washington. We landed at Andrews [Air Force Base]. We were the last plane to land at Andrews that day and we probably shouldn't have landed at Andrews. We landed and we were taxiing in and the snow...

Admiral Weisner's plane was one of the old [Boeing] 707s that had been turned into a command plane. It had been a tanker originally and turned into a command plane. So if you remember, the 707 is a four engine Boeing low wing monoplane with the engine

² Maurice F. Weisner (1917-2006); U.S. Navy admiral. Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet, 1973-76; Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Command, 1976-79.

nacelles hanging below the wing. We taxied in and we couldn't make it because the engines were scooping up snow from the snowdrifts along the taxiway. So the Andrews people sent a car out to pick us up.

I had called ahead for a room at Wainwright Hall at Fort Myer, which was a convenient and usual place for visiting senior officers to stay. I got to Wainwright Hall and by this time the whole federal government had been shut down. I got to Wainwright Hall walking through snowdrifts that were three feet or more in depth. Getting into Wainwright Hall, carrying my bag. *(laughing)* Looking for the room in which I was to stay.

The only person present was telling me that no one had come in that day so there weren't any clean rooms, but she could put me in the room that had originally been scheduled for me. My understanding that there were no clean sheets or anything like that. So spent the night in Wainwright Hall under fairly primitive conditions, with no breakfast. Finally a four wheel drive vehicle provided by the Pentagon motorpool made it to my congressional hearing on time, but the federal government, it was one of these days when they shut it down, didn't want anybody on the streets for very understandable reasons, because the streets were by and large impassable. But we did make it to the Capitol and, God bless him, Senator Stennis showed up and I showed up and one of Senator Stennis' staffers showed up and that was the hearing.

TS: That was it?

JV: That was the hearing. *(laughing)* I reported on the condition in Korea and went directly back to Andrews, and by this time the taxiways had been cleared and we took off and went back to Korea that afternoon. But it was the sort of thing that was going on with the relationships with the United States and Korea at that time.

(32:40)

TS: Did you make, would you say, frequent trips back to the U.S. to testify?

JV: I wouldn't say they were frequent, but I did make trips from Korea. I made a number of trips back to testify.

TS: Any of those times where you gave testimony stand out from the others as being either contentious or significant as far as the exchange of opinions or the delivery of information?

JV: Some were. In all those hearings you had people that agreed with President Carter, members of the House or the Senate who agreed with the President that we ought to get out of Korea, and certainly were going to receive some questioning from them. Then as time went by you had people who were neutral in the beginning and then pretty soon changed their mind, so they were sympathetic. Senator Stennis was in fact sympathetic to keeping troops in Korea and of course he was the chairman of the Armed Services Committee at that time. *(chuckles)* I'm sure it was as difficult or more difficult for him to get to that hearing than it was for me, but it shows how important he thought it was.

TS: For the Koreans, what are you able to tell them? I mean this comes less than a year after you've arrived there.

JV: That was perhaps the most difficult part for me. I was first a U.S. Army officer, an officer of the United States, and I'm subject to the orders of the President of the United States and certainly couldn't downgrade or belittle the President of the United States in front of our Korean allies. So I had to explain what the policy was, and of course the major part then became for us in the U.S. Defense Department to explain how we were going to ensure Korea's independence and our role in deterring a war. Blessedly, Secretary Brown understood that very well also and became more and more supportive as time went by. As I think as we discussed earlier, I think that by 1979, when President Carter came to Korea, Secretary Brown was completely on the side of cancelling the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Korea.

TS: For United States troops already there, when you arrived there, I mean there is a sizeable U.S. presence there. One thing I wanted to ask about, given that you have done several tours in Germany dating back as far as the 1950s, is that our troops when they're abroad often operate under some kind of Status of Forces Agreement, which coordinates or governs or controls the interactions of our forces with the host nation. Could you compare or contrast the Status of Forces Agreement in Korea in the 1970s with what you had experienced in Germany?

JV: They were generally parallel. I think the United States pursued that with all the countries where we had major forces stationed. What we wanted was good relationships with the local government. At the same time, we didn't want to subject U.S. forces to the court systems or justice systems of the countries which we were in. The general push for the status of forces agreements was that we would under most circumstances try American soldiers in the military court system for offenses that they committed in the Korean society. Now most countries tried to push for more control over our military people than that. For example, for murder trials or something like that, the push was to have them tried in civil courts in those countries. For us, the view was that at least the penal system in the United States was probably more humane than the penal system in the countries in which we had troops stationed, particularly in backward countries, which Korea was in those days. An annual review or two year review or three year review of the Status of Forces Agreement was a common thing. It was usually done with the lawyers and diplomats and with the senior commanders getting to stick in a word before any change was made.

TS: How politically sensitive or delicate was the Status of Forces Agreement or this relationship with Korean civil society when you were there?

JV: It only became an issue when there was some sort of a heinous incident involving U.S. armed forces. The most common sorts of incidents were motor vehicle accidents with U.S. military vehicles. I don't say there were common, they were uncommon, but they were the common sorts of incidents that occurred. Roads were narrow. Our vehicles were big. Drivers weren't used to driving in places where ox carts were common on the highway. So you could expect fairly frequently some sort of an incident involving traffic, and we worked very hard to prevent those. It was difficult to assign blame between an American soldier

driving the vehicle and the Koreans involved in the vehicle, but it wasn't difficult for the Korean press to assign blame. It usually was the fault of the American, and that's understandable, and that was not only true in Korea but it was true in Japan, it was true in Germany, true in Italy, whatever.

TS: What about more sensitive things, personal violence, rape, murder, these kind of things?

JV: Rape was perhaps that sort of incident that drew a lot of press, unfavorable press, and of course the best thing to do is work very hard to prevent that. But you couldn't prevent all of it, and when it occurred it was a nasty incident and took away time from commanders at all levels that had really more important things to do in making sure that Korea was safe from attack from North Korea rather than dealing with the rape charges.

TS: Is that something as a commander, looking at something like that you would hope to deal with it quickly and quietly, or to make publicity about it in order to show people under your command this is not going to be tolerated?

JV: Certainly you had to do the latter. You had to make sure that the U.S. soldiers, sailor and the airmen knew that first that hey, you don't want to do this because the Uniform Code of Military Justice says 'shall suffer death or such other punishment as a court-martial may direct'.

TS: Does that mean we had people condemned to death in your time in Korea?

JV: No.

TS: So it was theoretically possible, but it wasn't actually done.

JV: It was theoretically possible, or the Status of Forces Agreement permitted us to move the case to the Korean courts if we agreed that the Koreans wanted it, and we wanted it moved, we could move it.

TS: Was that ever done in a high profile case that you recall?

JV: I don't recall any case where we did that. In fact I don't recall...I'm sure we had cases of rape while I was there. Probably impossible to have three years and not have some, but I don't recall it being a great issue.

TS: So the issues were these ones we've touched on, right? The relationships between the two, between Americans and Korean society did not represent a stumbling block to the larger mission.

JV: You had to get that across to commanders at every level. And I think the Americans, by and large my observation is that the U.S. armed forces have done that fairly well anywhere

in the world. I'm sure that even if you go to Afghanistan today you'll find American forces that are supporting Afghan orphans or something like that, and certainly that was true in Korea at that time. The units in the armed forces, when there was an infantry battalion up on the DMZ or a unit in the southern part of Korea in the logistic chain, they had some active role in helping the Koreans.

(45:10)

TS: And yet it's these negative headline cases that often come to the public attention.

JV: Right. Right. They'll get the newspaper headlines, and the others may appear on page 16 or something like that. But that's the way life is; you can pick up today's newspaper ...

TS: Exactly. That's reporting and journalism and also public curiosity for things like that.

JV: Right.

TS: President Park Chung-hee is, as we've talked about him, an overarching presence in Korean society, politically, economically. Just after your departure in the fall of 1979 he is assassinated by Kim Jae-kyu, the director of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency. How do you remember reacting when you got that news, even though you had departed?

JV: Saddened but not surprised.

TS: What do you mean by that?

JV: Clearly it was going to be a tough time in Korea, with Park Chung-hee assassinated. It was going to create troubles in Korea. Because of our – I want to use the word rich involvement, because it was a rich involvement in Korea – it meant problems with the United States as well. I knew Cha Ji-chul, and Kim Jae-kyu, quite well. I knew everybody that was in the room that night quite well. The president was having dinner with Cha Ji-chul, who was the head of the presidential security forces, and Kim Gye-won, who was a Leavenworth classmate of mine and was the Secretary General to the president, sort of the chief of staff. In our country the president would call him the chief of staff of his office. Kim Jae-kyu was the director of the Korean CIA and certainly well-known and viewed to be a very competent subordinate of Park Chung-hee, but also was known to have some differences with Park Chung-hee, and I think Kim Jae-kyu had more democratic leanings than Park Chung-hee had.

I think we discussed earlier that Park Chung-hee wanted to transition his country into a democracy. But he didn't know how to do that, and one of the reasons he didn't know how to do that is he didn't have trust in anybody that he thought was capable of carrying that out. Of course he looked at people like Kim Dae-jung, who was an outspoken member of the opposition and who wanted to turn Korea into a democracy and certainly wanted to get rid of Park Chung-hee as an enemy. And there have been, I think, a number of things written, some alleging that there had been a ceremony opening some new facility that particular morning somewhere and that it had been attended by all of the people in the room, and the rumor is that either Park Chung-hee or Cha Ji-chul, probably Cha Ji-chul, had

told Kim Jae-kyu that he couldn't get in the helicopter with the president, that he had to go on a different helicopter or something like that. There was some sort of slight, impolitic remark made at the ceremony.

Cha Ji-chul was a tough guy, very loyal to Park Chung-hee and head of the presidential security force, which had become more and more independent of the rest of the bureaucracy. It was sort of like the Secret Service in this country, except that it seemed to be totally independent from the rest of the bureaucracy. Cha Ji-chul himself was a Christian. I considered him quite a remarkable man. He was very intelligent. The time that I spent with him was interesting.

Anyway, Kim Jae-kyu came in and killed Park Chung-hee and Cha Ji-chul. He did not kill Kim Gye-won. I've forgotten whether Kim Gye-won was wounded or not. It seemed to me that he received a wound, but it wasn't life threatening. As I say, I thought I knew all three or four of the people in the room reasonably well and had spent time independently with each of them.

TS: As I researched this I was curious, because there are all types of theories behind this trying to explain who all was involved and why it happened. In a way it sort of reminded me of the JFK assassination theories, that the more you dig the wilder some of these stories get.

JV: Right. Right.

TS: How do you piece it all together?

JV: I personally think it was Kim Jae-kyu just mad at things and looking at the general situation in Korea and (A) seeing no movement toward democracy, but being insulted by at least one or two of the people that he thought were the main roadblocks to moving forward in Korea and doing it by himself. I've forgotten who got fired in the aftermath, but I know Kim Gye-won went to prison and it was sort of, you failed to throw yourself in front of the president. And that was the main charge against Kim Gye-won, who was a wonderful soldier, military officer and a competent chief of staff for Park Chung-hee. In fact many of us worked for years afterward to get Kim Gye-won out of prison, to try and convince the Korean leadership to release him, and eventually he was.

TS: One newspaper at the time reporting on this story said "The assassination of Park Chung-hee yesterday, 26 October 1979, was a pivotal moment in South Korean history." How would you comment on that?

JV: I'd say it was. You had a steady move toward more democracy afterwards. You didn't have any immediate move, because Chun Doo-hwan pulled almost a mirror of the Park Chung-hee 1962 coup shortly after the assassination. As you recall we talked about him earlier. He was commanding the Korean 1st Division when we intercepted the tunnel and was looked upon as one of the bright young stars in the Korean Army and certainly was, I think I can say safely, a favorite of Park Chung-hee. And that of course created more

problems with the United States in our relationships. There were uprisings in Korea in [the city of] Gwangju,³ a major uprising.

Seong Jeong-nae, who was also in our class at Leavenworth, was high up in the Korean CIA, and by this time I was back as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Seong Jeong-nae pleaded with me to come to Korea and be the intermediary with the, I don't want to call them insurgents, but the opposition in Gwangju and settle that issue in a bloodless fashion. Clearly I couldn't do that. I was in close contact with my successor in Korea. Korea would not have been the thing for me to do. It was something the Koreans had to sort out themselves. Eventually it was sorted out, and not bloodlessly unfortunately.

Then Kim Dae-jung himself was sentenced to death as a result of this. By this time I was back as Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, and we're rolling into 1980 and into the election in the United States, and Ronald Reagan defeated Jimmy Carter. The Carter administration's relationships had really soured with Korea after the Chun Doo-hwan coup. Lew Byong Hyun ... we should probably go back and talk a bit later about the organization of the Combined Forces Command, because it was sort of a pivotal event for the United States defense relationships with Korea.

TS: This might be an appropriate to do that, quite frankly. Do you want to do that?

JV: Yes. We can do that and then come back to [this].

TS: Okay. Then maybe before we leave Park Chung-hee, the one thing I wanted to be sure to ask was, in your opinion what really is his legacy, both positive and negative?

JV: Of course the positive part of his legacy, one, is preserving Korean culture during the economic growth of Korea. And the second part is the economic growth of Korea. When Park Chung-hee pulled his coup in '62, the per capita GDP was about sixty bucks. When he left, or was assassinated, the per capita GDP was about \$2500 as I remember. So that's a huge change in that period of time which, in most places in the world, if you made that percentage of change in any of the poor countries of the world today, you'd create much more change in the culture I think than Park Chung-hee.

Park Chung-hee sort of moderated this by keeping Korean villages looking like Korean villages, but modernizing them and making them safer for the inhabitants. He renovated historic sites in Korea that had been downgraded during the Japanese occupation. Park Chung-hee brought them back to life and put money into them and made them not only tourist attractions for people visiting Korea, but attractions for the Korean people themselves. School children came to visit them regularly and learn about their own uniquely Korean heritage. The emphasis on maintaining the Korean language, *hangul* and the written *hangul*, was an important part of his legacy. In South Korean Chinese characters are still used and still taught in universities and so forth, and sort of a snob thing [is] to have a card with your name in Chinese characters, whereas *hangul* itself is a much more practical language. It's an easily translatable language. It has a lot more versatility in my view of converting thoughts to writing than does the Chinese language, either Mandarin

³ City in southeastern South Korea, 170 miles from Seoul.

or Cantonese. And Park Chung-hee recognized that he had to placate the professors and the hoi polloi that still wanted to use Chinese characters, so they permitted the use of, I've forgotten what it was, but a relatively small number of Chinese characters. But *hangul* was the basic language for Korea and the Korean bureaucracy and the Korean armed forces. In my own view, modern Korea owes quite a bit to Park Chung-hee.

The other part of his legacy was security in our time. Security enough to do these other things despite a very bellicose North Korea.

TS: Would you want to put anything on the negative side of the ledger that we should remember?

JV: He was very skeptical of those people around him. He kept repeating to me that he really wanted to move toward democracy. We had sort of an interesting relationship. I don't think I have any of them now, I think I gave them to National Defense University, but I have score cards from the golf course of my times playing golf with Park Chung-hee. The interesting thing about those incidents is that I would get a call maybe from Kim Gye-won, or Kim Gye-won's secretary, saying "the president has accepted your invitation to play golf this afternoon." And of course I had issued no invitation to play golf. Or "the president has accepted your invitation to play golf this afternoon and have dinner at your house tonight." *(chuckles)*

TS: In plain English we call that inviting yourself over.

JV: Right. And if you want to talk to a woman who felt invaded and disrupted, talk to Avis about Park Chung-hee coming to dinner at our house. His presidential security force would come in and rearrange the furniture.

TS: Really?

JV: Oh, yes.

TS: With what rationale?

JV: Safety. If President Obama accepts your invitation in the same fashion, the Secret Service is going to come in and redo your house before he shows up. *(chuckles)*

TS: I'll have to trust you on that, because I'm not expecting the President to answer my invitation any time soon.

JV: I remember one of those dinners at our house. And I've forgotten who it was afterwards telling my how proud they were of me for sticking up for democracy with Park Chung-hee in an argument we had at the dinner that night. So those sessions were interesting, but not always uncontentious.

TS: Was he a good conversation partner?

JV: Oh, yes.

TS: And how would you characterize or describe discussions with President Park?

JV: He was the president of the country, so I'm sure with most people and certainly with me there's a certain deference that comes with talking with presidents of a country, no matter what country it is. He was intelligent. He had a good sense of humor. His English was better than he gave it credit for being. I think you could say that he understood whatever was being said in English and like many of the rest of us, even though I could say the same thing, I understood most things that were being said in Korean but was reluctant to get into either deep political or scientific discussions. I wasn't confident enough with my language. I think it was about the same with his English. He was pleasant to be around as long as you understood that hey, he had his point of view and you were unlikely to change it. He'd be willing to joust with you a bit on it, but you weren't going to change it.

TS: Got it. He was still alive when you left the country, though not for much longer. How would you characterize relations with South Korea upon your exit in fall 1979?

JV: They were certainly better than they were in the spring of 1977.

TS: How much credit do you give yourself for that?

JV: I don't know whether the credit belongs to me, but it belongs to a lot of Americans who worked to help reassure South Korea that they weren't outside our defense umbrella. I'd say people like Senator Nunn particularly, Senator Stennis and a congressman from New York, sort of a brash New Yorker who was adamantly opposed to the Park Chung-hee dictatorship but also recognized the importance of America to South Korea's security and to the general stability of that part of the world. I think the problem in the United States, where you looked at it just as security between North and South Korea, it was easy to make a case for withdrawing forces and giving less support to South Korea, who should be able to defend themselves. But if you looked at it as a contribution to stability in the whole neighborhood then the argument for the United States presence became more convincing, it seems to me.

TS: What would you rate as your proudest accomplishment during your three years in Korea?

(1:11:45)

JV: (*chuckles*) I had a lot of proud accomplishments in Korea, all the way from getting NFL football games on the Armed Forces Network – and getting it live, which meant sometime early Monday morning on Korean time – to the fact that we did not have a war between North Korea and South Korea or the United States and anybody else in the region, and that by the time I left I can say that no more troops were withdrawn from South Korea. The overall strength of American forces in Korea was about the same as when I went there, but

the combat power and the contribution to the defense of the Republic of Korea was considerably greater.

TS: And how was that equation worked out? How did you achieve that?

JV: Through work with the then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and the Secretary of Defense to make sure that our anti-aircraft forces were modernized, for example. We brought the Patriot missiles⁴ into Korea.

TS: So if one looks just at the numbers of troops one can say the numbers didn't go up and maybe even went down, but what I hear you saying is, you increased the bang for your buck from those units.

JV: Right.

TS: And that works to not antagonize the President of the United States, who wants things held at a certain level, but also works to reassure the Koreans with the footprint that we have there.

JV: Right. I think by the time I left, first the ROK/US Combined Forces Command was organized and operating, and it has operated ever since. I've seen in the last year or two there have been some moves to disband the ROK/US Combined Forces Command, which I think is a grave mistake. And most of the Koreans I know believe it to be a grave mistake. I see we've now delayed it until 2016 or something like that, whereas I think it was supposed to happen this year originally. But at any rate, it certainly increased cooperation between the military of the two nations.

I like to think that I had made some contribution to that, but I would give even more credit to Lew Byong Hyun, my first Korean deputy who worked to help set up the organization. He was the Korean representative to help devise the Combined Forces Command and its function. What it turned out to be is a headquarters that, half of it was Korean and half was American. In fact more than half was Korean. So it had an American commander and a Korean deputy. Then each of the principle staff functions either had a Korean head and an American deputy, or an American head and a Korean deputy. We had more Korean heads than American heads. It became the major strategic and tactical planning headquarters for the defense of Korea. UN Command continued to exist, but only in name. So the ROK/US Combined Forces Command became the major tactical and strategic headquarters, and I view that as a major accomplishment. It certainly changed the confidence of the Korean armed forces.

The other thing is the greater integration we had. We put American officers in the major Korean military schools, in their staff college, in their war college, and these were wonderful officers who probably were penalized in the American armed forces for doing it.

⁴ MIM-104 Patriot: a U.S. surface-to-air missile system; PATRIOT = Phased Array Tracking Radar to Intercept On Target. Introduced 1981.

I'm sure you don't get as much credit for graduating from the Korean War College as they do for graduating from the American war college, but you ought to.

TS: I guess back to something you've mentioned more than once, which is the cultural ties and things. And it gets back to language again too, and approaching people at the level they're at, to indicate that you have a sense of respect.

JV: Yes.

TS: On the other hand, talking about accomplishments, what would you describe as your largest challenge that you left uncompleted or unfulfilled?

(1:18:25)

JV: One thing was the condition of the billets, the living conditions for the American armed forces in Korea. We may have talked about this earlier.

TS: You mentioned this was a challenge when you arrived there.

JV: It was a challenge. One of my first trips to the DMZ, I was going up to visit the forward most American battalion along the front line in Korea, and I saw two soldiers standing at a place that was identified as a bus stop with towels over their arms. I asked them where they were going, and they said they were going to camp so and so for a shower. I asked, I said, "Do you not have a shower in your camp?" They said, "No Sir, we do not have a shower in our camp." Again reminding you how long this is after the armistice in Korea, and here we have soldiers billeted in a camp without a shower. So I immediately called to the rear and told them that I wanted a shower in this camp, and I wanted it by tomorrow.

TS: You're the commander, right, so you get that.

JV: And you get to say sort of stupid things like that and get away with it, and people actually do it. *(chuckles)*

TS: It seems to me if that was so easy, why didn't they have it?

JV: Part of it is, again, every penny that the Defense Department spends is approved by the Congress. The money to improve those billeting conditions had not been approved, because of the prospect of withdrawing forces from Korea.

TS: That becomes, it creates a cycle, doesn't it?

JV: In this case a twenty-three year cycle.

TS: The arguments might wash in 1955, but in 1975 that seems like we're stuck between staying and going almost?

JV: Yes. Then as I got to looking into it, I got with the then commander of the 2nd Division, a wonderful officer named Morris Brady. Morrie Brady was totally disgusted with the living conditions that his soldiers had and he had already taken a bunch of photographs. And as he and I looked at it you could see that not a year had gone by since the Korean armistice that at least one soldier had not been killed in a barracks fire in South Korea. These people were in Quonset huts that had very poor insulation. The heating was coal fired stoves in the Quonset huts, and soldiers were responsible for firing up their own small stoves. There were two stoves in each Quonset hut, and they were neither particularly efficient nor particularly safe.

Of course on a Saturday night you get a drunken soldier coming in throwing more coal on the fire than should be there or something like that, you have the danger of a fire. So what I did is I took Morrie Brady's pictures back to Bernie Rogers, who was then Chief of Staff of the Army, and told him that we had to do something, that between him and me, we needed to find a way to fix these barracks. I remember telling Bernie that he had to get himself a new guy for Korea if we couldn't find a way to do it, because I felt as though I was not able to tell those soldiers I was their commander and have them live in conditions like that.

TS: You felt pretty strongly about this.

JV: I did indeed. But I was reflecting also the position of my own subordinates that also felt that way, and I'm sure this had gone on before. But anyway, thank God for Bernie Rogers because we got together and worked it out and we decided it would be a maintenance program rather than a construction program, and that we would in fact not build new barracks or better barracks but those Quonset huts, we'd insulate them, make them more secure and put in a thermostatically controlled heating system that did not have the fire danger.

Two years later we were at that point where we no longer had anybody dying from barracks fires in Korea or even being injured by barracks fires in Korea, because we were able to do it. Now it was an inefficient and costly way to do it. It probably would have been more efficient to tear them down and build new ones, but there wasn't money to do that. But we could do it as maintenance, and we did it.

TS: Using the end run strategy as opposed to trying to hammer away straight ahead?

JV: Yes. Anyway, it was an accomplishment but also a frustration. You asked for what was my biggest frustration. My frustration was that they were still living in crappy conditions, but they were a lot less crappy than they were.

TS: Right, but there was still a ways to go, which I heard from you.

JV: Indeed.

TS: How did you feel personally? You knew that you were going to be leaving Korea. Can you say how you felt about the situation when you departed Korea and were headed to the position as Deputy Chief of Staff, U.S. Army, not Chief of Staff, U.S. Army?

JV: I'd been asked by the new appointee as Chief of Staff, by Shy Meyer, who had been my deputy when I was Chief of Staff for Operations.

TS: In an inverse relationship.

JV: Right. Shy Meyer asked me to take on the job and, as I think I said earlier, Harold Brown had told me that I could have any Army four star job except Chief of Staff. (*chuckles*) But you're number two in the Army, and Shy Meyer, I had a great respect for him and knew him, probably a much smarter guy than I am, or was at that time certainly.

TS: How hard is it though to work for somebody that used to work for you?

JV: He and I had a good relationship when he was my deputy, and he'd already been appointed as the Chief. I knew him well. Liked him. It wasn't difficult.

TS: How much bitterness inside of you, the fact that you were overlooked for something that you had been led to believe was on the table?

JV: I would like to have been Chief of Staff of the Army. But I wasn't. And certainly at that time there was a lot to do as the Vice Chief. We were still trying to implement the Abrams vision for the post-Vietnam Army, but the budgets were miserably low at that time.

TS: Right. They declined throughout the Carter years.

JV: Right. We still had a lot of learning to do in recruiting the so called all-volunteer force. We had what the Army called the Big Five, which were equipment modernization programs, every one of which was behind schedule and well over budget and the Congress was unhappy with us. I'm sure the Army itself was unhappy with the way things were proceeding. There was a lot of work to be done.

TS: That's a pretty straightforward answer. I mean you didn't pass muster in your interview with President Jimmy Carter, and he didn't hire you. Let's face it.

JV: Right.

TS: How did you feel about President Jimmy Carter as you kind of moved away from the situation?

JV: In those days the Chiefs of Staffs of the services probably met with the President once or twice a year on budget issues. The JCS Chairman I'm sure met with the President quite regularly as an advisor to the National Security Council. So you didn't see the President. I

saw more of him, with my three sessions with him during my time in Korea. I don't think I ever saw him again, until later in life; when I was Chairman, I saw President Carter. But I never had any personal interaction with him again. But you do have interaction with the Secretary of Defense. I had great respect for Secretary Brown. And I think he respected me and wanted me around and appreciated having me around. So that was fine.

TS: Are you a person that gets over what we might call slights like that or being passed over or not selected, or do you let that stuff hang around?

JV: *(chuckles)* I'd never given that any thought to tell you the truth, but it was what it was and I knew what it was and I wasn't going to let it ruin my life.

TS: So you're leaving this and focusing on what is going to be your job as opposed to what could have been.

JV: Right. The Vice Chief's house is not as good as the Chief's house, but it's a pretty good place. *(laughter)*

TS: For the lay person, maybe you could spend just a minute or two explaining the duties of the office of the Chief of Staff, U.S. Army. I mean we've all heard of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and all that, but what does the Chief of Staff, U.S. Army do, in lay terms?

(1:31:30)

JV: Of course the mission of the Army is now to recruit, train and equip ground forces for deployment to the theaters under which the United States has operating armed forces. So that means if there's a war going on, it's wherever the war is, or if it's deterrence to places like Korea or Europe or whatever it happens to be. It's really not a military operational command; that is his duties as Chief of Staff of the Army, he's the builder of forces. So it ranges all the way from arguing for budgets with the Congress to recruiting soldiers from the population of the United States to devising equipping plans and providing that equipment and supplies for the Army to operate in the field, and training that Army.

TS: So the Chief of Staff has to be careful in selecting the people that are directly work for him that he will then delegate these tasks to.

JV: Yes.

TS: How much leeway does the Chief of Staff have for picking the people who will provide these...

JV: He's got a lot of leeway. The principal staff officers. I'm sure the Chief approves all of the principal staff officers and probably their deputies and in some cases even further. For example, the more junior officers that serve in the office of the Chief. So the Chief, he's the one guy that can really pick his own team.

TS: And Shy Meyer picked you to be on his team, said he wanted you.

JV: Yes.

TS: When you talked with him initially then, did he explain what your duties would be as Vice Chief, or was that pretty clear as well?

JV: Part of that's clear, but the Chief and the Vice Chief have to act as a team. I call it the Hertz-Avis⁵ rule: number one and number two. (*chuckles*) Avis gets all the business that Hertz doesn't want.

TS: So your specific duties as Vice Chief, for the lay person again, explain sort of what it is. **(1:34:35)**

JV: The Chief is the outward manifestation of the Army. He's the spokesman for the Army. When the Army has a big ceremony, the Chief ought to show up. He's it. If the Army testifies at the Congress, primarily it will be the Chief that testifies. But he's also a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff now, which is a different set of duties than we described for the Chief. When I described the duties earlier, those were his duties as Chief of Staff of the Army. When he's a member of the Joint Chiefs, he is part of a team that provides strategic command and strategic direction for the armed forces of the United States, provides logistic plans to support those strategic plans, provides for joint training of the armed forces of the United States and advises the President of the United States and the National Security Council and the Secretary of Defense on defense matters. So it's a completely different set of duties but, because he is head of the Army, he's got this other job as well.

TS: To what extent at all does the Vice Chief interact with the JCS or perform any of those duties?

JV: He's the number two guy in the Army, so if the Chief is gone and the JCS have a meeting, he goes. So he's got to stay up to date on what's happening so that he doesn't get crossways with his boss on his representation there.

TS: When you and Shy Meyer talked, as the Hertz-Avis team here, how did different responsibilities and areas of interest break down for you two?

JV: I think it wasn't so much interest as it was how to have an equitable division of the duties. First, you recognize the Chief is the outside guy, so he's got the outside part of the thing. If the Army is going to be represented, he's the representative except when he can't make it and he tells the Vice Chief to do it.

TS: So the spotlight is on the Chief.

JV: The spotlight is on the Chief, but you become the inside guy. So for example, my very first session with Shy Meyer is looking at, where is the Army now and what do we need to

⁵ Hertz and Avis: two U.S. rental car firms.

do to improve it? The first thing is the Big Five procurement: the Abrams tank, the Bradley fighting vehicle, the Patriot missile, the Apache helicopter and the Blackhawk helicopter. All late and over budget. So the agreement or direction, depending on how you look at it, is okay, Vessey, that's yours.

TS: All five?

JV: Right. The recruiting program is still not going correctly so we'll both work on that, but you're the day to day guy, Vessey.

TS: This recruiting thing, here we are in 1979 and should I understand that the U.S. Army is still coming to terms with this recruiting an all-volunteer force?

JV: Doing it better.

TS: You're still not where you want to be?

JV: Yes. Still not where we want to be. Still weren't getting the percentage of high school grads that we wanted.

TS: You must have looked at the causes for that, right? If you're the guy that's going to be day to day looking at that stuff, what did you ...

JV: I didn't look at it before I came home from Korea, I'll tell you. I had enough to worry about in Korea. And I didn't look at any of these other things. Now I had looked at all of those things as Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans, three years earlier. So they weren't new problems.

TS: But they're still on the table.

JV: They're still on the table, and some of them are in worse condition than they were when I left. For example, the procurement programs. We were closer now to the dates that we had set for fielding them, but in some cases we were having more difficulty. For example, the Abrams tank was one that was being attacked by members of Congress. There was a question of whether or not we were going to be able to complete that program.

TS: Pardon for the side tracking there about the recruitment, but you've got the Big Five Procurement Programs. Recruitment is also on your desk?

JV: Yes.

TS: That sounds like a lot just with those two right there.

JV: (*chuckles*) It was.

TS: Would you characterize those as your two primary day to day issues, or were there others you might mention?

JV: The general running of the Army, the internal running of the Army, usually it runs pretty well by itself but if there are problems, they usually come to the Vice Chief to sort out. If you've got – as we had at that time between the active and reserve about two million people in uniform and another close to a million civilian employees – no matter how dumb it is or how heinous it is, you've got somebody out there doing it right now.

TS: By the law of averages, yes I'd say that's probably true.

JV: Right. So you have to deal with those sorts of things. And about once a week it's a general, or a GS-15⁶ or higher. So you become sort of the in-house disciplinarian, to deal with things like that. They take time and you wish you didn't have to do it, but it's here and you have to deal with it.

TS: It sounds like a public relations management as well.

JV: Well, it's public relations, but it's also discipline, law and order. If you've got a general in a very responsible position and he's obviously involved in an extra-marital affair or something like that, it affects the morale of the unit and you have to deal with it, annoying though it may be in dealing with it.

TS: Would you characterize yourself as heavy on law and order issues like that, someone who just brought the hammer down, or is there more nuance involved?

JV: You have to settle the case on the merits. First you have to find out what's going on. There's the story about what's going on, and then there's actually what's going on. Somehow you've got to put those two together and find out what in fact is going on and then take care of it whatever it happens to be. I wouldn't characterize myself as heavy or light, but I would say that when I was Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, if you're marring the image of the Army, you have incurred my displeasure. (*chuckles*)

TS: Does that mean I might be looking for another line of work?

JV: As I think I've said to several people, would you like to retire this afternoon or tomorrow?

TS: Their choice.

JV: Yes.

TS: Don't push them out the door. Give them an option.

⁶ GS: General Schedule, the pay grades for the U.S. civil service. Higher numbers = higher rank and pay.

When you and Shy Meyer had initial conversations there in 1979 or early 1980, how much did the question of budget force itself onto the table?

JV: It's uppermost. Everything you do. You can't do anything that doesn't cost some money, so it's deciding what your priorities are and how you're going to divvy it up and how are you going to pay for it. If you want to do something new that costs some money, by that time you're operating on the budget that's already been approved.

TS: So there's a pie, and it's a finite size.

JV: Right. So it's always, always an issue.

TS: Would you say it's more of a challenge by the late 1970s with the declining budgets of the Carter years than it had been previously?

JV: I'm sure there are people who had been Vice Chiefs earlier, when budgets were even squeezed more. For example, right after World War II when Charlie Wilson was Secretary of Defense. We could see the budget squeeze down at the company, battery and troop level.

TS: At Fort Sill, you talked about that.

JV: I'm sure it was even more difficult for them than it was for us, but it was difficult. We talked about the living conditions of the soldiers in Korea. The same thing existed around the world. The Corps of Engineers in the Army is by and large responsible for maintaining the physical facility. There are all these charts in their budgets with a line showing deferred maintenance, that is maintenance that should be done but had to be deferred because there wasn't enough money. So one of my goals was lowering that line of deferred maintenance, because it meant barracks with tarps over the roof to keep the water from leaking in when it rained or something like that. What we wanted to do is spend our money wisely and come up with the best program for improving the living conditions of soldiers and their families within the budget that we had.

TS: Doesn't that mean, with the finite budgets that you're given by the Congress, taking the money from something else?

JV: First it meant arguing with the Congress for the right amount of money to do these particular things. You had to pay attention to that first step. That was step one, is try to get the next year's budget better than this year's budget for things that were high on your priority list. Then the second thing was making sure that you spent the money efficiently. It was one thing to have the money, but it's another thing to use it efficiently. And in many cases we did not use it as efficiently as we could have, so it meant there's always room for improvement in the way you're doing things. So we had to work on all of those things.

TS: Right. Budgets are such that there's never enough money I guess for what we might want to do.

JV: Right. So setting priorities and improving efficiency.

(1:48:00)

TS: Think about relationships during this time. You've talked consistently over the years now about team building and effective team building, and getting people to work together. At this level, what relationships are important to you? What people are you relying on to help you get where you want to be, where you want to go with this particular job?

JV: Of course one is the relationship with the Chief himself, making sure that the two of you understand what you're doing. I like to get things done, but at the same time if I'm disappointed with members of the staff or something like that where I don't see enough progress, I don't want to fire somebody that the Chief doesn't want fired. So you have to work closely to make sure that we have the same set of objectives in what we're trying to do and in choosing and keeping the people to take on those jobs. The second is with the principals in the Army staff, that is the Deputy Chiefs for Personnel, Intelligence, Operations, Logistics, and then the general support staff, the Adjutant General and Judge Advocate General, Inspector General.

TS: Are these people or positions that you are able to select or to draw from a list of candidates, perhaps pick people to be in place, the two of you?

JV: Yes. Sure. It's just like when I became Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans. When I reported to General Weyand, he said, "Dutch and I have decided we need a new DCS Ops, and you're it." Dutch was General Kerwin, who was then the Vice Chief of Staff of the Army.

TS: Right. You saw how this process worked.

JV: Right. And it worked the same way.

TS: You could "offer" a position to someone knowing full well essentially you're naming him to that job.

JV: Right.

TS: By the late 1970s there are in our society as well pressures for hiring women and minorities into a broader range of positions, and positions of responsibility. How much does this impact you and the decisions you make by the late 1970s, to look at or consider women or minority candidates, non-white candidates when you select a team?

JV: We discussed the integration of the armed forces back many years earlier and I would say that you'd have to give the Army high marks for this. That was no longer an issue. I don't remember ever saying, this guy is a black guy why don't we hire him, or why should

we not hire him. It was never an issue by that time in the Army. He's so and so; his skin color happens to be black, but that's not an issue. So the Army, even at the higher levels, was well integrated by that time. We had four star Army generals; they were not four stars because their skin color was black, they were four stars because they were competent Army officers.

Women: there were still fewer women than there are now, but it was less of an issue than it was for the society as a whole because by and large the country itself still generally looked at most of the work that the Army does as not being necessarily the type of work we want the young women of the nation to be doing. Being an infantry soldier, for example. Now we may be changing even more here in the years ahead. I don't know.

TS: You're talking about administrative jobs now. You've assembled a team of people, did you find yourself thinking about, do I have diversity among the team of people I'm picking?

JV: No. We had enough diversity, so that it wasn't an issue. That is, I don't recall us being accused of not being diverse. So the issue for the team picking was competence alone, and what's available.

TS: So you're not describing any kind of self-censorship where you felt compelled to have something that was inclusive or diverse in any way. You picked credentials.

JV: Right. There was enough diversity in the choices that were available to us to provide whatever...there wasn't any push to have more women on the staff. But I must say there weren't a lot of women available at that particular time.

(1:54:30)

TS: By the late 1970s.

JV: Yes.

TS: As you looked at recruiting, this is one of the things that you and Chief Meyer have decided is going to be your issue, if issue may is the right word here. As you looked at who was joining the United States Army, what did you learn about recruitment and retention and who we're getting and who we want?

JV: You had to look at how efficient we were. How many people did we have in the recruiting staff? How many people did we have to recruit every year? What was the attrition rate in the training base for those we did recruit?

TS: Who washed out or whatever.

JV: Yes. Right. Then how did they work out once they got into the field. The more we went at it, the clearer it became that we wanted people that had already shown some accomplishment, and that recruiting for the basic soldier in the United States Army, we finally came to the conclusion: did he graduate from high school or didn't he?

TS: Was that a benchmark at that level?

JV: That was a wonderful benchmark. It turned out to be a wonderful benchmark. All the statistics we had showed that as long as we stuck to high school graduates – and of course there was the Armed Forces Basic Evaluation Test that they took, kind of an IQ-aptitude combination – how did they score in that? That was important, but it turned out it wasn't as important as whether or not they graduated from high school. So the push became high school graduates and then higher scores on the Armed Forces Evaluation and Aptitude Test.

But for us the question was, how do we organize to do this and who is doing it? If you're a good infantry officer as a captain, you'd like to command an infantry company in a combat infantry battalion. Or if you're a major, you'd like to be the operations officer of an infantry battalion. Or if you're a lieutenant colonel, you'd like to command an infantry battalion. Now when I tell you that you're going to recruiting duty, what is your reaction?

TS: I've done something wrong or I'm being demoted.

JV: (*chuckles*) Exactly. So the question came for us is, how do we get some real fire into this recruiting business? How do we avoid the idea that we're having has beens or never to be?

TS: So my response here was, that was what you were getting, because people saw this as a "what have I done wrong." So how did you get around that one?

JV: The first thing to do is to appoint a really good guy to head the whole recruiting command. Between Shy and I we focused on Maxwell Thurman,⁷ who later became a four star general. His last major operational command was commanding the forces on the invasion of Panama.⁸

TS: During the [Manuel] Noriega time.

JV: Yes. But anyway, Max Thurman and Roy Thurman⁹ were brothers, both bachelors. I think Roy finished as a lieutenant general and Max, who was the younger of the two, was a four star. Anyway, we picked Max to head the recruiting command. Max at that time was on the Army staff and heading a small group looking forward to what are innovative ways to make the Army better. He was a superb pick for the job. If you remember that little ditty about, "be all that you can be" (*singing*)

⁷ Maxwell R. Thurman (1931-95); U.S. Army general. Chief of U.S. Army Recruiting Command, 1979-83; Vice Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, 1983-87.

⁸ The U.S. invasion of Panama, code-named Operation Just Cause, took place on 20 December 1989 and toppled Panamanian leader Manuel Noriega (b. 1934).

⁹ John R. Thurman (1924-2004); U.S. Army lieutenant general. Served 1946-79.

TS: *(also singing)* "Be all that you can be." That one, sure. I can still sing it. And I didn't even join the Army!

JV: Right. That's a Max Thurman product. Max was a great statistician and an analyzer of statistics. He could tell you not only what worked but what didn't work, and who worked and who didn't work.

TS: What were the innovations he brought to something that would encourage me as someone maybe who had done other jobs in the Army to see recruiting as an okay assignment?

JV: As a challenging assignment. What Max brought to us is hey, I want to pick good combat soldiers to be recruiters, but let them be on shorter tours as recruiters than we generally think of recruiters. You think of going out there for three years or something like that. Pick brighter people to do the recruiting, but have them do it for a shorter period of time so it doesn't become a serious disrupter in their own careers. That it looks like a good thing for them to do to become a recruiter.

Then seek innovation. Of course what Max wanted to do is, when the soldier goes to the recruiting office have him see a good, physically fit sergeant who looks like a soldier, not overweight, with a string of justifiably deserved ribbons on his chest and somebody that the potential recruit thinks, there's a person I'd like to serve with. Let's have the recruiting force look that way and act that way and then make soldiering the theme of recruiting, that is, don't promise soft beds and curtains in the window. Or Grandma's apple pie or something like that. You remember some of the television ads. This wonderful one that I remember was a sergeant, obviously of Hispanic background, saying, "We do more before nine o'clock than most people do all day." *(chuckles)*

TS: This sounds like a simple adjustment, but in a sense it changes everything.

JV: It does change everything.

TS: If I'm going into a recruiting office it's because I've been exposed to what being a soldier is like and you don't have to sell me on that when I go in the door. I must already like it enough to go see you.

JV: Yes. And I must say that Max Thurman deserves a tremendous amount of credit, and those of us who picked Max Thurman deserve a little credit. *(chuckles)*

TS: What kind of qualitative difference did you start to see in recruitment, the quality of recruits or in retention of recruits?

JV: All of the above, and I think we measured all of the above. It was not only, did they enlist for the first time, but what sort of people were around for re-enlistment? And of course that has more to do with what happens in the Army than what happens in the recruiting command. Did we come through on our promises? Was the training realistic

and tough and demanding, yet rewarding? Did we fix the leaks in the barracks? Did we provide the equipment that the soldier really needed to do the job that he was about to face in an operational Army? So that part didn't belong to the recruiting command. That belonged to the rest of the Army.

TS: True, but the importance of that as I can imagine is, if I don't retain enough people after their enlistment, I'm back to square one with having to recruit and train and find those people experience.

JV: Yes, but you start out with the recruited Army is better than a drafted Army. First, you're recruiting for three, four or five years of service instead of drafting for two years of service. So as a consequence, even if everybody got out at the end of three years, you're only retraining every third year instead of every other year.

TS: That's right. And even I would imagine, just because someone shows up at a recruiting office doesn't mean you have to basically take them.

(2:04:45)

JV: No, no, no, no. The important part of this thing is not taking the people you shouldn't take, because they're the costly ones. They're the ones we talked about that give you the rape problems in Korea or something like that, or who damage the equipment because they're not smart enough or not motivated enough to take care of it. You figure you're putting a soldier that drove his father and mother's Chevrolet or something like that, you're putting him in a tank with a 1500 horsepower turbine engine and a price tag of millions of dollars. So you want somebody that's got, first, the basic intelligence and motivation to do it well, and then you want to train him to do it well. So all that is a part of it.

TS: What about women? I mean the military is changing. Is part of this, is there an active intent to recruit more women into service?

JV: At that time, I've forgotten, we had about maybe ten percent women.

TS: Service-wide.

JV: Yes. We still had integration of women problem by the end of the '70s, but we were better. The money we got to build new barracks, we built living facilities that accommodated women and surprisingly enough we were moving more toward a married Army. I keep looking at statistics that say Americans get married later in life than they once did, and you look at the general population and I guess that's true. But if you look at the Army, it's a different Army and it's different from the Army that I joined. When I joined, if we had one or two married noncommissioned officers in the company or battery, that was about it. But today, many of the privates are married. So it changes the way you build esprit de corps, it changes the way you house your armed forces, and so forth.

TS: Something you hadn't expected, that kind of a change?

JV: Yes. The old saying was if the Army wanted you to have a wife they would have issued you one. (*chuckles*)

TS: Right. Apparently people were being issued wives, because it is changing. The demographic of who joins the service, I guess.

JV: Yes.

TS: And if people are joining for more than two years, in a sense they're making some kind of mid-range commitment to something for themselves. I mean four years is a sizeable part of someone's life.

JV: Yes. Right. And it's certainly a commitment to consider to staying longer.

TS: Right. During these years, you become Vice Chief in fall of 1979, there are a number of challenges facing American society and the United States Army by extension. I want to sort of talk about those, if it's okay. In no particular order, we've got events in Iran, a strategic ally of the United States during the Cold War, that during the mid to late 1970s experiences domestic political and civil unrest and ultimately overthrows the Shah of Iran¹⁰ in 1979. So in a sense, as you're coming to this job, what used to be a strategic U.S. ally in the region is now anything but.

JV: Right.

TS: And on the heels of that comes the hostage crisis¹¹ of late 1979, which lasts all the way through Ronald Reagan's inauguration in January of 1981. From your position as Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, and working with the Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, what does this mean for the United States Army as you see this developing?

JV: First was the loss of a strategic ally in an important part of the world. Iran sits in the middle of the oil producing part of the world. The second thing was this issue of the hostage taking, and having Americans being hostage in a place that's far from the United States and also far from where we have major bases. So it begins to bring out the importance of the Middle East and particularly the oil producing countries of the Middle East to our own security and economic well-being. So in a way it begins to change the focus of the armed forces. For example, in the Unified and Specified Command Plan, that part of the world came under the purview of the Supreme Commander, Allied Power of Europe. And for the United States the U.S. forces in Europe, which is primarily Germany in the Cold

¹⁰ Shah of Iran: in general, refers to dynasties that have ruled Iran for more than 4,000 years. In this usage, refers to Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1919-80), ruler of Iran from 1941 until deposed during the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

¹¹ Iran hostage crisis: fifty-two Americans were held hostage for 444 days (4 November 1979 to 20 January 1981), after a group of Iranian students supporting the Iranian Revolution took over the US Embassy in Tehran.

War, forces facing the Soviet Union. It began to change that emphasis, and eventually the armed forces grew to where we now have central command that looks at that part of the world specifically. Then of course that was magnified by the aborted raid that took place.

TS: And you're referring to what was known as Operation Eagle Claw, of April 1980.¹²

JV: Yes.

TS: It did indeed fail. Eight members of that mission were killed, on 24 April 1980. Let me ask, from your position as Vice Chief of Staff U.S. Army, what did you know prior to the mission's launch of it, and what role if any did you have in its planning?

JV: I did not have any role in the planning for that. The Chief of the Army, as a member of the Joint Chiefs, knew far more in detail. I had, I would say, not much more than a cursory understanding of what was being planned. That is, I knew that a rescue mission was being planned. In fact I was just thinking as we were sitting at lunch, there's a little plaque down [in the living room], it is a replica of, I think it's called "The Walk of Victory" or something like that, at the infantry school museum. It's sort of a memorial to the soldiers, sailors, airmen lost in wars, particularly in recent wars. Anyway, that replica, that brick, arrived a couple of days ago from a friend of mine who is now a civilian orthopedic surgeon, who was in fact the surgeon for the Special Operations Command on that raid and was on the raid himself, Carl Savory. At any rate, he sent me that and said that he had bought a brick for that walk, and "here's the replica of the brick that I bought in your name to honor you on that walk." Carl Savory was a West Point grad who had served I think two tours in Vietnam as an infantryman, and then came back and went to medical school and became an orthopedic surgeon. Of course the great draw for orthopedic surgeons in the Army is the 82nd Airborne Division.

TS: Plenty of business, I guess.

JV: Right. Plenty of business. (*chuckles*) Carl wound up being the surgeon for that particular raid.

TS: I think of a need to know basis, what did you need to know in advance of this, and what did you know?

JV: I think just shortly before...I don't recall going to any JCS meetings as the Army rep where details of that operation came to light, until a day or two before the meeting.

TS: So Chief of Staff General Meyer would have gone to those meetings.

¹² Operation Eagle Claw: military operation to rescue fifty-two Americans held captive at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, on 24 April 1980. The operation failed, and eight U.S. military personnel were killed.

JV: Yes. Right. I know that Shy and I discussed it and I don't recall the nature...I know we were both chary of the helicopter support part of that plan, because of the long distances involved and the lack of rehearsal for it.

TS: So you were skeptical of this mission, would you say, ahead of time?

JV: Yes. Right. But knowing that, in theory, it had been reviewed by people who knew a lot more about it than either one of us did.

TS: Were you asked for or did you give your opinion on what you thought of this, or was it simply you were being informed?

JV: No. It had already been approved.

TS: So you were being informed, this is going to happen.

JV: Right.

TS: What was your reaction to the news as you got it, that the mission had failed and been aborted?

JV: Great disappointment. There's no point in second guessing it either now, nor was there any point in second guessing it at that time.

TS: It was second guessed at the time. I mean publically. There was a lot...

JV: Certainly. Certainly. But it was...we were going to do it. You certainly want to increase the probability of success before you try anything like that. But the closest thing to it was, we had conducted a so called Son Tay raid during the Vietnam War. It was rumored that a lot of our prisoners were in a North Vietnamese camp, and we conducted the raid. The physical part of conducting the raid was as I recall a reasonable success, but we didn't get any prisoners because the North Vietnamese had moved the prisoners. So there was perhaps a little bit of overconfidence in our ability to be able to pull off a raid like that.

TS: Were you asked after the fact for any kind of feedback on what you thought of this raid?

JV: I wasn't personally asked. But I know there was a thorough study done of what went wrong and why it went wrong and suggestions on what we should have done instead of doing what we did. It was a risky operation and it required very close coordination and some good luck to make it work.

TS: Where in your sense did that mission break down, on those things you just mentioned?

JV: We were straining the helicopters to fly as far as they flew and then expecting them to be able to refuel and go on to the next part of the mission. It hadn't been rehearsed. I don't

know to what extent it had been rehearsed or if it had been rehearsed at all, to tell you the truth.

TS: For someone who has talked about the importance of training time and time again, it seems to me to be something that might have been dealt with differently.

JV: Yes.

TS: The situation in Iran in the aftermath of this doesn't get any better. In fact, within the next year the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War¹³ makes the whole region much more volatile, perhaps it's safe to say. You're still Vice Chief of Staff of the US Army when the Iran-Iraq War begins [in 1980]. What does that conflict mean for the United States Army from your perspective?

JV: Frankly it didn't mean a lot for the Army at that time other than the fact that there was trouble in a part of the world that had been disrupted seriously by what had happened in Iran. It's a shame to say it, but it almost looked like two countries that deserved trouble were getting it by inflicting it on each other. That's a cruel thing to say, because it was in fact a deadly war.

TS: Very much so. Dragged on for eight years and cost hundreds of thousands of lives.

JV: Yes. Huge costs in lives and blood for both Iran and Iraq, with very little to show for it.

TS: It reminds one sometimes of these World War I battles, which is a lot of materiel and men expended for virtually nothing.

JV: Yes. For what appeared to be no useful thing at all.

TS: How close did we monitor that conflict in any way?

(2:23:00)

JV: We monitored it fairly closely for what was going on, [as] the Iranians had a lot of U.S. equipment for one thing. I think that we wanted to see how it worked. At the same time we didn't want to get involved, because of the hostage situation and what had happened between us and Iran. So the Iranians were stuck without repair parts for the equipment that we had, and that particularly affected their air force.

And of course we knew a lot of Iranians. When I was a gunnery instructor at the artillery school I had two Iranians in the section that I taught, in the battery officers' course. And when I went to helicopter school there were two Iranians in my class at helicopter school. So the relationships between the armed forces of the United States, between the Iranian military and the American military, had been pretty good up until the overthrow of the Shah.

¹³ Iran-Iraq War: armed conflict lasting from September 1980 to August 1988. The 20th century's longest conventional war, with estimates of more than 500,000 military deaths.

TS: Right. That was one of our closest allies, if not the closest in the region, right, besides Israel.

JV: Right.

TS: So we had provided Iran with a lot of weapons systems, up to the 1970s.

JV: Right.

TS: You mentioned spare parts. Is that really where that equipment starts to, literally as well as figuratively, break down is when you can't get replacement parts?

JV: Right. If you can't get spare parts for it, it's very difficult to operate. You wind up cannibalizing one airplane to keep two more running, or something like that.

TS: Which is a way, before too long, of putting a lot of stuff out of commission.

JV: Exactly.

TS: We'll come back to the Iran-Iraq War, because all throughout your time as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs it's still going to be there.

JV: Yes.

TS: The election of Ronald Reagan. Candidate Ronald Reagan talks about, hints if not states openly, about the role of the military and a change in budgetary policy, and makes this more specific after his election in November 1980. How closely did you and the Chief of Staff, U.S. Army follow this candidate and later president, and what this was going to mean for the U.S. Army?

JV: First, looking back at the budgets during the Carter years with the constantly falling budgets, Jimmy Carter's last budget was a raise in defense spending.

TS: His very last one, yes. But it was still below where he started.

JV: Yes. It was below where he started, and of course it never got implemented because he was out of office before it came about. But the budget that he had submitted in his last in office – it wasn't submitted to the Congress but would have been submitted to the Congress – the budget we worked on the year of the election called for an increase, but as you say, it wasn't a huge increase but it was an important increase. Of course we looked at the campaigns, and you don't do that much when you're in the armed forces because it's talk for the most part. I think at the time with what the Reagan campaign was saying it sounded like, wow, that sounds really good. But we've heard that song before. (*chuckles*)

TS: A little jaded are we?

JV: Right. So I think the election and the rapidity with which the Reagan Administration pursued improvements in the defense certainly surprised me and I think it surprised most of the professional military officers. On the other hand, as far as the Carter Administration is concerned, the one thing that the defense establishment and the defense of the United States owes thanks for is appointing Harold Brown as Secretary of Defense. For an administration that had [what] I would consider poor defense policies, Harold Brown was a wonderful Secretary of Defense.

TS: How do you square that, in a sense, with what he's appointed to do and what he actually is able to do?

JV: Most presidents and secretaries of defense, if the nation has military problems, they have armed forces that were created for them by their predecessors, no matter what the party of the predecessor happened to be. And not only one predecessor, but in the case of the president even perhaps two or three.

You look at the aircraft carrier that's now being built, [the USS *Gerald R. Ford* (CVN-78)]. It was approved long before President Obama became president, and it's not going to be launched until sometime at least in his second term, or whoever replaces him during that term. So that's sort of the way the defense budget works nowadays. We don't decide to build an aircraft carrier today and launch it even four or five months from now or six months from now. So Harold Brown was a guy who understood that and understood the importance of planning for the future. So stealth technology and its use in subsequent aircraft really came to fruition under Harold Brown. He pushed that. The Internet.

TS: That's two enormous technologies right there.

JV: Yes. I think we talked earlier about the Big Five for the Army. Harold Brown made sure that we got the research and development into those programs to make them come to fruition. He was a big pusher of research and development to take care of the future. And I think that many of us argued at the time that perhaps he put too much money in research and development and we didn't have enough money to, as I say, fix the barracks roofs. But those are choices that the Secretary of Defense has to make and that the armed forces have to make. I would say Harold Brown, when it was up to him, made generally the right choices to have a better defense force in the future. The Reagan administration inherited the value of that, the ability to have programs that were almost ready to go into production and that could go into production in a hurry, and improve the armed forces in a hurry.

TS: So they weren't starting from square one with a lot of stuff. The ground work had already been done.

JV: Right.
(2:32:30)

TS: Can you compare and contrast outgoing Secretary of Defense Brown with incoming Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger?¹⁴

JV: Harold Brown was a scientist, to begin with. Cap Weinberger is not a scientist; [he was] a lawyer and an administrator. But an administrator with a lot of competence and a lot of background. He'd headed the Office of Management and Budget and had worked in a number of positions, both in the state and federal level, [he] certainly was closer to Ronald Reagan than Harold Brown was to Jimmy Carter. I'd say they were both men that I admired greatly, both people of enormous integrity and honesty, loyal Americans with very difficult jobs who worked their tails off to do them to the best of their ability. So I liked both Harold Brown and Cap Weinberger a great deal.

TS: How soon after the election did you have the opportunity to meet and speak with Secretary Weinberger?

JV: He visited the Joint Chiefs regularly, at least once a week during my time he met with the Joint Chiefs. As the acting Chief when Shy Meyer wasn't there I got to see him from time to time. But it didn't seem like a big deal or anything to me. He was refreshing and obviously, number one he was interested in carrying out the President's program of improving the armed forces, and he wanted to do it quickly and wanted to be seen doing it quickly and wanted to do it efficiently.

TS: What kind of leadership style did he bring to that assignment?

JV: As Secretary of Defense, it's a huge job. Next to the President of the United States it's the biggest job in the country.

TS: More than Secretary of State?

JV: Yes. Just the people alone, the number of people in the armed forces. The size of the budget. Then the political importance of it in dealing with the Congress, because of the size of the budget.

TS: The adjective thankless comes to mind thinking about that job, because there are so many different constituents.

JV: Right. Right. Right. It is a huge job. You are the President's representative to provide civilian control of the armed forces of the United States, but you're also the CEO of an outfit that spends, right now, close to a trillion dollars of the taxpayers' money. And then you are the person who orders armed forces to go to war. You're the President's agent for doing that. So those three things alone are enough to stagger you until you get into the details of

¹⁴ Caspar W. Weinberger (1917-2006); U.S. politician and businessman. Secretary of Defense under President Ronald Reagan, 1981-87.

the job. *(chuckles)* So it's a huge job with enormous responsibility. Cap Weinberger was a delegator. He had to delegate, but he also understood that the responsibility was his.

TS: He made that clear to you and General Meyer as well?

JV: To everybody that served for him. Responsibility was his. He was perfectly willing to delegate, and delegate authority to do things, but he didn't want any surprises so it was your duty to keep him informed of what was going on and inform him of what was important.

TS: Jimmy Carter wasn't in office very long in 1977 before, admittedly in different circumstances, you had the opportunity to meet with him personally. Did you have an opportunity early on to meet with President Ronald Reagan?

JV: He came to visit the Joint Chiefs fairly early, and it happened that Shy Meyer was out of town and I got to meet him. As a matter of fact somewhere around here there's a picture of that meeting. He came and he wanted to meet with the Joint Chiefs and have lunch with them.

TS: What was your first impression of President Ronald Reagan?

JV: A pleasant man, intelligent man, one who had great respect for the armed services and for Americans who served in the armed services. Eventually I came to realize that he had a great affection for the armed forces. A pleasant man to be around.

TS: We'll of course talk much more about President Ronald Reagan, but these first impressions are often interesting, to hear just how initially one comes across.

JV: Yes. I think it came across to me that, even at that first meeting with the Chiefs and the luncheon, that he viewed us as part of his team. He wanted us to be team members with him, and that he himself was part of the team as well.

TS: That language I can imagine after conversing with you, that resonates with you, because you've talked about team building.

JV: Yes.

TS: So hearing the President of the United States say you're part of a team – I didn't hear you describe Jimmy Carter that way.

JV: No. In fact, as I said before, at least in the immediate past time it was not common for the Chiefs to meet frequently with the President of the United States. At least once a year at budget time there was perhaps a perfunctory meeting with the Chiefs, where they'd tell the President that they were disappointed that the budget was as low as it was, but... *(chuckles)*
(2:41:00)

TS: And repeat this a year from now or something.

JV: Right.

TS: So Ronald Reagan changes this dynamic?

JV: He did indeed.

TS: And in a positive way as I hear you describing it.

JV: Yes.

TS: While you're still the Vice Chief, and pretty soon after Ronald Reagan is inaugurated, he's almost assassinated, in March 1981.¹⁵

JV: Yes.

TS: Do you remember that and how that news was received and how you reacted to it?

JV: It was scary to realize that again we did have people – but it shouldn't have surprised us – and I'm sure there are people who today would want to assassinate President Obama or whoever happened to be President. But certainly the bureaucracy, the Secret Service, has to take that into account and the presidents themselves have to take it into account. But certainly for us, having seen, at least by the time of the assassination attempt, the basic outlines of what the Reagan administration had in mind for the armed services, we certainly didn't want to lose President Reagan. Just purely from the Defense point of view and the wellbeing of the armed forces point of view, we didn't want to lose President Reagan. George H. W. Bush¹⁶ was well known, but the magnitude of the Reagan defense improvements that by this time had settled in on us that hey, this guy is really serious.

TS: This only took a matter of weeks for this to settle in.

JV: Right. Hey, they're serious. We're moving faster than we expected to move and we've got to run to catch up actually.

TS: Did this assassination attempt on the President, he was out of commission when it happened and then for a little bit longer, does this activate any kind of emergency procedures that you were then impacted by?

¹⁵ Attempted assassination of President Ronald Reagan: On 30 March 1981 in Washington, Reagan and three others were shot and wounded by would-be assassin John Hinckley, Jr.

¹⁶ George H. W. Bush (b. 1924); President of the United States, 1989-93. Previously Vice President of the United States, 1981-89; Director of the CIA, 1976-77.

JV: No. No. The procedures are well laid out. Those procedures were set early in the Cold War and you knew what was going to happen and how it would all work. There's stability in the Defense Department, because the Secretary of Defense wasn't changed.

TS: So the Army doesn't go on alert or anything just because something like this happens.

JV: No.

TS: The last thing I wanted to ask about as far as events, because there are things that are happening, is the April 1982 war in the Falkland Islands, off the coast of Argentina. This is before you've become Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Here's a foreign policy issue, but one which impacts our hemisphere nonetheless. What do you remember about that and about how the United States was sitting not involved, and yet we might have been involved?

JV: Yes. It was not only strange for me, because [General Leopoldo] Galtieri,¹⁷ head of the Argentine government, dictator, president, whatever you want to call him, had just visited the United States. Shy was out of town, so I was the host for his visit. He himself was an interesting guy, a big man, quite personable but a little on the gruff side, but I'd say a soldier through and through. In fact somewhere in this world there's a pistol given to me by Galtieri. (*chuckles*) An Argentine manufactured 9mm that was his idea of competing with Colt¹⁸ in the arms world, I think.

But at any rate, he had pledged cooperation with the United States in hemispheric matters and certainly wanted to be part of the Armies of the Americas, sort of a loose confederation. We had a defense college at Fort McNair [in Washington, D.C.] that was sort of a mirror image of the National Defense College, but it was for the hemisphere. He wanted to continue to cooperate with them. The Falklands were not mentioned at all during that visit.

TS: So he didn't sound you out as a representative of the U.S. military at all about what you might think or...

JV: No. No. So it was a surprise.

TS: That was my follow up. Then it seems like, if it wasn't mentioned, that you didn't see this coming.

JV: No. No. It may be that our intelligence knew more about it, but it wasn't brought to my attention. It was one of those dozens of border disputes that exist in the world today and have never been resolved. So put it down as number forty on your list of problems.

¹⁷ Leopoldo Galtieri (1926-2003); Argentine army general. Served as President of Argentina, December 1981 to June 1982, as head of a military junta.

¹⁸ Colt's Manufacturing Company: U.S. firearms manufacturer, founded 1836.

TS: That you probably won't have to deal with.

JV: Right.

TS: Argentina invades, I remember seeing the news as well, and it was almost surreal in a sense.

JV: It was indeed.

TS: What happened within the corridors of the United States Army at the highest levels, to decide what to make of this and how to respond?

JV: First, Britain is a member of NATO and probably our closest ally of all time other than the wars of the Revolution and 1812, and we've always had a closer relation with the Brits than with anybody else in the world, to tell you the truth. At least in my perception. And yet here this is occurring many thousands of miles from the British Isles and the Brits have gone through the same sort of budget cuts that we have and reductions in their armed forces. So the appeal from the Argentines was, don't get involved; we can take care of this ourselves. And I think they didn't want us to condemn them for it. The appeal from the Brits was, they were going to need a little help and we did in fact wind up giving the Brits a fair amount of help, but it was more overt than covert. It certainly wasn't greatly publicized at the time.

TS: It wasn't publicized.

JV: No.

TS: What did we decide to provide?

JV: Refueling for both ships and aircraft, intelligence. For me personally, I became acquainted with Sir Edwin Bramall,¹⁹ who was then the Chief of the British Army and later became Chief of the Defense Staff when I was Chairman. So it worked out to be a relationship that was important to me later on, the fact that we did give the Brits some help at that time.

TS: We're taking sides, in other words.

JV: We're taking sides, but not overtly. The United States has always been an anti-colonialist country; we grew out of that. And seeing the French thrown out of Indo-China, even though it brought us into a long war that we didn't want to be in, and maybe shouldn't have been in, was still something that we understood. In fact I think many secretly appreciated. So I think America was sort of ambivalent about the Falkland Islands. I don't

¹⁹ Sir Edwin Bramall (b. 1923); British Army field marshal. Chief of the British General Staff, 1979-82; Chief of the Defence Staff, 1982-85.

recall headlines in the newspaper, but I think the general feeling was support for Britain. If they had not been successful I don't know what would have been the result. But on the other hand, it was important as NATO members that...

(2:52:30)

TS: So we're balancing our relationship with Britain, fellow NATO member Britain, with questions of possible hemispheric solidarity with Argentina.

JV: Hemispheric. It wasn't so much with Argentina, I don't think. We didn't have any love for Galtieri. Seeing him deposed was okay, but we didn't want to cause problems with the rest of the people in the hemisphere.

TS: What military lessons were there? Were we watching U.S. military weapons systems, or were we looking to gain any kind of information or things that were useful for us moving out of this conflict, even though we weren't directly involved?

JV: You're always interested in any conflict that's going on in the world, particularly when you see pieces of equipment that you have and are also being used in the conflict. The Harrier jet, for example. The Brits had it and we have, the Marine Corps had it, and we were certainly interested in how it panned out.

TS: So at the end of the day, it sounds like, we aided the Brits in a way somewhat reminiscent of Lend-Lease²⁰ in 1941, where we were involved but certainly not directly in providing assistance.

JV: We didn't provide any combat support or....

TS: Right. But we had a desired outcome, it sounds like, in the Falklands conflict.

JV: Right.

TS: Did President Reagan talk to the Joint Chiefs at any meeting where you or Chief Meyer were there?

JV: I'm sure he did, but I didn't attend any.

TS: So it would have been Meyer who attended. Anything else you want to say about the Falklands conflict? I mean it was a strange conflict in some ways, and obviously didn't go very well for Argentina.

JV: Yes. Did not. It was a disaster for the Argentines. I mean, major ships sunk.

²⁰ Lend-Lease: World War II program under which U.S. supplied Great Britain, the USSR, and other Allied nations with materiel, 1941-45.

TS: They did, yes. And in a sense...the literature is pretty clear. The invasion had briefly boosted this military dictatorship, and the absolutely embarrassing loss at the end ...

JV: ... caused it to collapse.

TS: Which we weren't, from what I hear you say, unhappy with.

JV: Weren't displeased.

TS: That seems like a good break point for today.

JV: What we should do before we leave this, before we get into my being JCS Chairman and before we leave the Vice Chief's job, is again talk about Korea and what was going on in Korea. We don't have to do that today, but it is an important lead in to the Reagan administration and our relationship with Korea in which I was personally involved.

TS: And I appreciate you letting me know what else is significant. What else would you like us to make sure to cover about your three years as Vice Chief?

JV: Let me think about that. I'm sure there's things that we haven't covered, because it was an important three years for the Army and for me personally.

TS: Okay. Good.

END OF INTERVIEW