

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, 18 October 2012. This is another of our ongoing interviews with General John W. Vessey, Jr. My name is Thomas Saylor. It's a cloudy fall day here at the Vessey residence outside of Garrison, Minnesota. The leaves have largely exited the trees.

General Vessey, today we want to talk some about the Joint Chiefs of Staff itself and some of those issues surrounding the modernization and reform that you've identified as important to you during your time as Chairman. Let me go just for a few minutes to the JCS itself, and thinking of our possible audiences in the future too for this information. As a military man, how would you describe the origins of the JCS, its purpose and how it changed over time from its World War II beginnings to the time that you became the Chairman?

JV: The JCS grew out of World War II actually – and of course from our history previous to World War II, World War I, and the intervening years – but Pearl Harbor and then the United States involvement in World War II, which was a shaping event for the defense establishment of the United States. As you recall, there were congressional investigations into, How did Pearl Harbor occur and why did it occur? In the military school system and in the doctrinal documents for the armed forces, 'Never another Pearl Harbor' was sort of number one on the list.

Of course, we were engaged in battle in nearly every time zone in the world during World War II at some time or another. We had forces spread across the Pacific and the Atlantic and the Mediterranean and into South Asia, places that many Americans probably couldn't find on the map of the globe before World War II and yet their sons and daughters, sons particularly, were there and daughters to a lesser degree in World War II.

In previous wars the need for the Army and the Navy to work together were there, but there were generally few incidents where the borders between the Army and the Navy overlapped. World War I saw the introduction of aircraft, but in a minimal way. World War II saw us manufacturing 100,000 airplanes a year and deploying huge air fleets into battle. We lost thousands of airplanes shot down in World War II. So the introduction of air made a big difference and the question was whether the air arm should be a separate arm. Until World War II you had the Army Air Forces and the Naval Air Forces. After World War II there was a great push to separate the Army Air Forces into an Air Force, rather than a corps of the Army itself.

So all that brought about the so-called Defense Reorganization Act of 1947, which was the major driver. It established the JCS and the structure of unified commands, which would command forces from all services in theaters of operation. That set the basic framework for the JCS and for the command structure of American armed forces for the

future, and that still exists today but it has been modified and adjusted with lessons learned. We've had the Korean War, the Vietnam War, a number of skirmishes like Grenada, and then we've had the first Gulf War and then Iraq, and now Afghanistan continues. So we've had a lot of learning experience since that time. So the structure has been modified from time to time. Sometimes with major changes in the law and other times internal modification.

Basically the organization of the Joint Chiefs was to ensure that you had unified command and control of the armed forces of the United States, all pursuing a common objective. I think the original 1947 act laid out the duties of the JCS, which were to provide strategic command and strategic direction for the armed forces of the United States; to provide logistic plans to support those strategic plans; to provide a joint schooling and training system; and it listed several other things. But basically it was to provide a unified command and direction and the planning for the use of American armed forces, and that's been the framework ever since. And most importantly, to provide military advice to the real people who control the armed forces of the United States: the President, the National Security Council, the Congress, the Secretary of Defense.

Of course the same act created the Defense Department; up until that time you had the War Department, with the Army and the Navy Department for the Navy, and they were separate cabinet members. The Defense Reorganization Act of '47 made the Secretary of Defense over the Army and the Navy and eventually the Air Force. Of course the Marine Corps was subordinate to the Navy. The original JCS had a Chairman and the Chief of Staff of the Army, the Chief of Naval Operations and the Chief of Staff of the Air Force. Eventually the commandant of the Marine Corps was included as a member of the JCS.

TS: When you assumed the job in 1982, thirty-five years have gone by since the Defense Reorganization Act of 1947. What would you identify as the most substantive change or changes in that intervening three and a half decades?

JV: Of course the legal change was inclusion of the commandant of the Marine Corps. I've forgotten whether it was in the '47 act or in a later act, the commandant of the Coast Guard was also included in time of war. So it actually put some burden on the chair of the JCS to keep the commandant of the Coast Guard informed and to keep the JCS informed of the condition of the Coast Guard and its possible inclusion into the Navy in time of war. The real changes were in how they were used by the various presidents, I think. I don't think we have time to go through it all, and I'm not sure I know enough to answer the question, but it varied from president to president how the JCS was used.

TS: As we would expect, I guess. The presidents bring their own personalities and agendas into office.

JV: Right. And I think that will continue as long as we have this sort of an organization, but the way the presidents used the JCS changed the JCS at the time. That is, if presidents don't engage the JCS, the JCS generally ignore the presidents and it makes for a confrontational arrangement between the military forces and the civilian authorities that control the military forces. Whereas if presidents engage the JCS, and if there is a reasonably good

working relationship there, and the military advice is sought and listened to, then you wind up with more of a cooperative relationship.

TS: If we look at then from the 1947 founding of the JCS itself, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford and Carter, of those presidents which would you identify that fit the description of presidents who engaged with the JCS and which would you put in a category perhaps those that did less of that?

JV: Certainly right after World War II, you still had the World War II leadership and President Truman had the benefit of those people. And yet Truman himself was faced with the war in Korea and with [General Douglas] MacArthur; a sort of regal (*chuckles*) aura surrounded MacArthur, even if it was blown over from his corn cob pipe. And there were some tensions there at the time. I suspect that MacArthur thought he knew more than the President did about what was good for the United States. And you had others, of course the first Chairman of the JCS was [General] Omar Bradley, sort of a fatherly figure. Certainly well respected.

And in the background you had Eisenhower who, I've forgotten the exact history, but it seems to me Eisenhower retired and went to Columbia [University as president,] and then was called back and took over NATO and was the first commander of NATO at that time, the first Supreme Allied Commander. So you had these. [General] George Marshall was still around and serving the President both as Secretary of State and then as Secretary of Defense. You had these bigger than life figures that, you know, if I had been Harry Truman I would have been scared of them.

TS: They are both opportunity and challenge, aren't they? They're an enormous resource, but you're right to call them larger than life figures. To all Americans, they knew who these people were and they carried their own reputation with them.

JV: Yes. Right. So from my point of view, and it's only reading the history books and knowing the people sort of as a low ranker who from time to time met some of these other people, I can see why Harry Truman was a little chary of how to deal with this new organization, the JCS.

Then you go on and Eisenhower is elected [in 1952]. Of course that was a great period for the defense of the United States in the future. The framework of the security establishment of the United States was structured during the Eisenhower administration: the National Security Council, the Council staff, the way the National Security Council was to operate, and the president's interaction. Of course the President knew all these people personally. And he did some particularly wonderful things. The Solarium Project, which was Eisenhower's development of the strategy, the containment strategy, that ensued. That we followed actually all the way through the Cold War and successfully concluded the nuclear standoff era without the world being blown up or the United States being damaged materially or losing a lot of casualties.

TS: Did Eisenhower enjoy positive relations with the JCS?

JV: Eisenhower was pretty chintzy with the dollars, as far as defense was concerned. At least it seemed that way to the defense establishment, because immediately after World War II the armed forces of the United States went down to almost nothing. Particularly the Army. Then they recovered during the Korean War and, even though Eisenhower made that speech about the defense industrial complex, at the same time he had just submitted a defense budget that called for around eight percent of gross domestic product for defense, which by today's standards would be enormous.

TS: More than twice as much.

JV: Three times.

TS: He was making that speech I think in early 1961, just prior to exiting the office when he had already been in office, and by 1961 our needs possibly as a nation were different than they were in 1953.

JV: Yes. Right. The Korean War had ended.

TS: Right. Did this relationship change? Or how did this relationship change with John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Democrats, during a very different decade?

JV: Kennedy came into the presidency [in 1961] and immediately, for one thing, called for pay increases for the armed forces, which was welcome for all of us. And it was a substantial pay increase. Suddenly from being close to the poverty line we...

TS: I remember you talking about this even as we moved through that era chronologically. You noticed the increase in pay.

JV: Oh, yes. It was the first time in my post-war career after I was married and began to have children that we didn't have to manage the checkbook to make sure that we could pay the bills on the float at the end of the month. (*chuckles*) Put the check in the slow mail. Make sure it got there by the time your paycheck got to the bank.

TS: And you were paid once a month in those days, right?

JV: Yes.

TS: The JCS Chairman, a lot hinges on personalities, you've mentioned here too. Just thinking of those chairmen from Omar Bradley forward, we've got Arthur Radford, General Nathan Twining of the Air Force, Lyman Lemnitzer, Maxwell Taylor, Earl Wheeler, through the '50s and '60s. As you look at those or think about those of your predecessors, how many of them stand out as significant chairmen who we should remember historically? Let's put it that way.

(22:45)

JV: I guess you remember all of them, because they all made some contribution. Some more than others in terms of how the JCS operated.

TS: Which of those would you remember as most significant for what they provided to the role of the JCS?

JV: Bradley of course, as the first Chairman. Sort of set the tone. Lemnitzer, although he served only one term and was moved to the SACEUR¹ job, Lemnitzer was a great staff officer, that is, he understood staff functions.

TS: Is that important for the Chairman?

JV: It's important, the Joint Staff, before the Goldwater-Nichols [Act of 1986], then the JCS themselves were the military advisors to the presidents and Secretary of Defense and National Security Council, but the Chairman was the spokesman for the JCS. The Joint Staff was to serve the JCS, not the Chairman, but the JCS. But the Chairman was to manage the Joint Staff for the JCS.

The Navy had a different sort of school system. The way the naval officers' careers grew was different from the way that those in the Army. The Air Force pretty much copied the Army's system. The Marines were ex-officio members of the JCS until they became official members of the JCS, and theirs was sort of a mixture of the two. Most of the things that the Marines did were much like what the Army does, and of course many of the Marines were schooled in the Army school system. But most of the Marine officers were Naval Academy graduates, so you had a mixture of the two. In Lemnitzer's time much was done to systematize the operations of the Joint Staff. Earl Wheeler of course served longer than anyone.

TS: Six years, yes, 1964-70. Right.

JV: And of course that was Vietnam War time and the President wanted him to extend it. He served through both Democratic and Republican administrations.

TS: The Vietnam War of the 1960s and early 1970s: how did that impact the Chairman's position and role? We're in a different kind of conflict that World War II or Korea, World War II for sure.

JV: At least from the national point of view, sure. For the ordinary soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines, the fighting was very much like the same sort of fighting that they had in World War II except in many of the fights in South Vietnam the enemy wasn't in uniform.

TS: Right. But from the national political perspective, the public opinion, and so I'm wondering for the Chairman, here we've got a conflict that...

JV: ... is questioned strongly by the American public and certainly by the news media and academia.

¹ SACEUR: Supreme Allied Commander, Europe.

TS: Right.

JV: There was no actual vote ever taken by the American people on whether or not you support the war, but certainly it was reflected in congressional elections and presidential elections. The Defense Department itself, the office of the Secretary of Defense, became much stronger during that period. Its staff grew enormously.

(28:45)

TS: What carryover does this have to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Chairman, given the reporting relationships?

JV: In my opinion, it brought about the changes that David Jones had recommended. I think it was borne out in the work that we did in asking ourselves what needs to change. When I became Chairman, David Jones had made these public speeches.²

TS: And in clear fashion laid out what the issues were and what his suggestions were.

JV: What he thought the issues were. And suggested some very concrete changes that should be made. So by that time when we looked at it... For example, we're sort of jumping ahead from your earlier questions.

TS: Right.

JV: But perhaps it's time to jump ahead. So that when I was appointed Chairman, that was in the background. That is, that had already been laid out, and on the very first day that I met with the JCS it was one of the things that I laid out that I believed the JCS needed to address.

TS: So you've come to this job with, and I hate to use the word agenda, but shall we say issues of importance to you.

JV: Yes.

TS: Ideas develop over time. We've talked about this kind of changing position or relationship of the JCS now to this expanded Secretary of Defense role. The immediately preceding years to your assuming the job in 1982 were the difficult years of the 1970s, and we've talked in our discussions already, there's questions about the end of conscription, there's the end of the Vietnam War, there are budgeting challenges, there are modernization issues. So a lot of this is bubbling around.

JV: Yes. And under the shadow of increasing Soviet Union nuclear power.

² Jones also published these ideas, in a lengthy article called "Joint Chiefs," in the *New York Times*, 7 November 1982.

TS: Your immediate predecessors, Admiral Thomas Moorer, 1970-74, General George S. Brown, 1974-78, and General David C. Jones of the Air Force also, 1978-82, they were struggling with the same issues.

JV: Right.

TS: You're not a member of the JCS, but you are in a position where you're aware of these tensions and debates going on within the service, within the United States Army, about questions of modernization or reform. So when you meet with the JCS the first day for example, as you've mentioned, you've been thinking about things for a while, a longer time than just a few months?

JV: Yes, but intensified certainly after I found out that I was going to be the Chairman. They were a minor academic interest, I'd say, before that time.

TS: Reform. This idea of reform, and I guess modernization I would place under reform because it implies change or altering the status quo, there are some interesting academic books and also military books about this concept of reform and modernization in the 1970s and early '80s that bring us up to the time when you arrive with a list of things that are important to you.

One of these books, which is critical but also contentious, is James G. Burton's book called *The Pentagon Wars: Reformers Challenge the Old Guard*, Naval Institute Press, 1993. I single out Burton because he is critical but also argumentative, and he puts things on the table for us with a critical tone. And I summarize here: Burton argues that during the 1970s there was a group of military officers and civilians who challenged what they saw as bureaucratic corruption, incompetence and dogmatism in the Pentagon. These reformers, Burton says, worked through Congress and elsewhere in Washington to expose false claims of "high technology advocates and proponents of service parochialism."

Because those are out front arguments, I want to just put them out there as a way of exploring reform in the '70s and how we get to your set of ideas, and General Jones' too, for that matter. So first, about Burton's arguments about bureaucratic corruption, incompetence, identifying these things. Would you be likely to say yes to that or to refute what he lays out?

JV: There's a marvelous old poem from Civil War days. I've forgotten who wrote it or even the exact words, but it's a poem about calling a general to a hearing of the Congress and accusing him of corruption and malfeasance and so forth, because this guy was obviously in the logistic chain and responsible for procurement in some way or another. Every time I hear these words about bureaucratic corruption and so forth, I'm always reminded of that poem. Somewhere I have that poem in my papers, because it seems like something that we have repeated from George Washington's time to the present. Having experienced the same sort of charges in the hearings in front of the Congress, it always brings it to mind. I want to say this: Yes, if you've got as many people as we have working on defense issues and procurement problems and the budget that runs into the billions and billions of dollars, somewhere in here you're going to have somebody that's going to try and cheat or make an

extra buck where they shouldn't and so forth, but that's true in any human activity. Sin is with us and the Department of Defense is not excused from that or immune to it. (*chuckles*)

On the other hands, my general observation of the people with whom I have disagreed strongly, whether they be legislators or professional bureaucrats or military officers, my general observation is that most of these people come at their jobs, they come at it with their own biases and their own backgrounds and so forth, but generally work very hard to provide the taxpayer with honest work and honest opinions and work hard to make things come out right. Not everything that man makes comes out right. In fact, most of the things man makes come out with some mistakes involved in it, and that's certainly true of military operations, military equipment, whatever it happens to be. So the charge of...what did he call it? Bureaucratic corruption?

TS: Incompetence and dogmatism in the Pentagon. Yes.

JV: Yes, you could find plenty of dumb mistakes, but I'd say the bureaucratic corruption, there's not much of it. You can probably find some. I just reject the idea that the whole thing is falling apart because of bureaucratic corruption. On the other hand, we can make some dumb mistakes and you can make some dumb mistakes at very high levels that have big effects on the defense of the United States and casualties among American service people and dollars that the taxpayer has provided. It is the duty of these people in high places to work very hard to ensure that that doesn't occur.

TS: How aware were you on a daily basis that the lens was focused on you, as the highest ranking military officer?

JV: For the most part you're so busy that that really can't concern you, but every once in a while it's brought to your attention. I remember reading William Safire's³ comments one day when Safire was a great columnist for the *New York Times*. A wonderful writer. He called me an inarticulate martinet. (*chuckles*) So there are things like that that come to your attention every once in a while. And of course you go in front of the Congress and get accused of spending the country into bankruptcy and so forth. When you're sitting there with the hairs on your neck bristling and you want to tell them that, hey, I can't spend a dime that you don't authorize or appropriate. It's an interesting issue. People like Burton...

TS: Burton identifies, he argues that there was a committed group of reformers, people known to each other as pushing for modernization and reform in the way the armed forces was structured and did its job. Now in your job as Vice Chief, or now as Chairman, how aware were you of reformers, people who you would identify or who would identify themselves as reformers, as wanting to do things a different way?

JV: I've known dozens of people that wanted to do things in a different way, and I can usually count myself among that crowd. If there's a better way to do it, let's find out what it is and do it.

³ William Safire (1929-2009); U.S. author, journalist, and presidential speechwriter.

TS: So you would consider yourself someone who came into this job desirous of modernizing or reforming the way the military did its business, or how the JCS itself was organized.

JV: Yes.

TS: As opposed to someone who we might say was satisfied with the status quo.

JV: Yes. Right.

TS: Were you or how aware were you of a particular officer identified and talked about by Burton, an Air Force colonel named John Boyd?⁴

JV: I knew Boyd and knew what he was espousing.

TS: Tell us, just for the record, what did you know about Boyd?

JV: Boyd was a fighter pilot as I recall and was pushing for, basically, better training and more effective control of the fighter force, to get more out of it. I'm not sure whether Boyd himself or some of the people that listened to Boyd were pushing to apply Boyd's principles to the whole defense establishment.

(45:00)

TS: Did you ever meet Boyd yourself?

JV: I think I did.

TS: Do you remember that meeting at all?

JV: I don't.

TS: Boyd published a study called "Patterns of Conflict," from 1976, [although his ideas had been around since the early 1970s].

JV: Yes. Right.

TS: That rings a bell with you.

JV: Yes. Right.

TS: Can you recall anything about the content or how you responded to his calls to reform in there?

⁴ John R. Boyd (1927-1997); U.S. Air Force colonel and later Pentagon consultant.

JV: My general recollection of the Boyd business is that you can lay out principles of reform, but life is a lot like golf. Some people think God let man invent golf for the entertainment of the rich, whereas my own conclusion is that the Lord let man invent golf to teach him something about life. The fundamental rule of golf is that you play the ball where it lies. You cannot look out and say the world would be better if everybody did this and so forth. Maybe it would be, but how do you get everybody to do this? That's a big question.

What you have to recognize in reforming the armed forces is, you have to start from where you are today. You've got to start with, these are the officers we have. These are the soldiers we have. These are the sailors we have. These are the airmen we have. We have trained them to do this. They can do this. They have this equipment. You have to start from there. So where do you go? What's step one in making your changes? What's step two? What's the cost of step one and step two? How do we get the money to pay for step one and step two and step three and step four? My own evaluation of some of these big wave reformers is that they don't lay out steps one, two, three and four. How do you get there?

TS: Were they assuming a blank slate, in a sense?

JV: Yes. Right.

TS: The best of all possible worlds.

JV: Right. Rewrite, change the picture. The picture now looks like this. We're going to change it so there's television on that wall and no books in this room and so forth. Boyd was a smart guy and had some great ideas and many of his ideas were in fact implemented, particularly in the training system. I don't want to denigrate Boyd, but Boyd's solution for changing the defense establishment as people who became Boyd fans, not Boyd himself, my reaction is that you can't get there from here.

TS: So Boyd's ideas, theoretically I'm hearing, were attractive but in a fundamental application sense....

JV: Boyd's ideas had good fundamental application to certain aspects of the defense establishment. You could go and make those changes and improve, and the Air Force certainly did that. But to say that hey, bring in Boyd and have him reorganize the Department of Defense, that wasn't in the cards.

TS: So Boyd is someone, what I hear you saying I think, select some of his ideas for application where appropriate, but Boyd wasn't someone you were going to invite into the JCS as an advisor.

JV: Yes. Well, if I were president I wouldn't make him the Chairman.

TS: Okay. If we think about proponents of reform in the 1970s, Boyd wasn't the only one out there proposing this solution or that solution. It seemed more so than the preceding decade, people were calling for certain reforms both in the civilian establishment but also

within the U.S. military. How would you place yourself on the continuum of proponents of reform of those who were stand fast and those perhaps like Boyd, as polar opposites? Where does John Vessey fit by the late '70s, early '80s?

JV: My point I think, and I think I just described it, is that you have to go from where you are. Whatever you're going to do, you have to go from where you are. I go back to my time as Vice Chief of the Army and having the question of the big five programs – the M-1 [tank], the Patriot missile, the Bradley fighting vehicle, the Blackhawk and the Apache – how do we get them on time and under cost, or at least get them down within the cost that we had predicted? Knowing that that's a huge job, you get some outside advice. I'm not sure what I did was the right answer, but it certainly provided a lot of help, and that is get in some people who were in the manufacturing business who made things and who did it at a profit and weren't saddled with a defense bureaucracy and say, "What's your advice? What would you do if you were in this position?" We implemented many of those recommendations and changed the people, and eventually we got all of those programs within their budgets. We got them moved up so that they came into production generally on time and provided wonderful pieces of equipment for the armed forces of the United States that they're still using today, thirty years later. So again, you can't wave a magic wand and say well, the new principle applies. The new principle may apply, but you've got to go from where you are.

(52:50)

TS: In the business world, the larger the bureaucracy the more difficult it is to steer that bureaucracy or that system in a new direction. It takes time.

JV: It does indeed.

TS: Once things are moving it can be very challenging to shift the direction, even a little bit.

JV: Right. Right. It's like changing direction for a big ocean going oil tanker. The captain says change direction, but you can tell that to the man at the wheel and it will take a little while.

TS: When you become Chairman then, is the JCS the small speedboat or the large oil tanker, to use that analogy here again, as far as an organization to move in a modernized and reformed direction?

JV: There are certain things you can change quickly, but you have to recognize with the Defense Department that at that time you've got 500 ships out there in the Navy and if you're going to change what the Navy does or the way they do it or whatever it is you've got to change the minds of a lot of sailors, not only officers but noncommissioned officers and sailors themselves. You've got a fifteen division Army in the active force and another five divisions in the reserve force, and you're going to change – you've got 15,000 soldiers in each one of those divisions plus another division size of support for each one, so you're going to have a lot of changes to make. So those things work out only with the time that you change with objectives and tactics, techniques and procedures.

TS: Do you feel you recognized this adequately when you took this position or accepted this position?

JV: If I didn't, I had wasted forty years of service.

TS: Well, there are people like Boyd out there who are suggesting it's possible to move in a new direction more quickly, and he's also a person with experience.

JV: Well, that's right. But on the other hand, he's lucky. Boyd's experience draws from one facet of military operations, that is the operations of fighter aircraft.

TS: Which is itself a unique thing. It's more of the individual within a particular aircraft as opposed to a team.

JV: Right.

TS: Although he's a team on a plane.

JV: The same team supporting him.

TS: But it's him as the pilot. So he can change direction very quickly.

JV: Right.

TS: For the lay person – here's one of these lay person questions – can you describe how the JCS was organized when you took the job? This means just briefly, reporting relationships and maybe directorates.

JV: The JCS as a body were to do those things laid out in law under Title 10 U.S. Code, the Duties of the JCS, which were to provide military advice to the President and Secretary of Defense and National Security Council and then to provide strategic plans and strategic direction for the armed forces of the United States. Those were the main duties.

The other duties of the JCS sort of support those other duties. The logistic plans, the schools, the joint school system and so forth are all supporters of those first items. The JCS as a body met to carry out those duties. As I mentioned before, it had a unique staff, the joint staff under the direction of the Chairman to do the planning work and the analytical work to help them with their duties as members of the JCS. In my time both as the Army's Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans and as Vice Chief of the Army and from time to time Acting Chief and consequently a member of the JCS at that time, I must say that my opinion was that the JCS duties were secondary duties to the principle duties I had as being the number two man on the Army staff and to build an army and it was frankly almost an interference in my job.

TS: Really?

JV: Because in the Army staff we had a section of the staff that supported the chief in his duties as a member of the JCS. The chief may have taken it more seriously than I, because he did it more often than I. But frankly my preparations for JCS meetings were pretty cursory, when I was Vice Chief of the Army.

Then when you become JCS Chairman, and it's really incumbent on you to take those duties seriously that are laid out in law for the JCS and you are the Chairman, then you realize that you have some wonderful people who are members of the JCS. In theory you have the best soldier, best airman, best sailor and the best Marine that the country has. At least they've been chosen by their leaders to lead these organizations, and consequently somebody believes they're the best. And they ought to have some pretty good advice for you on these particular things that the JCS are supposed to provide, that is this military advice for the President, the Secretary of Defense and the National Security Council, and for planning for the strategic plans for the armed forces of the United States. The question is, how does one get the Chief of Naval Operations and the Chief of Staff of the Army and the Chief of Staff of the Air Force and the Commandant of the Marine Corps to hang their chiefs of service hats outside the room and put on their JCS hat, which is a completely different set of duties?

TS: Okay. Are you going to answer your own question?

JV: Yes. With great care (*chuckles*) and respect for the two sets of duties that those people have. For example, one of the arguments that Dave Jones raised often in pushing his need for reform was the fact that when the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs left town the next senior member of the JCS became the acting Chairman. Dave rightfully points out that sometimes that would change three times in a day, because if it happened to be Chief of Staff of the Army was the next ranking man who was in town at the time but he had travel plans for later in the day, then the next guy would be, or perhaps if the Chief of Naval Operations was senior to him and was out of town but came back into town, he would become the acting chair. So as I sat down with the chiefs... And the JCS usually met in a special room called The Tank.

TS: The second part of my lay person question was to sort of paint a picture for those of us in the audience not familiar with a JCS meeting. Talk about the actual location, for example, where you met.

JV: Yes. The JCS meeting room is on the second floor of the Pentagon, and it's a special meeting room. It's nicely decorated. It's got a big long wooden table, probably made out of mahogany or some special wood, and a set of chairs so that each member of the JCS can sit at the table, and the Chairman and room for the Secretary of Defense and probably one other person at the table who may be a visitor for the day or something like that.

TS: And could also be the President of the United States if he wants to attend.

JV: The President of the United States or a visiting ambassador or visiting head of state or the head of Allied Armed Force or something like that, that's invited to a JCS meeting. The room is guarded and it's a secure room. You can talk ultra-top secret or whatever it

happens to be. It has all sorts of visual aids that are capable of being used to enhance material that's being presented to the JCS. It has a restroom.

TS: So you needn't leave.

JV: You needn't leave. You cannot leave.

TS: You can't leave?

JV: (*chuckles*) Generally you don't leave once the meeting starts. You're in until it's over.

TS: Now these meetings. Again for the lay person, are these something that would be held typically in the morning over coffee, noon over lunch, or this is all business and we're not eating or drinking?

JV: Usually the JCS met on certain days of the week. Two days a week would be devoted to JCS meetings, and they would meet in the afternoon generally. The Chairman sets the agenda, and of course that's one of the great tools for the Chairman, is setting the agenda. Generally preparatory work has been done by not only the Joint Staff itself but the service staffs that support the chiefs in their duties as members of the JCS. Through the time I think...whether it was during Eisenhower's presidency [I'm not certain, but] a stylized system for reviewing papers [was created]. That is, there were color coded papers; flimsy, buff and green were the magic words. Flimsy ideas were those that were at the low staff level, were being treated at the lower staff levels, at the various service staffs in the Joint Staff. Buff, by the time it got to the buff color it was treated by the Operations Deputies for each of the chiefs. Then when it became green it meant that the Operations Deputies had approved it and it was ready for the chiefs themselves to address.

TS: Would a meeting of the chiefs, again from the lay perspective, be likely to last thirty minutes or four hours?

JV: Usually two hours or so. But sometimes when knotty subjects were there, late into the evening.

TS: So a wide variety of times.

JV: Right. But generally you looked to budget two hours.

TS: And the agenda. The Chairman sets the agenda.

JV: The Chairman sets the agenda.

TS: And people know ahead of time what the agenda is.

JV: Oh, yes.

TS: So meetings don't take place without agendas.

JV: No, no.

TS: Within a meeting, how free is each person to speak at any time?

JV: During my time it was freedom to speak.

TS: So it's conversational, in a way.

JV: Right.

TS: Does that, from your knowledge, differ from past chairmen?

JV: I can only speak for the time that I attended meetings, which were as the Operations Deputy and as the Vice Chief acting for the Chief. I would say that there was no prohibition against getting your point. In any of those you could make your points.

TS: Is there a stenographer in the room?

JV: That changed during the Vietnam War and after the Freedom of Information Act,⁵ which was a great mistake in my view. I'm not sure whether that happened in the George Brown era or the David Jones era, but in one of those two periods the stenographer disappeared. Up until that time there was a stenographer and every word was recorded.

TS: But under Freedom of Information Act there's the possibility that that exact transcription of the meeting could be made available.

JV: Yes. And it's one of the great regrets of my own experience as JCS Chairman that I didn't re-institute the stenographer and find some way to deal with that Freedom of Information Act.

TS: So there's no minutes from your meetings?

JV: There are no minutes.

TS: In what way was information reported out of these meetings then?

JV: You had two ways to report it. One is that if decisions were made that affected the Army or Navy or whatever it was, that the chiefs took that back with them. The other is that the Joint Staff would produce documents. For example, if it was a strategic plan that was being addressed, the plan itself would be adjusted by the Joint Staff and you'd have those

⁵ Freedom of Information Act: a federal law permitting full or partial disclosure of previously unreleased government information and documents. Effective 5 July 1967.

members of the Joint Staff in the meeting. There were chairs in the back around the wall, and you'd have staff that needed the information from any item that was on the agenda. They'd be present. They might be members of the Joint Staff as well as you'd have the Operations Deputies from the various services would also be in the room.

TS: So the number of people at the table and the number in the room are different.

JV: Yes. Then if it's military advice to Secretaries of Defense or the President, then the Chairman and the chiefs would agree on what that advice is. I'm sure the previous Chairmen had generally the same agreement with the chiefs that I had, that is, that I will present your advice as accurately as I possibly can. If there were any questions about wording, I would write the advice down and then get the chiefs to agree that this is the advice. Or perhaps we would have the staff construct some sort of a memorandum that would carry that advice to the Secretary of Defense or the President.

TS: How often, generally speaking, did you report information out of these meetings to the Secretary of Defense or the President? Regularly or as required?

JV: As required. In my time I got the chiefs to agree that the advice ought to be timely, and if they have to ask for the advice it's probably not timely. So the unwritten rule we had agreed to was that we ought to seek to give the President and the Secretary advice, military advice, before they know they need it. If we've done that then we've probably been timely. If they have to ask for advice on a given subject, we're probably late.

TS: In other words, they've got context from somewhere else already.

JV: Right.

TS: How successful do you feel you were at that?

(1:14:20)

JV: I think reasonably successful. I took those duties very seriously myself. That is, the fact that I wasn't the advisor. The composite JCS was the advisor, the military advisor. But the agreement that I made with the chiefs was first, this business of timely advice. Secondly, that I would try to make sure that I had their advice on any particular subject before I met with the President or Secretary of Defense, and I would provide that advice as accurately as I possibly could and I would tell them beforehand what I was going to tell the President and the Secretary of Defense and then I would tell them afterward.

In my own office, which was not The Tank where the JCS met but in my own office, I got rid of the desk and I got a round table. Many times we had JCS meetings that weren't the traditional Tuesday-Thursday JCS meetings, but they met in my office. We sat around that table. Many times after I met with the President or the Secretary of Defense or attended a National Security Council meeting I had assembled the JCS then in my office to tell them what had happened at that meeting and what advice I had given, so that I tried to make sure there was never any difference between me and the JCS about what advice I was giving. And I told the JCS that I was going to give the President their advice, but if I couldn't contact them or if they could not come to agreement on the advice the President was going

to get my advice. And I would tell them what that advice was. I don't remember an incident where I did not inform the JCS of advice that I had given.

TS: This reflects on something that you've mentioned time and time again from when you first started in the United States military about communication. For you, personal communication is important and how people relate to each other. This thing is another good example of you ensure that information is passed in a timely way but also in a respectful fashion of all parties involved.

JV: Yes.

TS: Is that from your experience a corrective to past chairmen or is that just the way that General John Vessey did business?

JV: That's the way I did business. Back to this business of Dave Jones and the acting Chairman. One of the things, at my first meeting with the JCS, we agreed that examining the issues raised by both Dave Jones and Shy Meyer, that we would do that. But what I proposed to the JCS, what I said is, "The JCS is this body right here. These five people. That's the JCS. Not Vice Chiefs of the Army or the Vice Chief of Naval Operations. We are the JCS. And certainly not the staffs of the Army, Navy, Air Force or not even the Joint Staff. They're not the JCS. We are the JCS. So my suggestion is that we take each of these issues that David Jones has raised and that Shy Meyer has added to and the suggestions that they've made and that we address each one of those and ask ourselves, does the law need to be changed or can we address this inside the laws that now exist?" Because one of the things that Dave Jones was pressing for was changes in the law. And the chiefs agreed to that. And we met at times other than the regular JCS meetings to address these. The only thing on the agenda was reform...I dislike that word.

TS: I know, but it seems to be...

JV: It's the word that got attached to it. So we met only to address those issues and sometimes it was in the evening, sometimes on a Saturday morning or something like that, but we wanted everybody in town. We didn't want any Vice Chiefs present, even though I knew that they would share with their Vice Chiefs what went on. That was fine. But my view was that I wanted their advice, not some staff advice. So one of the early things we came up with is that maybe there's an easy solution to this changing the acting Chairman when the Chairman is out of town. We'll just run a duty roster and then some member of the JCS will be the acting Chairman during this three month period and then that the Chairman himself will keep in contact with him, keep him especially informed of things that don't come up in general JCS meetings but that do come up in National Security Council meetings or meetings with the Secretary of Defense. So it meant that you had a special relationship with whomever was on the duty roster to be the acting Chairman for that quarter.

It had a number of very special benefits. The first was that the President and the Secretary of Defense got to know each of the members of the JCS personally a lot better than before. The second thing is that the people, as they went through their time as acting

Chairman, got to be better members of the JCS. They got a better view of these duties that the law had for them as members of the JCS rather than as chiefs of a military service. I think if you go talk to those who are still alive today they will tell you that that was one of the smartest things we did.

TS: And it's interesting how the idea was as basic as a duty roster, which every person in the military can relate to.

JV: Right. It was a simple solution and I think that eventually the law changed and a Vice Chairman of the JCS came into law. I was asked by the Congress at the time; I told them I didn't think it was needed. I've changed my mind since then, because the first three guys we had in that job defined the job and took a lot of the duties off the Chairman's back, in fact duties that the Chairman really didn't have time to attend to. I now think it's a good idea, but I was first opposed to increasing the bureaucracy in Washington. Having another four star.

TS: Because it would be a four star position, right?

JV: Right. But at any rate, the solution was very simple and I think Jim Watkins, who was the Chief of Naval Operations for most of the time that I was Chairman, got into a tiff with Congressman Bill Nichols [of Alabama]. A wonderful man incidentally. Anyway, he got into a tiff with Bill Nichols on that very issue of whether or not there would be a Vice Chairman. Jim Watkins inappropriately said something that shouldn't have been said in a congressional hearing. I think he said it was un-American or something like that, that the act itself was un-American, which really ticked off Bill Nichols, who was a World War II vet himself and lost a leg in World War II and a great patriot. *(chuckles)* And I think it ensured that the Goldwater-Nichols Act got passed. There were some things that probably shouldn't have been in it that could have been taken out rather easily.

TS: But there's the consequences.

JV: That's right.

TS: Now just looking at the clock I know you often like to stop for lunch around twelve o'clock. Do you want to do a little more here or do you prefer to stop now?

JV: Up to you.

TS: It's your house. You've got to tell me. *(both laugh)*

JV: We could stop for lunch.

TS: We can divide this section into segments. All right. I'll pause then.

(pause for lunch – interview then resumes)

(1:25:30)

TS: So we've returned after lunch.

We had been talking in kind of lay terms, and you have done a nice job describing kind of typical meetings and setting of agendas and attendees, even the actual physical location itself for JCS meetings. I think connected to that is also, in lay terms, thinking about the Chairman himself. I mean images of the Chairman of the JCS, whether it's you or another Chairman, a lot of photo opportunities that see a Chairman in various settings usually with people or at meetings and gives the impression that there's a lot of meetings involved in this particular job, or public relations and public events. So in lay terms, how would you describe a typical week or month on the Chairman's calendar? What is it exactly that the Chairman does?

JV: I'm sure that varied with chairmen. I was criticized mildly by some and strongly by others because I did not hold press conferences. I avoided the press where I could. And as far as public events, you got an invitation to something for every single evening of the month in Washington. Somebody was having a dinner or a fundraiser or a dinner for a visitor or something like that. I told my staff – and you have a little section of the staff that sort of helps you with that, in the military they call it the protocol section – my guidance to them was that if the defense of the United States will be seriously harmed if I do not go or will be seriously enhanced if I do go, I will consider going to these. Otherwise I had no interest in going to social events in the Washington area. I don't need to be seen. In fact don't want to be seen. I would rather spend the time alone with my wife or working on issues that need work. So that was sort of my rule in terms of how to spend the week or the time, the off duty time. The other thing was that I wanted to stay in shape. I wanted to continue to get my time on the handball court or the golf course or spend a little time going up to the Shenandoah River Valley and doing a little fly fishing for bass or something like that in order to keep my own sanity and not get wound around the axle.

TS: How difficult is it to maintain your private life in a very public position like this?

JV: I don't know. I think you have to work at it otherwise you can be caught up with...because almost every day some invitation would arrive and somebody on the staff would say, you really need to go to this, and you have to ask the question why. The other thing that I wanted to do is try and strengthen the relationships. If the President or the Secretary of Defense asked me to do it, I was probably going to do it. Just to strengthen those relationships. And strengthen the relationships with the other members of the Joint Chiefs. If the Chief of Naval Operations was having a dinner for a foreign navy chief and he would like to have me attend, I'd go because I wanted to strengthen that team. Along that line I would just point out that what we have discussed before about how the JCS operated, at least during my time and my role in that was intrinsically tied with the relationships that I had with those chiefs of the services, the other members of the JCS.

I was really blessed with a great team. Originally we had Lew Allen and Bob Barrow as the Commandant of the Marine Corps. Lew Allen in the Air Force. Tom Hayward was the Chief of Naval Operations. Shy Meyer was Chief of the Army. Then they changed; Hayward was replaced by Jim Watkins, and Lew Allen was replaced by Charley Gabriel, and

the new Marine Corps Commandant was P.X. Kelley.⁶ So I really had a great team all the way through. They were all very competent people, people that I knew beforehand. Watkins I probably knew less than any of the others, but he and I became good friends and worked well together.

Maintaining that team as a team was probably the number one goal for me, because I was supposed to represent their advice. It was best if they agreed, and they weren't always going to agree and certainly they didn't always agree. When we started out I told them on day one I said, "We have all been accused of inter-service bickering" – which was a great newspaper quote. You'd see it in the newspapers often: inter-service bickering among the JCS. So I suggested that we put inter-service bickering on the training schedule and we'd have a session, a regular session, for inter-service bickering and that it be on the golf course at Andrews Air Force Base on Saturday afternoons. So we arranged, we would always have a game of golf at Andrews Air Force Base on Saturday afternoon for the JCS. We just set up a time. The JCS are going to play at, I've forgotten, one o'clock or something like that. That was put on the schedule at Andrews Air Force Base. We didn't always have four golfers in town, but we usually had at least three in town out of the five members of the JCS. I told them they could start out by learning how to bicker about the length of putts they would give to each other. (*chuckles*)

(1:35:00)

TS: Since you bring up inter-service rivalry, which is something I wanted to have us talk about today, let me just sort of segue into that. You're right: the press has this, if not a focus on inter-service rivalry, it's talked about in the press of the time with some regularity. So I guess thinking about inter-service relations and communication at the time you assumed the Chairmanship ... because it is more than one author that describes a counterproductive inter-service rivalry existing by the 1970s.

JV: Right.

TS: How would you describe inter-service relations?

JV: First, the defense budget is a fixed dollar amount. I wouldn't say never, because I never say never, but I don't think in any time from George Washington's time until today that we've had a time when the amount that the President has set aside for defense in any particular year would cover all or even most of what all of the services believed they needed to provide the best Army or the best Navy or the best Air Force or the best Marine Corps that the nation required at any particular time. So most of that "inter-service rivalry" has to do with how you divide up the budget and how you take on any particular task.

For example, air defense of the United States. Primarily that's the job of the Air Force, but traditionally the Army has provided the surface to air defense for the nation and for the battlefield forces. So how much do you put into bombers to bomb enemy airfields? How much do you put into fighters to shoot down enemy bombers? How much do you put into anti-aircraft missiles or guns or whatever it happens to be? Or into concrete protection for our installations that we want to maintain? The Air Force and/or the Navy,

⁶ Paul X. Kelley (b. 1928); U.S. Marine Corps general. Commandant of the Marine Corps, 1983-87.

so much is going to go into the active air defense, that is the airplanes or long range missiles and so much is going into the ground defense and how do you divide that up? The probability issues, weapons effects issues, manpower issues... So what you need is a group of people who can sit down and provide the best available advice, and it is best if the leaders of the two services combined can in fact come as close as possible to some general agreement that both sides of this equation need some monetary value to it.

That means you need chiefs that will work together. I'm pleased to say that in my time we had a Chief of Staff of the Army and Chief of Staff of the Air Force sit down and come to broad agreements on what the Army and the Air Force would do and how budgets would generally be assigned. It doesn't mean that there weren't annual questions that had to be raised about particular weapons systems or how much time would go into this, because some of it was investment in long range solutions that would only come to Army and Air Force chiefs and presidents and defense secretaries that were going to come ten years from now. But nevertheless, the decision had to be made that particular year. I was also pleased that the Chief of Naval Operations and the Chief of Staff of the Air Force were able to sit down and come to broad and fairly specific agreements on how certain duties would be dealt with between the Navy and Air Force. But that has to be a continuing arrangement. It has to be something that has to happen every year. You can't solve a problem once by saying, this service gets everything that flies above a certain range and this service gets everything that flies below that range or something like that. Those rough sort of agreements are okay, but circumstances in the world change, threats change, technology changes, concepts change.

TS: A skeptic might say well, agreement on weapons systems and programs in the 1980s in the Reagan administration was bound to be easier because there were so many additional resources being put into military spending and therefore, General Vessey, you had an easier time than your predecessors possibly in finding agreement, because the pie was so much larger. How would you respond to that?

JV: Maybe yes, maybe no. I don't know. The same arguments had to be resolved. We dealt with the same issues during the Carter administration when I was Vice Chief of the Army. We decided that the Vice Chiefs ought to be able to get together and solve a lot of issues themselves, and we had a regular meeting of the Vice Chiefs to deal with inter-service issues and we expanded it to a regular social. We had a monthly dinner for the Vice Chiefs. We rotated among each other's houses so that we got to know each other better.

TS: How did that work out?

JV: I think it worked out pretty well. We got work done that we wouldn't otherwise have gotten done if we hadn't done that. So if you can't sit down with the person with whom you disagree and find some common ground, it's unlikely that you'll ever find any agreement.

TS: It sounds like you're saying that the communication is more important than the size of the budget pie that's being split up.

JV: Yes. Right. And it may well be easier when the budget pie is bigger, but I don't think it is.

TS: Let's talk about specific ways the services cooperated or didn't cooperate with regard to things like weapons systems development, procurement and evaluation. What is an example you could provide that illustrates this kind of cooperation?

JV: Of course one of the big examples at that particular time was how much goes into the nuclear ballistic missile submarine force and how much goes into land based missiles and to bombers. Of course there's the great argument about, submarines are a lot safer than missiles in silos on the land which can be easily located by satellite, or bombers which can be caught in the air by radar and shot down before they get to the target. So you had people that would be willing to say, let's put all our strategic nuclear weapons into submarines. Of course the problem with that is anti-submarine warfare, the technology changes regularly and people who are bad at it or not very good at it at one time spent a lot of time trying to get better at it.

Lessons from previous wars tell us that whenever we think we know everything there is to know about a different subject something is going to happen to surprise us. The Japanese surely could not have reached Pearl Harbor with bombers without us knowing about it. They did. So it was clear that we needed to make prudent investments in all of those things, and we needed to hedge our bets particularly in the warning system.

When I became Chairman I thought I knew a little bit about the nuclear deterrent force, but clearly I didn't know enough. So I set out a training course for myself which involved visiting all of our main radar detection radars for the strategic forces: the one in Greenland, the one in the U.K. and the one in Alaska, and seeing how good they were. Well, to my surprise not very many people had looked at those things. It was assumed that that's a pretty simple operation and everybody ought to assume that it works well. I found that that wasn't the case, that it needed a lot of attention.

In the Air Force, manning a radar system in Greenland doesn't have the same sort of glamour that flying a fighter plane or even a bomber does or even a transport aircraft. So it was a group of people that were off by themselves, considered themselves orphans in their own force and first, needed somebody to look at them and secondly, needed some attention to their personnel policies, health, morale and welfare. Also you find out that there are new weapons systems that we can't detect from those radars. So we need to spend some R and D money on over the horizon radars that can pick up Cruise missiles.

Then the submarines are safe but you have to communicate with the submarines, and communicating with an underwater submarine is pretty doggone difficult. In those days the Navy was flying a C-130;⁷ they had about a mile long antenna that was dispensed out the back of this thing that would be used for very low frequency radio transmissions to a submarine that was underwater. It was an antiquated system that would almost guarantee that the probability of communicating with those submarines was far less than 1.0, and something different had to be done.

⁷ Lockheed C-130 Hercules: four-engine turboprop transport aircraft. Introduced 1957.

TS: So only service cooperation could ensure that something like that could move forward.

JV: Yes. First you needed somebody to look and see, what was the situation? When we finally came to approving a new aircraft to replace those so called TACAMO⁸ birds that were communicating with the ballistic missile submarines, we were in the Defense Resources Council and the Secretary of Defense wanted advice and went around the table. The Secretary of the Navy was against spending new money on a different aircraft and so forth. Cap Weinberger and I always had the arrangement that in those meetings he would always call on me last. So it came time to decide about the new aircraft to communicate with the submarines and Cap turned to me and said, "What's your position?" I said, "I have a few questions to ask, Mr. Secretary. How many people in this room have ever flown on a TACAMO bird?" There was only one person, and it was I.

I had some photos that I had taken inside the bird while it was in flight and trying to communicate, to show the antiquity of the communications equipment that we were using. It was absolutely essential that we have absolute assurance that we would be able to get the message to these submarines. So I said, "I have flown on one of those airplanes on a mission, and I have some photographs of how it works inside." I passed those around. Cap took one look at it and listened to what I had to say and approved the new airplane for communicating with the submarines, which was absolutely essential. If you don't do those things, if you don't find out what is the situation and what needs to be done, it doesn't get done.

(1:52:30)

TS: How do you feel about your ability of your years as Chairman to have instilled a culture of cooperation and communication?

JV: I don't know. As I said, I had a wonderful group of chiefs, I must say. For the Chief of Naval Operations and the Chief of Staff of the Air Force to sit down and even discuss the issues was a major step. I'm sure that both the Naval Staff and Air Force Staff had provided their chiefs with all sorts of arguments on why they shouldn't come to an agreement. But they did. You see, it all depends on the people involved.

TS: So it's personnel. Change depended on personnel at the time, as opposed to being able to institutionalize something.

JV: Yes. You can institutionalize anything, but it doesn't necessarily have to happen. It's the people who make it happen. The folks on high can issue policy statements until they're blue in the face, but if the people who are supposed to implement those policies don't get behind them to implement them, not much of anything happens or you get a sort of a Potemkin Village. I'm sure that pushing the policy for cooperation has been on the agenda for every Chairman. I was blessed to have chiefs of the services who were willing to do it.

TS: Weapons systems, which is finances in a way, it's ensuring...

⁸ TACAMO (Take Charge and Move Out): military communications system designed to be used in nuclear war to maintain communications. Introduced early 1960s.

JV: Right. Right.

TS: So it sounds like people were pretty protective of their own service, their own budgets and their own systems, to keep what they have and expand other things.

JV: Yes.

TS: What about the creation of doctrine and war plans which requires a different level of communication? How did the services cooperate in that respect on the creation of doctrine and war plans?

JV: Again let me go back to what we did in my time. We agreed on that very first day that improving the war plans was a high priority objective for the JCS. My approach again was to get the chiefs themselves involved, realizing that the ultimate war plan is the work of a lot of wonderful staff officers and many junior grade staff officers who do all sorts of things with computers and slide rules and so forth, and finally you put the plan together. Eventually it has to be the product of staffs of the Unified and Specified Commands and at the Joint Staff itself. But unless the leaders understand the plan itself and the general concept of how it's to be implemented and what's to be done, it doesn't get the attention that's required. So my point was, let us sit down and have each of the commanders of the Unified and Specified Commands brief us, the JCS, on their most demanding war plan. And let us have the commander himself do the briefing, not staff officers and do it again in a non-embarrassing situation where the commander comes in himself in front of the chiefs and brief the plan. It turned out to be a very useful exercise, because I would say that it made sure that the commanders of the Unified and Specified Commands understood their own war plans, to start with. That was the first useful part of it. They had to know enough about how it was to work and where the material and the people were to come from.

TS: Normally they would delegate that to a staff person, to explain a plan.

JV: Right. And how to get it there and in front of people who were their contemporaries or immediate superiors. So they had to do it well in the first place. You wouldn't want to come in front of the JCS and not understand your war plan. So there was probably a lot more study of the war plans than had ever been done before. Finally, there was a lot more exposure of the plans to the chiefs themselves about weaknesses in their own service portion of supporting the plans or what they had promised and what they could do.

As a result it became clear that many of these plans exceeded the budgets that we could see. Now of course you come up with well, these are war plans and if war comes the money will come. But money coming doesn't make tanks. You have to go to somebody and build the tanks. It doesn't make ammunition, or it doesn't get the ammunition from the United States to wherever it's needed. So clearly it had budgetary implications. We looked at it and said, "We don't have the capability at the Joint Staff or in the staffs of the Unified and Specified Commands to analyze the budgetary requirements of these plans that we have written." At that particular time, and it probably may be true today too, the size of the

Joint Staff was limited by law. So concomitantly we were also examining this issue that we talked about earlier, that is the so-called “reform” of the JCS.

The services had plenty of budgetary support in their own staffs and the Secretary of Defense had plenty of budgetary support in his staff, but they weren’t war planners. So I went to the Secretary and told him that we didn’t have the people to look at the budgetary implications of these war plans. So I asked for, I think it was, seventeen more officers for the Joint Staff, seventeen officers or civilians of comparable rank to come to the Joint Staff. So we went to the Congress and we got the seventeen more and constituted an additional element of the Joint Staff to look at the budgetary implications of the war plans, and that continues to exist today. The staff is considerably larger today than it was in my time, but they’ve got a regular part of the Joint Staff that’s charged with doing that nowadays.

In fact, just to digress and go back to the JCS reform thing: one of the things that when we began looking at the JCS – of course, again the implication was that the Joint Chiefs had to do a better job and in a sense we determined that yes, that was in a sense correct – but really the fellow who had the most difficult job was the Secretary of Defense. Next to the President, he’s probably got the most difficult job in the country. First, he’s the CEO of a huge industrial organization spending, I don’t know what the defense budget is this year, but in those days it was about \$300 billion, which is a lot of money. Today I suspect it’s probably close to a trillion dollars. Then he’s the head of an organization that at that time employed somewhere around three million people in addition to the part time people, the National Guard and the Reserve Forces of the services. Then he’s a cabinet member. But most importantly he is the actual civilian control of the military forces. Although the President is the Commander in Chief, he counts on the Secretary of Defense. The Secretary of Defense is the guy who signs the orders to send people overseas or whatever it happens to be, so he is the civilian control of the armed forces of the United States – and that’s a huge job.

Now he has two staffs: a military staff, which is the Joint Staff, in fact the laws says that his military staff is the Joint Staff or at least the law said it in my time. But he also has a civilian staff. As we pointed out to Mr. Weinberger, you have more military officers on your civilian staff than you are authorized by law to have on your military staff. So something is askew there. We pointed out that you have in effect, in your civilian staff, you’ve got the alter ego of a military staff and we wind up sending papers between the second floor and the third floor that go no further than the second floor to the third floor and back again to the second floor. Maybe we can clean that up by you simply saying, my civilian staff is going to do this and my military staff is going to do this.

TS: That seems simple and straightforward. Did it work?

JV: No. *(chuckles)*

TS: Why not?

(2:05:00)

JV: When we finally briefed Mr. Weinberger on our proposed actions, it was looking at where are the duplications here and what can be eliminated and can you reduce your staff, your civilian staff? Do we need to raise the size of your military staff, or is there enough there already? Our contention was that you’ve got military staff enough in one place and

you don't need another one second guessing your military staff, that you know enough yourself to do all the second guessing that you need.

Cap put Will Taft,⁹ who was then the General Consul of the Defense Department, in charge of this. He said, "This is a good idea. We'll do this." So he put Will Taft in charge. There was some disruption in the Defense Department itself at that time, and Will took on the job. You could almost hear the wagons circling on the floor above us when Will had laid out what the JCS had proposed, because for years and years the story was the third floor would often say, if the JCS would just do their job this would be a lot simpler. Of course we came to the conclusion...Will went upstairs and said hey, these guys are trying to do their job and we don't like it because it looks like they're going to disrupt what we're doing and the way we're doing it now.

TS: Inertia is a powerful thing too, isn't it?

JV: Right.

TS: So relationships in some cases can be made more efficient. In other times they run up against structural impediments that make change difficult, if not impossible.

JV: Right.

TS: You mentioned Caspar Weinberger, Secretary of Defense, for whom you worked. I'm wondering if you could say a little more about Caspar Weinberger and your relationship with him.

JV: Yes. As you and I have perhaps discussed before that for the Chairman, he had relations with these teams: one was with the Secretary of Defense and the President and the Chairman has to understand that he's the gopher in that team.

TS: Four stars though you may have, you're still lowest ranking of those three.

JV: Yes. You're the low ranking guy. On the other hand, you're the guy that's by law told to provide the military advice. So what you need in that team is confidence in the part of the other two that they're going to get good military advice from you. As I told President Reagan, we talked about this military advice business and I told him that in my opinion some presidents have gotten their military advice from all sorts of different places. I said, "Any president is able to do that, and I suspect that some get it probably from reading [the comic strip] Beetle Bailey. (*chuckles*) But if you're going to follow the law, you really ought to listen to the people that the law says you should listen to." And the President agreed with that. But that's only as good as the team can build confidence. Presidents have a forty-eight hour day every twenty-four hours, and they don't have a lot of time for loose talk or wasted minutes.

⁹ William H. Taft IV (b. 1945). General Counsel of the Department of Defense, 1981-84; Deputy Secretary of Defense, 1984-89.

TS: Right. Which brings us to this relationship, because if we look historically there are a lot of prickly relationships between presidents, Secretaries of Defense and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. It isn't always smooth sailing.

JV: Right. Right.

TS: So what I'm hearing you say is yours was a positive relationship that did work with all three people.

JV: Yes. You have to build on it. You have to work at it.

TS: What did you do to make that an effective relationship?

JV: The first thing that I tried to do is never go see the President unprepared. People used to sort of laugh at me, particularly the staff, the NSC staff, because I would always come to a meeting with a big bag of charts and maps ready to have visual aids ready to address whatever problem the President wanted to raise. It didn't make any difference whether it was on the agenda or not. If it was something alive in the world that the President might want to raise, I wanted to be able to discuss it with him. So I spent an awful lot of time preparing for any meeting I was going to have with the President and with the Secretary of Defense. Now the Secretary of Defense and I agreed, we would meet every day. Either in person or by electronic. And we did by and large. Met every day.

TS: And what was the idea behind that?

JV: He's the civilian head of the military forces of the United States. I, as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, am the guy that's supposed to turn whatever decisions he makes into language that the military can understand and see that they get it in a timely fashion. I'm also the person that receives the reports from the military organizations, although he may see exactly the same reports, but he's a civilian. It comes in a language that I really knew. I'd spent forty years studying that language. So our goal was to make sure we both had the same view of the defense situation for the United States. That's why we met every day.

TS: On a personal level, how would you describe the relationship between you and Secretary of Defense Weinberger?

JV: I think pretty good. It grew in time. I'm not sure that I was Cap Weinberger's man when I got picked for this job.

TS: What makes you say that?

JV: Just from what I've read of what other people talked about, the selection of the JCS Chairman at the time.

TS: Caspar Weinberger hinted at that or told you that?

JV: No.

TS: Is Caspar Weinberger somebody who you had a golf game with or went out to lunch with, or was pretty much a business relationship?

JV: It was a business relationship, although we had plenty of social contact and certainly which continued after both of us left the positions. I was a pall bearer at Cap's funeral. Jane Weinberger and Avis were good friends. I think Cap has said it in books that he has written, said some very nice things about his relationship with me and I believe he meant it. I came away with the judgment that he was one of the finest public servants we've ever had. He wasn't a rich man. He wasn't poor by any manner of means. Never used his position to foster his own wealth or well-being. He was a hundred percent loyal to the President of the United States and to the United States and the armed forces of the United States. Had a great affection for the armed forces, had himself served in World War II. Married an Army nurse. Cap Weinberger and I got along very well.

TS: Ideologically how much on the same page were you and Secretary Weinberger?

JV: I'd say ideologically at the time we were both interested in producing the best defense that we could possibly produce for the United States. Cap had an additional duty that I didn't have, that is making the administration look good. I remember Cap killing a weapons system on fairly flimsy grounds. I've forgotten what it was; it was an Army anti-aircraft gun, a battlefield anti-aircraft gun. And it wasn't a do or die sort of system. He needed to kill something. Politically he needed to kill a weapons system. It wasn't a particularly bad candidate if you looked at all the weapons systems that were available, and I understand why. He did it not because it was a bad weapons system. It was going along. It was slightly over budget, but it was something that could be sorted out and it was a very useful battlefield system and one that if we had ever had to fight the Soviets it would have been particularly useful in that fight. And Cap and I disagreed on killing the weapons system, but he did and I understand why he did it. But generally, a hundred percent honest.

One of the great tragedies of his career was that he was the only guy indicted on the so-called Iran Contra Scandal, which took place shortly after I left. Cap was more opposed to what the administration did than anybody else in the administration, perhaps other than me, and yet he was the only guy indicted. Wound up being pardoned by President George H.W. Bush. I for one was hoping he would go to trial and be proved innocent, but he said afterward the lawyer fees were killing him. He couldn't afford not to accept the pardon. His reputation and record is still besmirched by that. You see historically that the reference will be made to his having been indicted, but pardoned.

TS: You mention Iran Contra, which of course links us to Central America. I don't want to flesh that issue out right now, but were there issues where you and Secretary Weinberger ideologically disagreed? I mean just thinking of Lebanon or Grenada or Central America, there are three foreign policy topics where there could have been disagreements about what was appropriate for the United States. Did you agree with those?

(2:19:15)

JV: Again, Lebanon is a good example, because Cap and I did not disagree. We were in agreement. My disagreement with going into Lebanon was stronger than Cap's. Cap was very loyal to President Reagan, and was going to support President Reagan I think. If he thought the President was wrong he would in fact tell him he was wrong and work very hard to get the decision changed. But if the President made the decision to do something, Cap was going to support it a hundred percent, and I think that's a mark of his excellence as a cabinet officer and a public servant.

TS: He's a political appointee. That's his job.

JV: Right. But I disagreed with us going into Lebanon in the first place, and Cap agreed and sent my disagreements to the President with his own endorsement of them. Then the President made the decision to go anyway and we did and then got out shortly after that. Then the massacres took place at the Palestinian camps at Sabra and Shatila¹⁰ and the President ordered us back in. Again, I understand why he felt we had to go back in and so forth, but I continued to believe that it was a mistake and eventually we wound up losing a couple hundred Marines.

TS: That's the bombing of that barracks.

JV: Yes. The bombing of the barracks.

TS: Can you think of an instance where you and Secretary Weinberger fundamentally disagreed?

JV: *(long pause)* No. Well, I think going back into Lebanon, I didn't want to go back in either. I'm not sure what Cap's position was, but Cap was more in sympathy with the President's understanding or belief that he had to go back in. Politically. I think Cap agreed with me and with the other members of the JCS that it was not a place for the U.S. forces, but one of those things where the President wants this done and we have to do it. That's probably the strongest disagreement. We had plenty of issues. We were wrestling with how to base the MX,¹¹ the so-called Peacekeeper Missile. We had plenty of issues where we weren't in a hundred percent agreement, but eventually wound up agreeing with whatever it was we eventually did.

(2:23:30)

TS: Let me extend this a little and ask about your relationship with President Reagan. How would you describe your professional and personal relationship with President Reagan at the time?

JV: Again, I point out that you had to have a team of those three, the JCS Chairman, the President and the Secretary of Defense, and understanding that you were in fact the low

¹⁰ Sabra and Shatila massacre: slaughter of Palestinians and Lebanese Shiites by a Lebanese Christian militia, in two refugee camps in Beirut, Lebanon, 16-18 September 1982.

¹¹ MX missile, or LGM-118 Peacekeeper: U.S. land-based ICBM, deployed starting in 1986.

man on the totem pole in that team and you had to have the confidence of the other two. I would say from my point of view it was the Chairman's duty to make sure that he was prepared at any time to address the President on issues that may come up.

When I first took the job the President asked me about relations with the JCS, and we discussed a little earlier this business about when he asked about getting advice and my telling him that he could get it from any place he wanted but he really ought to listen to the JCS. And I suggested that he meet regularly with the JCS. And the President said, "We'll do that." Shortly after that I got a call from Judge Clark, Bill Clark, who was then the National Security Advisor, saying that the President had talked to him about my suggestion for regular meetings with the JCS as a body and that President wanted to do that and suggesting a time for the first meeting. I've forgotten the actual date of the first meeting.

Bill Clark and I discussed the issue at some length, and how to do this. He suggested that what I do is provide a list of topics to him, to Bill Clark, that might be suitable topics for such a meeting, and our discussion was that these ought to be strategic issues for the United States, not issues of the moment. Not the crisis of today, because that would be addressed by the National Security Council. The regular establishment was able to deal with that. But the President had his own long range vision of how the world ought to come out in his time, and if he and the JCS could be on the same sheet toward these long range objectives that the United States would be better served and certainly it would be cheaper and the world might possibly become a better place.

So Bill Clark suggested that I provide him a possible list of things that we might discuss, and suggested that perhaps every six months that we ought to meet. It seems to me that I suggested to Bill Clark that it could possibly be more often than that, that most presidents met probably once a year with the JCS and it was to tell them in advance what the defense budget was going to be before he submitted it to the Congress so that the JCS wasn't surprised. And I suggested that perhaps quarterly might be a good time. I think we agreed to that. Bill Clark said, "We'll start out with once every six months and then see." It turns out we had the first meeting and the President thought it was so good that we went ahead and scheduled it every three months and I think sometimes a little more often than that.

TS: You saw him at those kind of meetings more regularly than they had in the past.

JV: Right. I'm sure that during the Vietnam War that President Johnson probably met fairly frequently with the JCS, but I don't know that for sure. But at any rate, we set out for these meetings and I think it worked, not only helped my relationship with the President but it helped his relationship with the other members of the JCS. And as we instituted this duty roster policy for the acting Chairman, each one of those supported the other. But as Chairman I think I probably met with the President somewhere between three and five times a week.

TS: That was my next question because there's the meeting with the JCS but then there's this other...

JV: The National Security Council met probably once a week, and then if there were a crisis of some kind you met additionally.

TS: How often did you have the occasion to meet with the President, just the two of you?

JV: I think the only time we met with just the two of us is when I was first interviewed for the job, when I went back to tell him that I would take the job. The next time we met was when I had submitted my intent to retire about six months early. And then I met with him alone when I was the Presidential Emissary on the POW-MIA business. But I met often with only the Secretary of Defense and the President and I.

TS: Those are interesting meetings. There was only the three of you there. There was no stenographer.

JV: No.

TS: If you can, because you're the person still alive who can talk about those meetings, talk about how those meetings went. Because President Reagan comes across with his biographers and also in certain accounts as a relationships- and communication-based chief executive who put a lot of emphasis on relationships like that, and conversations. How would you talk about those meetings and how you remember them?

JV: The first thing you remember about Ronald Reagan is that he was a pleasant and decent man. You may go into a meeting with him where difficult subjects were going to be addressed and were addressed and where you might be grilled on details or something like that, but you knew that the meeting was going to start out with a smile and some pleasantries and probably a little funny story which he would tell.

TS: What's one of those that you remember?

JV: I've forgotten what the details were, but there's a wonderful picture somewhere. I may have a copy of it around here someplace, but there's a blown up picture of it over in the Minnesota Military History Museum of Cap Weinberger and the President and me, all three obviously laughing genuinely at something. The President had an old *Life* magazine and was showing us a picture of something. It had something to do with his movie career and his stretching some sort of an analogy from the old movie to whatever it was we were addressing at the moment. But I often think that that picture typifies the relationship that Ronald Reagan established with his subordinates. You were at ease when he was there.

Now actual cabinet meetings, I'd say those small meetings, you were more at ease than at any other time. As the size of the meeting grew, the formality and intensity of the situation grew. The National Security Council would be a little more tense, because you had various cabinet departments that didn't necessarily agree in the room and meeting, probably talking about an issue that they wouldn't agree on at the time. The President often wouldn't make a decision when there was a disagreement in one of those meetings, but he would make the decision later and then it would come to the cabinet officers. The cabinet meetings were even more formal. Of course I sat at the table during National Security Council meetings, but in the cabinet meetings I sat in the back row. Not at the

table. I wasn't a cabinet member. There was no room at the table for other than cabinet members.

TS: So you as the Chairman, you sat in the back?

JV: Yes. I sat behind the Secretary of Defense.

TS: So very different. So you got a chance to observe President Reagan in very different types of environments.

JV: Yes, and including at dinners for foreign dignitaries.

TS: How would you describe President Reagan in venues like that?

JV: Pleasant, dignified, presidential. I think one of the most memorable ones for me is [when] Indira Gandhi¹² was a guest. I sat between Indira Gandhi and Clare Boothe Luce.¹³ You talk about two strong and opinionated and differing in ideology women, you couldn't find two any more different than Clare Boothe Luce and Indira Gandhi.

TS: How did that go for you that evening?

JV: (*chuckles*) It was a great evening. They were both very pleasant to each other, but also differed strongly. I was the sort of go between. I had known Clare Boothe Luce for a number of years, because she had a great interest in Korea. I think we may have mentioned that when I'd come back to the United States from Korea, if I stopped in Hawaii one of my duties was always to go and have tea with Clare Boothe Luce.

TS: You didn't mention that, but it was. Okay.

JV: (*chuckles*) Which was itself a great experience. Sitting there with her and Indira Gandhi I thought man, you've got an opportunity to see part of the world that very few people would get to see.

TS: Were you conscious of that very often? You've traveled a lot of places, met with lots of different types of people. Were you conscious of that idea throughout your life?

JV: You can't help but be. If you're sitting with the King of Saudi Arabia or going into the office of the King of Norway or something like this you've got to say to yourself, Wow, what am I doing here?

¹² Indira Gandhi (1917-1984); prime minister of India, 1970-77 and 1980-84.

¹³ Clare Boothe Luce (1903-87); U.S. politician, ambassador, author.

TS: I was wondering if you did say that, because it's sometimes only after the fact that we realize who we've met with and what we've seen and what we've done. You think you were aware of that at the time in certain occasions?

JV: Yes, I think so. Some of those things they look like tedious chores, because the preparation for them is great. What do you say to the king? (*chuckles*)

TS: Do you have a crib sheet or what?

JV: Right. You usually added some talking points that the Secretary of State thinks you ought to raise or the Secretary of Defense thinks, issues that may well come up.

TS: Seriously? So you do literally walk in there having some talking points.

JV: Yes.

TS: Okay. Either that or you make up your own I suppose, which they'd rather not have that happen.

JV: Yes.

TS: In your meetings or observations of President Reagan at meetings, can you recall a time when he didn't manage a situation or type of situation successfully? What challenged him?

JV: I don't recall any that he didn't manage successfully. I think that as you look back on it afterwards, that he didn't manage successfully. There were meetings where, Cap Weinberger and George Schultz¹⁴ were friends but competitors, I guess, and part of it came from a traditional State Department-Defense Department [rivalry]. I'm sure you could walk down the halls either in Foggy Bottom¹⁵ or in the Pentagon today, and you wouldn't have to go very far to find some conversation about 'those guys in the Pentagon' or 'those guys at Foggy Bottom' denigrating the positions.

TS: This is an ingrained sense of hostility, competitiveness.

JV: Indeed. And sometimes you got to the feeling that both for George Schultz and Cap Weinberger that they didn't make up their mind on any particular small issue until they found out what the other fellow's position was, so that they could take the opposite position. (*chuckles*) I'm sure that's unfair, but nevertheless it's a conclusion that was easy to draw. I want to say that I counted both those men as wonderful public servants and friends and had great admiration for both of them.

¹⁴ George P. Shultz (b. 1920); U.S. economist and statesman. Secretary of State, 1982-89.

¹⁵ Foggy Bottom: neighborhood of Washington, D.C., also home to the U.S. State Department.

TS: Did you feel yourself caught in the middle though?

JV: A little bit, on some of the arguments. I tried to maintain reasonably good relations with the State Department, and George Schultz was very kind to me. He was a member of Augusta National [Golf Club, Georgia], and invited me to come with him to Augusta National a couple of times the weekend before the Masters [Golf Tournament] was played. And whenever we see each other now we have a good time with memories about it. I think at Reagan's funeral I had Cap Weinberger on one side and George Schultz on the other side of me.

(2:42:00)

TS: In a sense in the middle, as you had been years previously.

JV: Right.

TS: So when you disagreed with President Reagan, how easy did you find it to confront him and to say that you disagreed with him?

JV: The President was pretty cagey. You didn't wind up disagreeing with him in any of those big meetings. He didn't commit himself. He listened to everybody and would make a few comments on the position that you were taking and then make his decision later on. Once he made his decision, that was it.

TS: What you're describing is someone who avoids confrontation in a public setting.

JV: Yes.

TS: Cagey is an interesting adjective. What does that mean?

JV: I'm not sure. *(chuckles)*

TS: I mean it's an interesting adjective for the President of the United States. That's all I'm trying to figure out. So do you think it was a management style or a personality trait?

JV: Management styles are built on personality traits.

TS: All right. Did you find that personality trait or management style more of an opportunity or a challenge for you personally?

JV: It was both. Both. For the JCS Chairman, most of the times that you're dealing with the President the decisions are going to be about things that are going to take place sometime in the future, and many of them are going to take place many years in the future. But a few are going to take place tomorrow or shortly thereafter.

I would cite the night before we went into Grenada. We met in the White House in the residential portion of the White House, because the idea was to keep this out of the press, that we were going to do this. So we met upstairs. We had the President, [George] Schultz, the CIA director, Cap Weinberger, me and then you had the majority and minority

leaders of both the House and the Senate present. I briefed the group on the plan. The President started out by saying what the situation was in Grenada and that we were considering going in to rescue the American students [at the medical school].

It was a surprise to Tip O'Neill¹⁶ and I think to all the members of the Congress. Tip O'Neill at the time said he thought it was a bad thing to do, but he would listen to what the President had to say. Then the President had me brief the outline of the plan. The President was interrupted by a call from Margaret Thatcher.¹⁷ He had called her earlier to tell her and he had been unable to contact her, and she called him in the middle of this meeting. The President went into the next room and took the call from Margaret Thatcher and came back in and explained that she was mad as all get out about our going into a former British colony, and particularly with no more coordination than we'd had with the British on this issue. The President said something like, "Well, if we do it right she'll calm down." (*chuckles*) Then the President asked some details about when could he call off the plan. I explained to him that he could call it off at any time up until just before we were to land the troops, but that the later he waited to call it off the more time it would take for us to reconstitute the plan. Then I explained to him that the planes with the paratroopers in them were on the runways right then, right at that moment, in the United States. And that for us to do it tomorrow morning that he had to give the order at a certain time, which was fairly soon. Then he thought about it a while and asked a few more questions.

TS: Did you get the impression at the time that he was undecided?

JV: No. But he wanted to make sure that (A) what we were going to do was going to work. I explained to him that this plan had been put together in about forty-eight hours and we had had no time to rehearse it and that there were some things that were clearly weak. For example, we had no maps of Grenada. We got some tourist maps.

TS: We had no maps of Grenada?

JV: No. No. We had a few aerial photographs of Grenada, but we didn't have the sort of maps that ground troops used in those days, which they no longer use. So we were handing out tourist maps to the Ranger battalions.

TS: They'd have the roads on I guess, wouldn't they?

JV: Right. But at any rate, I told him that I was sure that it would have been a lot better if we had had time to rehearse the plan, and that the troops had had time to learn more about where they were going. But I said I was confident that it could be done. So the President said, "We'll go ahead."

¹⁶ Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill, Jr. (1912-94); U.S. politician. Democratic member of the House from Massachusetts, 1953-87; Speaker of the House of Representatives, 1977-1987.

¹⁷ Margaret Thatcher (1925-2013); Conservative party prime minister of the United Kingdom, 1979-90.

TS: Do you feel that during that meeting since we're talking about President Reagan here, do you feel that he was able to be convinced of a certain yes-no, or do you feel he was already past that point with this decision?

JV: He wanted to go, but he didn't want to have a failure.

TS: Sure. That's having your bread and butter on it too. Of course you don't want it to fail.

JV: Right. Bud McFarlane¹⁸ was the National Security Advisor, and he'd just spent I think ten million dollars modernizing the electronic stuff in the situation room in the White House. Bud said, Mr. President, ... *(trails off)* He said, "The President gave the order to go." I had a code word that I had used to pass to the Pentagon and of course which I did, and the operation was underway. And Bud said that they'd be on station all night long in the situation room, and any time the President wanted to come down and find out what the situation was they'd be able to brief him on it.

So the President turned to me and said, "What are you going to do?" I said, "Mr. President, I'm going home and go to bed. We have competent commanders and competent troops, and you've given the order to go ahead and nothing will be changed unless you give the order to stop it. I'm going to get up early in the morning. I'm sure there will be some reports about how the first parts of the operation went." And the President said, "That's a good idea. I'll do that too. Why don't you give me a call in the morning and tell me how it went?" *(chuckles)* And I thought, that's a very presidential statement for him to make.

TS: President Reagan, in your experience, was he someone who second guessed himself?

JV: I don't know. He certainly reviewed what had happened, particularly in international meetings where he was involved or where his principle deputies were involved on decisions that he had made. He certainly looked back on them to see if there were lessons to be learned, but I don't know about second guessing himself. I'd say he was a fairly steady hand at the helm most of the time. I think the only time that he really was led astray was on that Iran Contra issue, that is that I know of.

TS: I will be curious to hear, as we develop that topic. How often did you attend international meetings with President Reagan, in an official capacity?

JV: He came to a few NATO meetings, but when heads of state came to the NATO meetings it was to show up and make sure that everybody understood that he did in fact support NATO and the U.S. position in it, but it wasn't a big deal.

TS: It was showing the flag almost?

JV: Showing the flag. Right. I think I went to one speech at the U.N., but it wasn't in an official capacity. It was in an official capacity, but I didn't have to go.

¹⁸ Robert C. "Bud" McFarlane (b. 1937); National Security Advisor, 1983-85.

TS: President Reagan will come up obviously in many of our discussions, so I wanted to spend some time at least establishing what your sort of assessment of him as a leader and how he acted and reacted in situations in meetings and in talking about subjects, and so now we can reference that.

I want to pick up on something you said a little bit ago about the press. When I ask about you as Chairman, you mentioned that you kind of kept the press at arm's length. Not exactly the phrase you used, but that was the impression I got. And that you didn't hold many press conferences.

JV: I don't think I had any.

TS: I want to ask you why that was. Was that an understanding from the Secretary of Defense or the President that said, keep your distance?

JV: No. No. As a matter of fact Cap wanted me to have more contact with the press than I had.

TS: Explain why you didn't want to.

JV: I just didn't see it as my cup of tea. My view was that neither the armed forces nor the American people wanted or needed to see their senior military officer displayed publically a lot. I would say that effective anonymity was probably what my perception of what the American people at least needed and probably wanted.

TS: Your immediate predecessor met with the press often.

JV: And my successor did often.

TS: Was there some kind of expectation, that you understood the expectation and chose to say no to it?

JV: I had reasonably good relations with most of the Pentagon, the regular Pentagon correspondents.

TS: Even a casual perusal of the *New York Times* during your years as Chairman of the JCS shows you were written about if you weren't actually being quoted. You were a subject of news. Your decisions and actions were held to be news. You just didn't want to talk about them?

JV: Yes. That's their job to make their judgment, and if William Safire thought I was an inarticulate martinet, so be it. In fact I joked with him later, I told him that I had had the Secretary of the Joint Staff survey the staff to see if they thought I was actually an inarticulate martinet, and it came out even. Half thought I was not inarticulate but was in fact a martinet, and the other half thought that I wasn't a martinet but that I was inarticulate. (*chuckles*)

TS: You mentioned President Reagan and how meetings with the President would often start with some kind of a funny story that the President would tell. What I've noticed in our conversations is that you also do that very well. You can take a somewhat touchy or controversial subject and talk about it much more easily by some kind of self-deprecation, for example whether you were inarticulate or a martinet, but that's a conversational style. Did you find that to be successful in disarming people and putting people at ease in a sense?

JV: I am who I am.

TS: Judging by the – and I'll throw some kudos your way – judging by the fact that you were selected for so many positions by so many different types of people over the decades, it suggests that people found something in John Vessey that they liked. We'll leave the comment there on the table.

JV: (*chuckles*)

TS: So the press, your approach to the press, did you enter this job thinking that you had some kind of trepidation about the press or distrust of the press?

JV: No, not really. I learned more during the course of the job. I had had no particular contact with the press before that, except one after the Battle of Soui Tre in Vietnam. Jack Bender and I were called to Saigon and we were sort of the monkeys of the day at the press conference that day or the day following that battle.

TS: Some quotes and some photo ops?

JV: Yes. Then in Korea of course with the Carter withdrawal of forces in Korea and my chief of staff getting fired. Part of that was his own fault and part of it was that he at one time thought he was talking to somebody else and he was actually talking to a reporter. At least that's his story. I think one other time in Laos, when my Special Forces helpers got seen down in Pakse and it was reported in the *Washington Post* or *New York Times* or someplace and I got in trouble with the Secretary of Defense. But other than that I had had no particular big press relationship opportunities or challenges.

Then the Grenada thing came along, and of course initially we were trying to keep it secret. And we wrestled with this. Cap Weinberger and I discussed it and said that if we had reporters that were ready to jump in with the Rangers or go ashore with the Marines, that it would be helpful to us for them to see it. But we didn't have any. And it meant disclosing the operation to a wider body and probably compromising it if we went to the press and said, "How can you cover this particular thing?"

TS: Then they would know about it.

JV: Yes. We were using Marines that were already on their way to Lebanon and they just happened to be close enough to Grenada so that we could divert them slightly and put them

into the plan. Then the others were Rangers and Special Ops people that were in the United States and we could get into the operation.

(brief interruption)

(3:05:00)

TS: To wrap up, the situation with Grenada I want to come back to obviously when we talk about Grenada itself. Having this background now, knowing how President Reagan thought about this and how there were questions about secrecy, there were questions about the operation itself and it all had to be decided relatively in a very compressed timeframe. With of course the ramifications after the brief operation, that are their own story.

JV: Yes.

TS: One of the things that we talked about at the beginning, or laid out, was this whole question of modernization and reform. This comes from our previous discussions, talking about General Jones and the very public proclaiming his ideas about modernization and reform and what the issues were with the United States military and what in his opinion needed to happen. I know from our discussions that on some of those of General Jones' issues you were in agreement and on others maybe not so much, and the same with the suggestion of solutions.

So when it comes to modernization and reform, if you would identify two or three specifics that are more than just the general terms. You have time as you enter this job – you're identified by President Reagan; you say yes; Senate confirmation hearing. Then you start this job. So there's time in there for you to think about what Jones has said, what you think, what you've experienced, and to come up with, whether it's an agenda or whether it's a listing. Modernization and reform, this is what it means for me and this is my priority list. Did you have a priority listing? How did you put that together?

JV: Let's go back to one of the things we were discussing before we were interrupted, so we can finish that thing, and that is the press in Grenada. We decided that we would keep the press out, because we couldn't see an easy way to get them in. This had been put together quickly. We were moving Marines that were already on their way to Lebanon. We didn't want Cuba interrupting this thing, so we were able to put an aircraft carrier between Cuba and Grenada to make sure that we wouldn't get any air interruption from Cuba and then go in. It was our intention for Cap and me, the intention was to let the press in immediately after the troops were on the ground. Well, we had Vice Admiral Joe Metcalf,¹⁹ who had a burr under his saddle blanket about the press anyway and he kept them out for an extra day until we could tell him, Hey, you can't do that. You've got to let them in. It was in our interest to let them in.

That became a big issue and it was in the explanation of that that Safire called me an inarticulate martinet, as a matter of fact. After it was over I had to give a speech in Boston,

¹⁹ Joseph Metcalf, III (1927-2007); U.S. Navy vice admiral. Commander of U.S. Forces during Grenada operation, October 1983.

and there were people who took out full page ads wanting to line up protestors against me speaking because we had kept the press out of the initial operation in Grenada. It turned out the only protestor that showed up at the speech was the guy who paid for the ad. *(chuckles)* So it was a bigger deal for the press than it was for the American people, I think. In fact many letters to the editor that sort of applauded the idea.

But it was clear to me particularly after the criticism of some of the problems we had in Grenada that... *(trails off)* The actual operation was a huge success. In fact, being put together in the very short period of time, we put it together with no opportunity for rehearsal or anything like that that we ordinarily would have done. I was so proud of our people, but discouraged because we did have some casualties. We had some losses that we certainly regret and wish we hadn't had and probably if we had done things better we wouldn't have had those losses, but we did have.

But I thought the American people would have been far better served had that operation been covered from the very beginning by the American press. So I put together a team headed by a former Chief of Information for the Army. Anyway, the history books say that Cap Weinberger put that team together, but he didn't - I did. I told Cap what we were going to do and he applauded it, but he didn't do it. I did it. And the whole idea was to ask the question how in this modern age of instant information, this is 1983 - which is nothing compared to today.

TS: No, but it was already instantaneous.

JV: Right. How do we deal with it? World War II, we had censorship and so forth and it was an easy thing to do. Even in Vietnam it was fairly easy to do. But how do we deal with it today? So that was the question. The recommendations that came out of that were eventually carried out in the First Gulf War by seconding reporters to certain military units and had them follow the military units into that war.

TS: What we now call embedding?

JV: Embedding. Right. It worked out very well in that situation. But anyway, that seemed to me to make an awful lot of common sense. If we'd had had it, somebody that was parachute qualified that could have gone in with those Rangers it would have made a wonderful story for the American people to see of their people in the armed forces and how competent they were. It was a great story. These guys got down there and the Cubans had what would be for us would be a combat engineer battalion that was building that airfield and what they did is they got down there and covered the airfield with construction equipment and the Rangers went in with some great difficulty. There were mistakes made on the way in, but the people that went in there, they hotwired that Cuban construction equipment and got them off the runway. Used one of their bulldozers as a makeshift tank to get behind and give them cover from the automatic fire that the Cubans were training on them. It was an absolutely wonderful story. And eventually some good came out of it in the relationships between the Defense Department and the media by the time the First Gulf War came along. We were much better. It was well reported.

TS: Do you feel that over the three plus years that you were the Chairman that your relationship with the press improved, stayed the same or ...

JV: I don't think they were ever really bad, but in fact I did have more contact with the press by the time I left than I had before.

TS: Research of just the *New York Times* shows that there are more articles about you by 1985 than there are in 1983, for example. How much more comfortable did you feel working with or talking to the press by the time you left?

JV: I wasn't ever really uncomfortable, but I never liked to do it. It was okay. If you had to do it, you had to do it.

TS: Others may have enjoyed it and done it more, but you did it because you had to. If you had to you did it.

JV: Yes. Okay.

TS: Yes. Thank you for that. I did get off the track there with the interruption. Think about modernization and reform. You did have a chance to reflect on Jones' ideas and to formulate your own plan of attack, if you will, or listing of this is what modernization and reform means specifically and this is how I prioritize those things.

JV: Indeed. In fact as we discussed earlier, I had the opportunity to go around and talk to the former chairmen and that was one of the issues raised. Now you have to look at the people I talked to. I talked to Lemnitzer, who went back quite a ways.

TS: Sure. Early '60s.

JV: And Maxwell Taylor and Tom Moorer and Dave Jones, and I knew what Dave Jones' positions were. None of those other guys were necessarily very sympathetic to what Dave Jones had raised, and they all thought there's always plenty of room for improvement, that we're never lacking in room for improvement. On the other hand, most of them believed that all the things Dave Jones raised as being wrong with the JCS could be improved within the law as it presently existed.

TS: Did you agree with that?

JV: I didn't know whether I agreed with it. So the plan of attack was, let the chiefs address this issue. That was the major part of the chiefs look at this thing, was whether or not the law needed to be changed. Our general conclusion at the end was that the law did not need to be changed. We could make most of the improvements or could solve most of the problems that Dave Jones had raised within the law as it presently existed.

TS: Did you, as you examined what...and Dave Jones wasn't the first to make those criticisms. Perhaps he was the first to do them all in one place with the benefit of the rank

he had. Did you parse those apart and put those in any kind of a yes-maybe-no and of the yes here are the things specifically I'd like to tackle first?

(3:18:15)

JV: What we did is we took the recommendations that Jones made, the specific recommendations like adding a Vice Chairman for example, we took each of those and said, "Is this necessary and is it a real problem and if it is, how do we fix it?" And we've already discussed the Vice Chairman thing and what came about with that. So one of the major parts was where Jones was absolutely right was that the Joint Staff itself was not as strong as it could be. That is, if you looked at the promotion lists in the services, for example, if you looked at the promotion list of lieutenant colonel to colonel, the people serving on the Joint Staff, did they come out being promoted at the same rate as the rest of the Air Force or the rest of the Army or the rest of the Navy? Oftentimes they did not.

Of course two questions: one was, did you have poorer people serving on the Joint Staff or did you have less recognition for service on the Joint Staff than you had for other duties in the service? And the answer was probably that you had less recognition for service on the Joint Staff although you may have had poorer people – although I never felt that we had poorer people. We had some people who had become sort of professional Joint Staff officers and in the United States it had often been recommended that we have a general staff similar to the German general staff and that had been almost always uniformly rejected. They said, we didn't want to have, first, anything as powerful as the German general staff. That was sort of the illusion in the United States, that the German general staff got them into World War I and World War II, neither of which is probably correct. In fact in the latter case it's almost totally wrong, because the German general staff got themselves trapped by Adolph Hitler. There's plenty of evidence to show that there was plenty of opposition.

TS: Correct. And in World War I the German general staff trapped themselves with the Schlieffen Plan,²⁰ really.

JV: Right.

TS: So they put their own handcuffs on in a sense.

JV: Right. Right. But at any rate, the idea of having a U.S. general staff has been uniformly rejected, and I too was opposed to that idea. But in fact we had people that had become professional Joint Staff officers. They had served on the Joint Staffs of Unified and Specified Commands and had come to the Joint Staff in Washington and their reputation for competent staff work had been increased and they wound up going back to another Joint Staff duty at some other headquarters. They themselves were people who didn't necessarily want to command battalions or brigades or something like that.

TS: There are people who actually just want to do that kind of work, in other words.

²⁰ Schlieffen Plan: pre-World War I German military plan to win a forthcoming war with France and Russia by quickly defeating France with a rapid offensive strike.

JV: Yes. And many of these people were very competent, but because they didn't check off the boxes that were required for promotion in their own service, they didn't get promoted. I know I had a number of them serving on the Joint Staff at that time who didn't get promoted, who should have been rewarded by the country. But the way the service promotion system worked ... So there needed to be probably more credit for service on the Joint Staff. The approach that the chiefs and I agreed with at that time is that they particularly in their personnel systems would pay more attention to selecting people who were clearly promotion eligible for service on the Joint Staff. I'm not sure that it helped the Joint Staff one whit, because by and large you've got people who wanted to command troops or wanted to fly airplanes or something like that.

TS: People who've also seen from the past, they've seen that's also the way to promotion too.

JV: Exactly. And didn't necessarily want to come to the Joint Staff. Of course that's one of the things that the change in law with the Goldwater-Nichols Bill made compulsory. To get promoted you had to have Joint Staff duty. So it was probably one of the benefits of it. On the other hand I'm not sure that it improved the Joint Staff a bit. What you really need on the Joint Staff are experts in certain areas that the decision is about. My general opinion was, give me a good soldier, a good airman, a good sailor – I'll make him a Joint Staff officer. I'll orient him so that if he's not going to be a good Joint Staff officer, he and I will part friends in a hurry and not have him sit around and screw up the Joint Staff. I had an orientation period with everybody who showed up to work for the Joint Staff, and that was one of the points. "If you can't work with a fellow in a green uniform or a sailor suit, make it known in a hurry and we will part friends. But if you stay around here and become a fly in the ointment, you and I are going to part but we won't part friends." (*chuckles*)

TS: Okay. So you're stressing a culture of cooperation.

JV: Yes.

TS: That's another. Okay.

JV: But in fact the chiefs did agree to get people with more eligibility for promotion, and we did. We improved the promotion record of the people on the Joint Staff, which may have made Joint Staff more attractive. Then in fact later when Goldwater-Nichols was passed and it became compulsory, it continued to be more acceptable.

TS: You've mentioned I think in past interviews how from your own experience of finding you were getting a posting to the Pentagon was not attractive to you. You didn't look forward to this.

JV: Right. No. That was the last place I wanted to be.

TS: And you explained that. Part of that was you enjoyed the active part of commanding, but what I'm hearing now is you might have also understood this is no way to further my career by getting stuck at a desk.

JV: You had to have some time. You had to check off that box someplace or another.

TS: If you check it off with too thick of a line, you've done too much desk time.

JV: Right. Right. How are you going to know how to lead soldiers in battle if you're sitting behind a desk?

TS: And what I'm thinking as I process this is, the more time one spends at a desk and is called into question for their ability to lead, the less likely they're going to get a chance to lead and the more likely they're going to get even more Pentagon time.

JV: Exactly.

TS: So it becomes an inertia thing?

JV: Right.

TS: The next time we pick this discussion up, let's talk about modernization. If we look at that list that we reviewed when I arrived today, the National Security Council would be another topic we could pick up as well.

JV: Yes.

TS: Anything else you want to add today?

JV: I'm sure there is, but we have pounded a few subjects into the ground and others we've passed over sort of cursorily.

TS: That's always the way though. I enjoyed this discussion very much today. The kind of insights into the personalities of Caspar Weinberger and Ronald Reagan are very interesting, how the styles of each of those and how you found yourself acting and reacting with both of them. I enjoyed that. So let me turn off our blinking friend here.

END OF INTERVIEW

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