

**Narrator: Gen John W. Vessey, Jr**

**Interviewer: Thomas Saylor, Ph.D.**

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**Location: Vessey residence, North Oaks, MN**

**Transcribed by: Linda Gerber, May 2013**

**Edited for clarity by: Thomas Saylor, Ph.D., September 2013 and February 2014**

(00:00:00) = elapsed time on digital recording

TS: Today is Tuesday, 19 February 2013. This is another of our ongoing interview cycle with General John W. Vessey, Jr. My name is Thomas Saylor. Today we're at the Vessey residence in North Oaks, Minnesota, on a bright, clear and very cold winter day.

General Vessey, we wanted at first to add some additional information and perspective on Lebanon, going back to 1983. I'll let you put the conversation in motion here.

JV: After we talked last week I got to thinking that we hadn't really explained as fully as we might have the confusion and the multiple points of view that existed both in the United States and in the world in general about Lebanon and our involvement. I'm not sure that what I remembered after you left will add any clarity to (*chuckles*) your reader's understanding, but at least they'll understand the muddled picture that I was looking at, at the time.

TS: And that's important, because even in the contemporary news accounts of the time there is a sense of confusion and wondering really what the Americans are trying to accomplish, as well as the fact that the Americans aren't the only Western force even in Lebanon at the time.

JV: Yes. Indeed. Both the French and the Italians were part of the international force that went in originally and were there after the massacres at Sabra and Shatila [refugee camps in Beirut, in September 1982]. I think it's important to remember that when we look at the U.S. involvement, that the Marines were initially looked upon very favorably by the people of Lebanon and particularly by the civilian Palestinians who were left over after the [PLO] fighters had been withdrawn. Then when we got sucked into supporting the Gemayel government and their battles against particularly the Druze and the Shiites, that's when things began to deteriorate for the United States, and particularly for our Marines who were stuck there.

TS: Let me ask you to sort of elaborate on that phrase when you say we got "sucked into" supporting the Gemayel government. How does a nation like the United States get sucked into a situation like this?

JV: I think being in an area that we didn't completely understand. As in many of our involvements in foreign countries, we had many expatriates from that country in this country more than willing to advise U.S. government officials on what the situation was and

what we ought to be doing – with us perhaps failing to recognize that all those people had some sort of an axe to grind in their own country.

TS: Does that mean we lacked top notch intelligence on the situation on the ground before we got involved?

JV: We lacked certainly a balanced view of the intelligence that we were getting. I think if you look at all the pressure to use military force against Baalbek,<sup>1</sup> and of course the justification was we would be using it against the Syrians and Hezbollah who were in fact in Baalbek. But there were also important Shiite members of the Lebanese community who were loyal to Lebanon. The El Hussein family is from Baalbek. I've forgotten how many times we had a member of that family as a prime minister in Lebanon, but it's been a number of times. They're a very influential part of Lebanon, of Lebanese society, and a moderating influence.

Certainly even recently, with getting the Syrians out of Lebanon, the Husseinis were very much involved in that. And yet we had our own people who were adamant about the importance of us bombing Baalbek, failing to recognize that there were important Shiite memorials there in Baalbek. Also it was the heart of some important Shiite influence in the Lebanese society, and we would surely incur the wrath of, or the disappointment of those people, if not wrath, by bombing Baalbek.

And you had people in this country who were being influenced by the Israelis, who were being influenced by the French. And you had people in the U.S. government who were influenced by it. I remember having a JCS meeting, and the Chief of Operations on the Naval Staff brought in some aerial photographs of the Baalbek area. Now mind you, we were flying photographic missions over that area, but when I looked at these photos they clearly came from Israel.

**(08:10)**

TS: How did you know?

JV: I could see by the writing on it. (*chuckles*) We had people in the National Security Council staff who were speaking to the French, and expecting us to coordinate a U.S.-French operation. The French actually did bomb Baalbek and wanted us to go with them. We had people on the National Security Council staff who looked to me to be circumventing the President and the Secretary of Defense, and wanted us to join with the French in this thing. Fortunately we didn't.

TS: Are the Italians playing a significant role here or are they simply...

JV: I think the Italians were fulfilling a duty to NATO and their ally the United States by being there, and hoping to get out with a full skin without any serious troubles.

TS: I see. That says a lot. In hindsight, I mean if you think back, what might you have wanted to know ahead of time before you made the decision to commit troops to Lebanon, that you didn't know at the time?

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<sup>1</sup> Baalbek: Lebanese town located 85 km northeast of Beirut, in the Beqaa Valley.

JV: Know more about the divisions within Lebanon and the various ties to Syria, Iran, Israel, and who the major players were in Lebanon. We tended to look on Gemayel as spokesman for Lebanon, when he was spokesman for the Maronite community really.

TS: Did this sense of confusion with regard to the players or the mission become more or less pronounced after the barracks bombing itself in October?

JV: I think it continued, in that we continued to support the Gemayel government. ... The chief of the Lebanese armed forces, who himself certainly had a better understanding of Lebanon than we did, understood the need to bring the various factions in Lebanon together probably better than we did, and even better than his own president did. But we continued to shoot at the Druze and failed to recognize the importance of [Walid] Jumblatt and the overall security and peaceful well-being – if there can ever be peaceful well-being in Lebanon. I'm not sure.

TS: For periods of time historically there have been, and those are either peaceful times punctuated by violence or vice versa.

JV: Yes.

**(12:15)**

TS: Sort of the elephant in the room here in this conversation are the Israelis. They have been for decades a regional ally of the United States. Where are they in this whole situation, before the bombing?

JV: The whole thing was, our presence there was precipitated immediately by the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, which was probably precipitated by the PLO attacks on Israel. So it's pretty difficult...you have to go back a long way to find out who threw the first rock.

TS: In the aftermath of the bombing, from your memory, were the Israelis imploring the United States to stay the course, and stay in Lebanon? Or did they encourage us to maybe get out? Or were they silent?

JV: For the most part they were silent. I think the Israelis didn't want us there in the first place. We were there as part of the deal to get the Israelis out of Beirut, and out of the northern part of Lebanon. I think I'd go back to my conversation with Ariel Sharon when he suggested that the United States was screwing it up, and I think he meant screwing it up for Israel.

TS: Right. Maybe he spoke just off the cuff, but you remember that.

JV: I'm sure he spoke off the cuff.

TS: In the newspaper reports of the time, in the immediate aftermath of the bombing, there was confusion with trying to ascertain who precisely was responsible for this, if any one group was. And then in determining, as you've described here, what is the most

appropriate response – and these ran the gamut really from depart to strike back to something in the middle. Were you satisfied, as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, with the announcement by President Reagan in February 1984 to begin withdrawing troops from Lebanon?

JV: Yes.

TS: Did you advise the President on that step?

JV: As we said earlier, it started with my advice to not go in there in the first place.

TS: But once we were there though, that was the mission.

JV: Yes.

TS: Once there was the bombing though, President Reagan was willing to listen to ideas about a change in the status of our presence there?

JV: Yes. And I think as we discussed before, you had two of his major cabinet members with diametrically opposed positions, with Cap Weinberger wanting to get out and continuing to insist that the mission was ill-defined. As I recall, there had been votes in the Congress before, with a sizeable number voting against our presence in Lebanon. I've forgotten what the count was, but it seems to me that there were over 150 votes in the House alone against deployment.

TS: So it was never without controversy, even before it started.

JV: Right.

TS: Are there other points you would like to add right now about Lebanon?

JV: No. I think we've probably confused it about as much as it was confused at the time.

TS: But confusion marked that. As you've pointed out again today, and I think correctly, there are multiple actors here and there are overlapping allegiances and alliances and then we add outside national actors, Western powers. We have Syria with a role. We have the Israelis. With that many actors on the same stage, and a small one, it's amazing that it wasn't perhaps more confusing than this.

JV: Indeed. Syria looked on, and I'm sure continues to look on, a good part of Lebanon as Syria today.

TS: That's certainly a place that they desire influence.

JV: Yes.

**(18:10)**

TS: This notion of confusion and multiple points of view is an interesting segue into a discussion about this hemisphere, and more specifically Central America and the Reagan White House. Because it's clear from archival documents and accounts in the newspapers that there were multiple perspectives within the administration on what to do and how to do it.

Just as a bit of background, for the record: in Central America in the 1980s there are ongoing civil war conditions or armed struggles, if you will, in Guatemala and El Salvador; since July of 1979, the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua; as well as an ongoing Cuban Revolution since 1959 that has a difficult relationship, if any relationship at all, with the United States.

JV: And hovered over all of Central America, you might add also.

TS: That's what I wanted to ask you really about Cuba. With the ascent to power of Fidel Castro in 1959, and the closer and closer ties of the Cuban Revolution to the Soviet Union, as you became Chair of the Joint Chiefs in 1982 what was the perspective on Cuba, on its place in the hemisphere or its threat level in the hemisphere, if you will?

JV: Intelligence we had at the time indicated that the Cubans were the Soviet surrogates in spreading influence in Central America, and in the Andes actually as well. I think it wasn't very secret.

TS: Cuban military and medical and civilian advisors were open secrets.

JV: Right. Certainly by 1982 the government in El Salvador was fighting an armed insurgency, and Nicaragua had some similar issues going on with insurgents battling the Nicaraguan government. More of the same in Guatemala, and Honduras was sitting in the middle and felt as though it would probably be next. We were supporting the government in El Salvador and trying to buck up the government in Honduras.

TS: When you accepted the position of Chair of the JCS in 1982, how were you made aware of the administration's positions and actions up to that point, and role of the U.S. military in Central America? The Reagan administration has been in power eighteen months by the time you become JCS Chair.

JV: I'd say that the Reagan administration was perhaps more vigorous certainly than the Carter administration in supporting the government in El Salvador, but it wasn't a marked change. Of course I had been Vice Chief of the Army before that, so I was not unaware of what was going on and what the armed forces of the United States were doing.

TS: There are policy discussions, correct me if I'm wrong, and there are also policy discussions held at higher levels to where the Vice Chief of the Army might not have been invited and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs might be, for example.

JV: Yes, but I would say that I don't think there were any secrets between the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs at the time, my predecessor [General David C. Jones, USAF], and the other senior members of the armed services. So I didn't have any special briefings.

TS: There weren't any. That's what I wanted to ask, whether there were things....

JV: Right. No, I was not invited to come in and say, now let us tell you what's really going on in Central America.

TS: And this gets to the question of levels of secrecy, of who needs to know. When there were meetings of the National Security Council for example, the Chairman might be invited. But that circle of who's invited to meetings like that doesn't include everyone, and certain things that are shared there or things that are said aren't necessarily things that you are, correct me if I'm wrong again, free to share with anybody you wish.

JV: Yes. But I would say for the Chairman of the JCS at that time, this is before the Goldwater-Nichols change,<sup>2</sup> the JCS themselves are the principal military advisors to the President and the Secretary of Defense and the National Security Council, and the Chairman is their agent. So the JCS certainly expected the Chairman to inform them truthfully about what happened in the National Security Council meetings, and I would say I did my very best to carry out that mission. I must say I think that my predecessors did the same thing.

TS: When your predecessor, that was General Jones, you didn't feel that there were things that you were hearing and things you weren't hearing?

JV: No.

TS: So, for example, in December 1981 President Reagan signed an initial one paragraph finding that authorized the CIA's paramilitary war against Nicaragua. So this was known to you as well, that this finding had been issued and that the policy was to be to pursue some kind of campaign, if I can use that word, against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua.

JV: Yes.

**(26:15)**

TS: Briefly then from your perspective as Chair of the JCS and member of the NSC, what was the role of the U.S. military in Central America from June of 1982?

JV: We had advisors advising the government in El Salvador particularly, and we used Honduras as sort of an operating base for intelligence gathering and then also bucking up the government of Honduras to try and preclude an insurgency taking place in Honduras. And the CIA was supporting the insurgents in Nicaragua. The Contras.

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<sup>2</sup> Reference to the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986.

TS: So the United States military is active in a number of different ways and in a number of different places, through training or advising. And we had bases established in Honduras in order to conduct training as well?

JV: Yes. One of the things we did in Honduras, which I thought was well done. And I want to say that I think that what happened during those years in Central America, considering the political opposition to it in this country – and certainly there was plenty of opposition to our involvement in Central America, political opposition in this country, and some of it right here in Minnesota. What we were trying to do is promote democracy in South and Central America.

Going back to my last overseas trip, while I was Vice Chief of the Army. As you recall I went to the Conference of American Armies as the American representative at that meeting, and then marched around a number of different South American countries speaking to dictators promoting democracy and trying to promote reform in those governments. That was certainly a consistent foreign policy issue for the United States. Not just the Reagan administration, but certainly the Carter administration and almost every administration preceding it at least hoped for a democratic movement in the countries of South and Central America.

I remember visiting Panama for example. Omar Torrijos<sup>3</sup> was the dictator in Panama at the time. My audience with Torrijos was set for I think 11:30 in the morning or something like that. Torrijos was still in bed at the moment. The guy who replaced him was a captain. [Manuel] Noriega<sup>4</sup> was his sort of gopher at the time. (*chuckles*) I thought...it was like a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta.

But what I would say is, just looking back at it despite all the political opposition, that the United States did pretty well in Central America in those days. Its policies were probably even better than the outcomes, but we had some really top notch people involved. You had John Negroponte<sup>5</sup> as the ambassador to Honduras at the time. Tom Pickering<sup>6</sup> was the ambassador in El Salvador. Pickering, we just heard his name with the investigation that he and the present Chairman of the Joint Chiefs did. John Negroponte later on was ambassador to Iraq, was director of National Intelligence. Just absolutely top notch.

TS: Negroponte had a long career in public service, ambassador to Mexico I think he was too along the way.

JV: Right. And Paul Gorman. He was and is a dear friend of mine and was the commander of Southern Command at the time[, serving from 1983-85]. He had great relationships with Negroponte and with Pickering, collaborated well with them and used innovative methods to promote humane and democratic governments in those countries.

We used the National Guard, particularly in Honduras. We sent many National Guard units, medical units and aviation units, to try to get the point across that you don't

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<sup>3</sup> Omar Torrijos (1929-1981); Panamanian National Guard commander, dictator of Panama, 1968-81.

<sup>4</sup> Manuel A. Noriega (b. 1934); Panamanian politician and soldier. Dictator of Panama from 1983 until ouster by U.S. invasion in 1989.

<sup>5</sup> John Negroponte (b. 1939); U.S. diplomat. Ambassador to Honduras, 1981-85.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Pickering (b. 1931); U.S. diplomat. Ambassador to El Salvador, 1983-85.

need a big regular army. A citizen militia will serve your country better than a huge regular force. Almost all of those countries spent more money per capita on defense than we did certainly.

TS: They did, with the exception of Costa Rica perhaps.

JV: Costa Rica was the only real good example of how those countries ought to be governed.

TS: Right. Speaking of Honduras then, I think it can be argued that Honduras occupied a pivotal position in the 1980s, during the time in the Reagan administration when you were Chairman.

The Reagan administration's activities in Central America, we already alluded to training centers where Honduran troops and Salvadoran troops were trained. What kind of – if you can recall or say – advisors and trainers were we sending there? Because it made me think of your descriptions of the kind of training we did in Laos and Vietnam, where that could be a lot of different types of things. So what was going on with Honduras?

JV: The interesting thing about today's operations in Afghanistan and the earlier operations in Iraq, we talk about civil military operations and so-called COIN counterinsurgency, winning the hearts and minds of the local people. Certainly we were very much involved in that in places like Honduras, sending in National Guard medical teams and training teams to train their armed forces.

Curiously enough, in Minnesota Governor Perpich<sup>7</sup> opposed that. I've forgotten exactly how it turned out, but Perpich refused to let the Minnesota National Guard go on one or more of those training missions. Of course we didn't want to federalize the National Guard, but what we wanted to do was use them in their role as citizen military people to demonstrate to the local military that this was possible in Central America. But we had all sorts of training teams going. Particularly in El Salvador, the military had a reputation for cruelty to the civilian populace and there were certainly plenty of incidents that tended to support that reputation.

TS: Right.

JV: Certainly Paul Gorman had his hands full trying to turn that around and find proper commanders and support them and give them the proper support, and at the same time help protect the government of El Salvador against a well-financed and well supported military opposition that got its support from the Soviets through Cuba at the time. You had in this country the political opposition that both manifested itself in the civilian community and in the press. Certainly what we were doing didn't get much favorable publicity in the press.

TS: Got a lot of negative publicity.

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<sup>7</sup> Rudolph G. "Rudy" Perpich (1928-95); U.S. politician. Democratic Governor of Minnesota, 1976-79 and 1983-91.

JV: Yes. Or in the Congress. The Congress a couple of times cut the number of people that we could have. Today the talk is about the use of drones. I want to tell you that the first successful military use of drones by the United States military forces was in Central America in those days. Paul Gorman had things that were essentially almost toys that he was using as intelligence gathering drones in Central America at the time. When the Congress cut the number of people we could have in Central America and about wiped out the intelligence gathering capability that we had, Gorman and I got together and we decided that we could set up an analytical part of the intelligence center that he had in Central America, and we could do that in Washington.

We set it up in Washington, and set up good communications channels so that the actual information that was gathered by the various means that we had for intelligence, whether it were agents or Gorman's drones or satellites or aerial photography or whatever it was, it was fed to the center in Washington and the information was fed back immediately to Gorman in Central America and to the operating units in El Salvador and Nicaragua and Honduras. It was difficult, but I was pleased with the way things turned out, that we had good people involved both on the diplomatic side and the military side, and things got better in El Salvador. We wound up without a major war in Central America.

TS: Without certainly a regional conflict.

JV: Yes. And actually turned things around in El Salvador.

TS: Part of the training and the leaders that we're dealing with in those countries, and part of the negative press at the time too, quite frankly, is about the impact of training from the School of the Americas then at Fort Benning, Georgia.

JV: Right.

**(40:45)**

TS: The School of the Americas had been around a long time, and had attracted quite frankly, almost like a magnet, a lot of negative publicity. So I want to give you a chance here to describe the historical mission of the School of the Americas and really how it was used during your term as Chair of the JCS.

JV: Its role wasn't changed during my time as Chairman of the JCS. It had been used all along to try to improve the efficiency and professionalism of the armed forces of the southern hemisphere and Central America. It wasn't a school for democracy, but it was an attempt to influence the officers of the armed forces of those different countries in a democratic society. I want to say that it did that fairly well, and often the criticism came from [some who said that] "people who later became dictators at some time went through the School of the Americas."

TS: That is one of the criticisms.

JV: Right. Noriega went to the School of the Americas.

TS: He's just one of them.

JV: He went to a motor officer's course at the School of the Americas as I remember. Something like that. But I think it was a motor officer's course. So he was instructed in how to keep trucks running. (*chuckles*) He certainly wasn't instructed on how to be a dictator. He had a mentor there in Panama, Omar Torrijos, who gave him all the instruction that he needed on how to be a dictator – but he certainly didn't get it from the School of the Americas. Remember there was a lot of opposition right here in Minnesota. There was some young woman for example, she did something at the School of the Americas and was tried in court and sentenced to time in jail or something like that.

TS: Federal prison. Correct. For either chaining herself to the gate or infiltrating the property.

JV: Yes. I remember a newspaper debate that I had with her or one of her supporters. My particular offer to those who maintained that the School of the Americas was training dictators was to come and visit the school. We would get them into the school and let them see the curriculum and see what was taught at the school. We didn't get any takers.

TS: Still, that kind of open offer is a way of sort of pushing back against critics. At the same time the critics persisted and the School of the Americas, the criticism about it continued even after your time.

JV: Indeed.

TS: In fact, in sort of looking about the School of the Americas, a *New York Times* report of September 28, 1996, about curriculum at the School of the Americas during the 1980s [used information acquired] under the Freedom of Information Act.<sup>8</sup> It said, "A training manual recently released by the Pentagon about the School of the Americas recommended interrogation techniques like torture, execution, blackmail and arresting the relatives of those being questioned. Such practices, which some of the school's graduates enthusiastically applied once they returned home, violate basic human rights and the army's own rules of procedure. They also defy the professed goals of American foreign policy in foreign military programs."

JV: And I must say every investigation of the School of the Americas that was ever conducted by the Inspector General or whomever it was never found any of that during my time. And certainly we had plenty of it.

TS: Of investigations.

JV: Right.

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<sup>8</sup> "School of the Dictators." Editorial in *New York Times*, 28 September 1996.

TS: And from your perspective, because I'm not on the inside here, why do you think that criticism and these allegations persisted year after year after year about the School of the Americas?

JV: Part of it was the conduct of the governments in Central and South America that were clearly oppressive and certainly acted against some of their citizens in a less than humanitarian way. I think that the fact that we had the school and it was perceived to be more than it was. The whole role of it was to improve the professionalism of the members of the armed forces of those countries. We certainly didn't teach dictatorship or how to oppress the civilian population. (*chuckles*)

You look at the courses that were run and they were primarily for junior officers, for second lieutenants and first lieutenants and captains. How to be company commanders, how to be motor officers, how to be communicators. Things of that nature. We certainly didn't get our points across obviously, despite trying pretty hard to do that.

TS: Right. And long after you were Chairman the School of the Americas was renamed and the curriculum was modified, I guess we can say. But still the criticism is still out there. The School of the Americas Watch<sup>9</sup> as an organization is still out there reporting on the School of the Americas.

JV: Right. We had thousands of graduates and a few of them turned out to be turkeys. I would say the same is true for Harvard or Concordia or Yale or Notre Dame. The School of the Americas had its share of turkeys, but it was not more than its share.

TS: These are some of the officers that we're dealing with in these Central American countries. Some but not all are ones who have gone through training courses for example at Fort Benning. How involved were you...

JV: And I want to say again how important that is for us. I think we've stressed this before when we talked about my time in Korea, the importance of the contacts that I had with the people who were in my class at Fort Leavenworth.

I remember going to Egypt and talking with [President Hosni] Mubarak's<sup>10</sup> operations chief, who had been a graduate of the Army War College. He explained to me how important that schooling was for him, but not only how important it was for him but how important it was for the United States. He said the two women in Egypt that support the United States more than any others that he knew were his wife and his daughter. He said his wife was a member of the Officers Wives Club at Carlisle Barracks and his daughter finished her senior year in high school at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, and they were so pro-American that it almost embarrassed him. (*chuckles*)

TS: So there are all kinds of good aftereffects of this kind of cultural interchange.

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<sup>9</sup> School of the Americas Watch: advocacy organization, founded 1990.

<sup>10</sup> Muhammad Hosni Mubarak (b. 1928); Egyptian military leader and politician. President of Egypt, 1981-2011.

JV: Indeed. And from time to time we in this country, when we don't like what some foreign country has done, we'll cut off that training for the armed forces of that country. We did it for example with Pakistan, at a time when it was very important to keep contacts with the Pakistani military. We cut off the training to shame the Pakistani government when we should have been inviting their officers to come to this country to try and influence future generations of Pakistani military. So again, I just want to support the importance of bringing officers and soldiers from other countries to be trained in our schools, whether it's School of the Americas or the Infantry School or the Artillery School or Command and General Staff College or whatever it is.

TS: Getting back to this presence in Honduras, records show that from 1981-85 U.S. military aide to Honduras grew from about four million dollars to more than seventy-seven million dollars a year. That's a lot of money now, it was a lot of money in 1980s as well. So we're increasing the amount of aid that we're providing. How involved were you personally in discussions on levels of aid to places like Honduras and the type of training that we would be doing there?

JV: The increase, as you point out, was almost exponential. It was certainly geometric, but still, seventy-seven million dollars in light of a three hundred billion dollar defense budget was loose change actually and certainly wasn't a big amount. I'm sure that yes, it was something that I looked at, but considering what else we were doing with the defense budget in those days it wasn't a major concern of mine. Certainly the goals that we had in Central America were a lot bigger than seventy-seven million dollars.

TS: True enough. The goals in Central America, I mean as you've described them already in other interviews, there were different perspectives within the Reagan administration on lots of things. You've mentioned Secretary Schultz and Secretary of Defense Weinberger as two people who had, not just once, differing perspectives. And we have other voices as well. By this time at the United Nations we have Jeane Kirkpatrick<sup>11</sup> as our U.N. ambassador, a person who is strong-willed and has opinions that she would make clear to whomever would listen. Robert McFarlane was the National Security Advisor [and served 1983-85]. We've got CIA Director [William] Casey. In other words, we have a lot of people out there in this administration who have points of view and are willing to make them. When it came to Central America, what debates were conducted here on our mission there or our means, given that we had some disparate points of view?

JV: I think there was probably more unanimity about the policies in Central America certainly than there were, say, about Lebanon for example that we just discussed, where Schultz and Weinberger had diametrically opposed positions. I think that they were by and large on the same side of the issue usually on Central America, I think. Where there might have been differences in some of the things that the CIA was doing with the Contras in Nicaragua...and they were more about individual events. I've forgotten what the particular one was, but there was an attack on shipping in Nicaragua that I think that Weinberger

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<sup>11</sup> Jeane Kirkpatrick (1926-2006); U.S. diplomat and government official. U.S. Ambassador to the U.N., 1981-85.

thought was particularly dumb and the JCS didn't think it was necessarily a smart move. I've forgotten what Schultz's position was, but it was more discouragement with what the CIA had done at that particular time.

TS: In 1984 as well, the Nicaraguan harbor is mined [by U.S. financed forces]. There are some overt steps being taken here to push back against the Sandinista regime. Words like destabilization and counter-revolution are loaded terms, but I mean they're ones that are part of this discussion here if we listen to it in the mid-1980s. How did you come down as you're attending administration meetings, NSC meetings? For you what feels like the right mix of approaches here when it comes to dealing with El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua? **(57:40)**

JV: I think our dealings with El Salvador were pretty straightforward. You had two issues going on: one is making sure that the government of El Salvador was treating its own people humanely, and at the same time that it was dealing effectively with the armed insurgency.

TS: And that created a certain level of tension, to be sure.

JV: Indeed. Indeed. And it goes on wherever you have that sort of thing, whether it's Afghanistan today or Vietnam thirty years ago or El Salvador thirty years ago. But as I said before, we had top notch people in Gorman on the military side and Southern Command and Pickering on the State Department side and El Salvador. We had our best and brightest dealing with the problems, and the problems were difficult. Yes, there were fits and starts, but generally we did pretty well.

TS: One of the questions in El Salvador that emerges in the public debates is about human rights abuses.

JV: Yes.

TS: The Salvadoran military, some of whom are trained by, and certainly the Salvadoran military is advised and has aid from the United States military and government, I mean how do we separate that? Why are we backing a regime that is clearly linked to human rights abuses?

JV: The human rights abuses occurred because of a culture that existed in the armed forces of El Salvador. It didn't start in 1981 or '82 or '83, but had its roots back with a long series of dictators and military governments. We had the opportunity to try and change that, and I think we worked very hard to try and change it and had a reasonable amount of success in doing that. You had the other course of action that was proposed by the political opponents in this country, and that's abandon the government of El Salvador and withdraw aid and punish them and let them lose the war against the insurgents. We weren't going to do that.

TS: The Reagan Doctrine specifically prohibited that in a sense, right, of providing aid to those who...

JV: Right. Good sense prohibited it.

TS: Can we say the same of Guatemala where, during the time that you were Chairman, a number of generals – including Efraín Ríos Montt,<sup>12</sup> himself later condemned as a human rights abuser – are people that you're having the deal with?

JV: Yes. We were less involved in Guatemala, that is we certainly were unhappy with the human rights abuses in Guatemala and provided less support to Guatemala. You look around at the whole of Central America at that time and the only really bright spot was Costa Rica.

TS: Right. The one [nation] without the military.

JV: And I must say that Honduras had its problems. It was probably poorer than any of the other countries. The president at the time[, Roberto Suazo Córdova],<sup>13</sup> was a medical doctor. He was an interesting man who continued his medical practice while he was president of the country.

TS: How often did you travel to Central America during your time as Chairman?

JV: My recollection is that I went fairly often, but that's not true. (*chuckles*) It just seemed like Central America called for more of my attention than it should have. That was my thought at the time, that it was calling for more attention than it should have.

TS: You did make trips there though.

JV: Yes. Indeed.

TS: When you went there do you remember, were you going to talk with U.S. troops or to Central American military allies?

**(1:04:20)**

JV: All of the above. It would usually involve going to Panama, to Southern Command, in the [Panama] Canal Zone at that time. Going to El Salvador and seeing Pickering and our advisory team in El Salvador, going to Honduras and seeing the troops that were there.

TS: What impressions did you take with you from these on the scene visits, which can be very different from just getting information sitting in Washington?

JV: One is that I came away with increased respect and admiration for the people that we had, the Americans that we had involved in some really difficult problems. Certainly the

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<sup>12</sup> José Efraín Ríos Montt (b. 1926); Guatemalan army general and president. Assumed power through military coup, 1982; overthrown by coup, 1983. Convicted in Guatemalan court of genocide and crimes against humanity, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Roberto Suazo Córdova (b. 1927); medical doctor. President of Honduras, 1982-86.

leaders I cited before, Gorman, Pickering and Negrofonte, were all top notch people and I think their subsequent careers for all of them demonstrated that.

TS: Let me just ask you: Negrofonte, to be frank with you, was a lightning rod during the 1980s. He had his admirers; he also had his vocal critics. Those vocal critics would point out, as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* did at the time and later, a picture of what the *New York Times* called “a tough, cold warrior who enthusiastically carried out President Ronald Reagan’s strategy. Cables that were released in 2005 under a Freedom of Information Act request by the *Washington Post* show Negrofonte worked closely with CIA Director William J. Casey on the Reagan administration’s anti-Communist offensive in Central America. Negrofonte helped word a secret 1983 presidential finding authorizing support for the Contras and met regularly with Honduran military officials to win and retain their backing for the covert action.” That article from the *New York Times*, by Scott Shane, 13 April 2005.<sup>14</sup> So after the fact, but at the time as well, Negrofonte was attracting his share of criticism.

JV: And just listening to that I would ask, as a citizen of the United States, how would you expect the President’s ambassador to a country to act? Would you expect him to oppose the president’s policies?

TS: That’s not why he’s appointed though, right? The President of the United States appoints someone who will carry out his policies, right?

JV: Exactly. And that’s what Negrofonte did and did it very capably and kept order in Honduras and supported the government, helped strengthen the government in Honduras, kept it reasonably democratic, and supported the actions of the United States in neighboring countries, in El Salvador and in Nicaragua.

TS: From your perspective, did Negrofonte at all overstep his bounds as far as the level of – I hate to say involvement – contact or pressure that he placed on the government of Honduras?

JV: No. Negrofonte was no wimp. He was the ambassador of the United States in Honduras and helped push and support and foster United States’ policies in Honduras at the time and did it very well. I just want to say that if I’m going to some country to head the military operation, I want an ambassador like John Negrofonte being the American ambassador in that country.

TS: How come? What would you say are the character traits that brings strength?

JV: (A) He kept his eye on the ball. He knew what the Americas objectives were in that country and in the area, and pursued them. He was a diplomat through and through, got along with the people in that country, spoke the languages, was respected at all levels of

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<sup>14</sup> Scott Shane, “Cables Show Central Negrofonte Role in 80's Covert War Against Nicaragua.” In *New York Times*, 13 April 2005.

government in the country where he was posted, worked well with the American diplomatic community and intelligence community in that country and in the neighboring countries. What more could you ask for? I would say that the description that you read, although it was probably intended to be critical, I'd say after reading that I'd give him A+. **(1:10:15)**

TS: He's the kind of figure that as you read the paper, people are either supportive like you are and full of praise, or the criticism is also writ large. So that's the kind of figure that he was.

JV: And I'd say Tom Pickering is cut from the same bolt of cloth.

TS: These questions of aid and increased military aid to Honduras, for example, although it wasn't a lot at seventy-seven million dollars, it was still a marked increase from four million. I don't know what four million dollars buys, but limits to aid and limits to assistance posed somewhat of a challenge in the time when you were JCS Chair. And the Boland Amendment, or Boland Amendments, were part of that quite frankly.

Just to put some kind of basic definition on the table for us and into the record, the Boland Amendment, actually three U.S. legislative amendments between 1982 and 1984, all aimed at limiting government assistance to the Contras in Nicaragua. The Boland Amendment prohibited the Federal Government from providing military support "for the purpose of overthrowing the government of Nicaragua." For you, what did the Boland Amendment really mean and what did it not mean?

JV: It didn't affect us in the Defense Department as directly, because the CIA was in charge of that operation of supporting the Contras, but it did mean that U.S. support for the Contras was withdrawn. For example, the ambassador from Saudi Arabia, Prince Bandar, contacted me shortly after the first withdrawal of that support and told me that Saudi Arabia was giving a million dollars directly to the Contras. But I think if you look at the effects of those amendments and how they eventually turned out through '84-85 and leading into the whole Iran-Contra [Affair], it was a route that the Reagan administration wound up taking that was really disastrous for the President and for the administration and its political standing in the country.

TS: You're right, because as funding is congressionally restricted here, and Congress provides the funds, the Reagan administration officials, and I'm summarizing here, argued that the Boland Amendment or any act of Congress would not interfere with the President's conduct of foreign policy by restricting funds, as the President could seek funds from private entities, or foreign governments as you mentioned, or the National Security Council. So arguments being made within the Reagan administration documents show that there are numerous ways to circumvent this apparent cut off of funds.

JV: Yes. All of them bordering on illegality, I would say.

TS: That's exactly right. I brought this up today because I have a document here I want to quote from, and I didn't want to simply take pieces of it. At this National Security Council

website, National Security Archive site,<sup>15</sup> there are a number of secret documents available, fully reproduced here. The one that I was reading this morning is the minutes of the National Security Planning Group from 25 June 1984, and this meeting included the highest officials of the Reagan administration. The list of participants: the President, Vice President, Secretary of State George Schultz, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, CIA Director William Casey, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Edwin Meese, Robert McFarland. General John W. Vessey, Jr. present as well.

I don't expect that you remember this meeting specifically, but as I read the minutes from this, and you speak as well, the topic of discussion, and the reason I think it's important for us to put it out on the table, was how to sustain the war against the Contras in the face of mounting congressional opposition. This is the summer of 1984, so the Boland Amendment has tightened or cut off [funding].

The discussion focuses on asking third countries to fund and maintain the effort, circumventing the congressional power to curtail the CIA's paramilitary operations. Secretary of State George P. Schultz, and I'm summarizing because it's a long document, warns the President, White House advisor James Baker, saying that "if we go out and try to get money from third countries it is an impeachable offense."

Vice President George Bush is on record arguing the contrary. "How can anyone object to the U.S. encouraging third parties to provide help to the anti-Sandinistas? The only problem that might come up is if the United States were to promise to give these third parties something in return so that some people could interpret this as some kind of an exchange." General Vessey, this is getting sticky indeed.

JV: Yes.

TS: You're in the room. You are party to this discussion, the record says here. Your comments on the record are early in the meeting, at least according to the record here, and you speak after Secretary Schultz and Director Casey, who is talking about what could possibly be done. You review what Bill Casey has covered about what's in Nicaragua, what they're preparing to do. I don't want to put you on the spot, because you haven't read this document, but you're party to discussions that are heading in directions that you said a moment ago border on illegality. What's going through your head as you listen to these kind of discussions, General Vessey?

JV: Two things. One is, pursuit of our policies in Central America, which is to overthrow the Sandinistas and promote a democratic government in Nicaragua. But the second is keeping the support of the people in the United States and not getting the President into trouble by committing an impeachable offense, for example. So where is the line? We're clearly pushing the envelope here. I wasn't a lawyer then and I'm not one today, but certainly at that time what George H. W. Bush was saying seemed to make a lot of sense, that is that there was nothing wrong with us asking or urging other governments to support the Contras – as long as we didn't provide any quid pro quo for that support. But at the same time, we had to pay attention to what Schultz had already said, that the last thing we

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<sup>15</sup> Housed at George Mason University and also online, accessible at <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>

wanted to do is put the President in a position of supporting a policy that was in fact an impeachable offense or even bordered on one.

TS: Right. The discussion in the minutes here, and they go on for fourteen pages, the only comments that are on the record from you are the ones you make earlier, about the military situation. Did you feel compelled to add your point of view to this discussion? Because there were points of view here that say we should do this, we shouldn't do this.

JV: You look at what my position was. I was not a member of the National Security Council, and I was present in that meeting as a military advisor to the President and the Secretary of Defense and the National Security Council.

TS: It says you brought Admiral Arthur S. Moreau<sup>16</sup> with you on this day. He was providing some maps or information.

JV: Yes. Moreau was the Assistant to the Chairman at that time and was sort of my liaison, particularly with the CIA, and day to day liaison with the National Security Council staff.

TS: Had you selected him yourself?

JV: Yes.

TS: Is this the point, June 1984, where you start to feel that this is running off the rails?

JV: It wasn't as clear at that time that it was running off the rails in June of '84 as it became later on in '85, but at that particular time Judge Clark had been replaced as National Security Advisor and my concerns with McFarlane and [Admiral John] Poindexter and [Oliver] North<sup>17</sup> were growing at this particular time.

TS: How vocally did you make those concerns?

JV: I'd say in '84 not particularly so, because it was just beginning to show. When these concerns grew through the next year, certainly. They had grown since '83 actually, and all go back to what we discussed in the last meeting. Lebanon, it was really the push of the National Security Council staff that got us shooting back at the Druze and Shiites that I think eventually led to the bombing of the Marine barracks [in Beirut]. It turned our goal in Lebanon around. But here it would be unfair for me to point too big a finger at the National Security Council staff because I didn't do enough to stop it at that time.

TS: That's an interesting statement. What could or should you have done?

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<sup>16</sup> Arthur S. Moreau (1931-86); U.S. Navy admiral. Assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1983-85.

<sup>17</sup> Oliver L. North (b. 1943); Marine Corps lieutenant colonel. Assigned to National Security Council as deputy director for political-military affairs, 1981-86.

JV: Been more vocal in the opposition to what was going on.

TS: That's a pretty strong statement, General Vessey.

JV: Yes.

TS: Did you feel that at the time or after the fact?

JV: I must say after the fact. As I told you before, the day of that Marine barracks bombing was the worst day of my career in the armed forces.

TS: And at the same time you were dealing with the Grenada question, a lot of responsibility on your shoulders with that. And then there's this stuff, the Central America stuff, which goes on the whole time you were Chairman.

JV: Yes. And at the same time we're trying to deploy intermediate range nuclear forces in Europe. The important things.

TS: Now as a point of information, because I don't know the technical thing here, as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs people like Marine Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North aren't in the chain of command. They don't report to you, do they?

JV: No.

TS: So even though they're still in the military, they don't report to you.

JV: No.

TS: You can't influence their actions at all? Or control their actions, excuse me.

JV: No. Right.

TS: Same with Poindexter.

JV: Right.

TS: How was that for the lay person, if you could explain? How is it that people who are in the military don't report to, or can't be controlled by, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs?

JV: They're filling jobs. They're not military jobs that they're filling. They're filling jobs that could be filled by civilians or academicians or whatever it is. They were picked to be members of the National Security Council staff.

TS: So that could have been a civilian or a military person and that then becomes the chain of command for them.

JV: Right.

TS: Because Oliver North gains a lot of publicity, and he has his own set of supporters, even today. But by early 1985 Oliver North – who reports to Robert McFarlane, is that correct?

JV: Yes.

**(1:27:15)**

TS: [North] issues a memorandum – and this top secret document is also available at the National Security Archive website – from himself to Robert C. McFarlane, labeled Top Secret, 16 March 1985, and it’s called “Fall Back Plan for the Nicaraguan Resistance.” Summarizing the content here, North describes a plan he has to sustain the Contra conflict if Congress refuses to vote more funds. His plan calls for approaching key donor nations such as Saudi Arabia, that you mentioned earlier, and having Honduras play a bigger role. Early 1985, you mentioned earlier that your sense of misgiving about certain people like North is growing. Is this the kind of stuff you’re talking about?

JV: Yes. I don’t think I ever saw that memorandum.

TS: Because it was addressed to McFarlane, you wouldn’t necessarily have seen it.

JV: Right.

TS: What did you see or did you hear that tipped you off that this was something that just gave you a bad feeling?

JV: Clearly the NSC staff was looking for other ways to support the Contras, and in working with Casey who was charged with that mission. As I say, Prince Bandar told me that Saudi Arabia was providing a million dollars once and then told me a second time that Saudi Arabia was providing another million dollars. But we had other indications that had nothing to do with Central America that strange and unusual ideas, I think I would have termed them at the time “nutty” ideas, were proceeding from the National Security Council staff. One was a directive to prepare plans to invade Libya. This is 1984. Prepare to invade Libya, to support a Mubarak invasion of Libya from Egypt.

TS: All kinds of ideas, in other words.

JV: Right.

TS: One of the key questions that emerged and hung around for a while was, with regard to these plans for Central America, what did the President of the United States know and when did he know it?

JV: Yes.

TS: I want to give you a chance to explain, from your perspective, what you believe the President of the United States knew and when he knew it with regard to Central America.

JV: I don't know the answer to that question. In the intervening years both McFarlane and Poindexter have written ... about the subject. [They] have contended that Ronald Reagan knew and also alleged that Weinberger and I disobeyed orders of the President of the United States that came through them to us. So I'm not sure what exchanges took place between the President and the members of the National Security Council staff. I suspect that he was less informed than they would lead us to believe that he was informed, and certainly that was Weinberger's position.

If I can jump forward to August of '85, when the magnitude of this problem came home to me with great clarity. I was having my noon meeting with Weinberger. As I told you before, Weinberger and I had agreed to meet daily with electronic communication or in person if possible. I was having my noon meeting with Secretary Weinberger and he said, "Why don't you ride to the meeting with me?" I said, "Meeting, what meeting?" He said, "The meeting at the White House." I said, "I have not been informed that I know of, of a meeting at the White House." Weinberger said, "Just a minute." He called the National Security Council staff and he said, "Strangely you're not invited to the meeting." So I said, "Fine." Any meeting I'm not invited to is a good meeting, as far as I'm concerned. *(chuckles)* So I thought nothing more of it.

Late that afternoon Weinberger called me and asked me to come up to his office. I went up there and he said, "I now know why you weren't invited to the meeting." Then he went on to say, "You will never believe the crazy thing that's being proposed." Then he laid out this idea of exchanging arms with the Iranians for help for the Contras. Weinberger, we discussed it some time, and it was his position that the President was less informed than he ought to be about what was going on in the National Security Council staff and what activities were going on. Weinberger's position was that it will never happen.

TS: The deal.

JV: Yes. And if there was ever a time when he and Schultz were in agreement, it was over this.

TS: The trading of the missiles, actually the missiles would be sold by Israel to Iran, if I understand this correctly, and then we would refill the Israeli stockpile and the money would be funneled back.

JV: Right.

TS: When you heard about that plan, what was your reaction?

JV: Again, the same as Weinberger's: this is absolutely too nutty and the President will surely not approve this and it won't happen.

TS: How should we understand then the fact that within a month essentially it had happened?

JV: That the President got persuaded that it was necessary and should be done.

TS: How much did you feel cut out of the loop on decision making?

JV: I was certainly absolutely cut out on that part, and I'm sure that I was cut out because McFarlane and Poindexter knew what my position would be.

TS: And had you gone to a meeting at the White House with the President, where this had been proposed, he'd have had a chance to ask you what you thought.

JV: Indeed.

TS: And you would have told him?

JV: Yes.

TS: September 1985, this transaction has been completed. On the one hand I see these actions as you've described them, of questionable legality, implicating a number of different people, by action or inaction. How much did you feel your own necktie tightening with the stuff that's going on?

JV: When Weinberger came back...by this time my retirement had been approved. I knew that at the end of September [1985], I'm leaving. And I must say that through August and September I did not believe that it would happen. I think neither did Cap Weinberger. The sad part of it is that Weinberger is the only guy that got indicted.

TS: You told me, he kept notes that were found or consulted.

JV: He kept notes on three by five cards that he gave to the National Archives, and the Special Prosecutor's office got a hold of those cards and constructed a conspiracy theory out of whole cloth based on Weinberger's notes. I was called as a prosecution witness to testify, because the notes from which they construed Weinberger's involvement in the operation were based on notes that he had written from meetings with me that had nothing to do with Iran-Contra or Central America at all. They were sketchy notes about things in Europe or wherever.

I've forgotten exactly what it was, but they had constructed a whole cloth theory about Weinberger's guilt and involvement in Iran-Contra, which had no basis in fact. It absolutely broke my heart to see Weinberger indicted over this thing. He was eventually pardoned by George H. W. Bush. I expressed my relief but disappointment to Weinberger that he had accepted the pardon, because I was sure that he would be found not guilty. But Weinberger said that he had no choice, that the legal costs were eating him alive.

He had hired, I've forgotten the name of the lawyer, but a well-known lawyer and apparently the costs were enormous. But at any rate it was one of the great injustices. In fact from time to time you'll see an article about Weinberger being indicted and the suggestion that he was probably guilty – when if there were anyone in the whole administration that was more opposed to what happened than Weinberger, I have no idea who it could have been.

**(1:41:50)**

TS: And there were the indictments for this, they include Oliver North and others with regard to this.

JV: Right.

TS: Just for the record then, I mean one sees the whole spiraling out of control of this Central American policy and one sees your resignation on 30 September [1985,] when you retire early before the end of your second term. I just want to give you a chance to say whether there's any connection between this spiraling out of control and your deciding you've had enough.

JV: Absolutely none. Somewhere around here is my letter to the President, which was in June I think, asking for permission to retire in September. It had nothing to do with Iran-Contra. It had to do with a promise I had made to my wife to get her back to Minnesota before the snow flew in the fall of '85.

TS: On the other hand were you tempted, given the fact this is running out of control and the President, a man for whom you have great respect as you've said, is getting bad advice, to stay on longer and to try to fix this?

JV: By the time I got back to Minnesota in the fall of '85 and this all began to come out I regretted having left office because, it may be vain on my part, but I think I could have had some moderating influence on what was happening. But I don't know that. We'll never know.

TS: Ronald Reagan's reputation, for all the positives that show up on his ledger, one of the big negatives....

JV: The big blot is right here.

TS: It is right here. And the questions of bad advice or questionable appointments or how decisions were made or what he knew and when he knew it, never were really satisfactorily answered for everyone.

JV: Right. He was a decentralizer. He approved major policies and decentralized the execution to people whom he trusted. Sometimes you do that and find out later on that their trust was not justified, and that's what happened to him here.

TS: This decentralizing and giving more authority and leeway to people under him sounds like what happened with the growing in stature of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs during the same time. All this change in the status of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs that was going on at the same time, was this part of that whole idea?

JV: I think that was more inside the Defense Department than it was with the President himself. I think that for him, as for most presidents, the Secretary of Defense is his agent

for commanding the armed forces of the United States and for operating the Department of Defense as one of the largest businesses in the country.

TS: Right. The Goldwater-Nichols Act, after you leave office, will change the structure of the Joint Chiefs and also the specific role of the Chairman.

JV: Yes. It changes the role of the Chairman; it makes him the principal military advisor. I think Goldwater-Nichols for the most part put into law what was actually being practiced at the time. Certainly I have some minor quarrels with Goldwater-Nichols; some of the details on officer assignments I thought were more detailed than it needed to be, and at the time I particularly opposed a four star Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Since then I've change my mind. I think probably it's okay and it's a good idea. Particularly I think that grew because the first two or three people that held the office were people that I knew very well and shaped the job and made it what it is today. It's turned out okay.

And the rest of it, it turned into law things that we had started during my time as Chairman. Although you read the books and the articles that the critics wrote and you'd think that we were all opposed to changing the law. In fact at the time I believed that there was more room inside the law as it presently existed for improving the operation of the Joint Chiefs than was created by Goldwater-Nichols. We didn't really need the law.

TS: As opposed to just a different application of the existing laws.

JV: Right.

TS: We got a new law anyway. The changes brought by Goldwater-Nichols you've seen on the whole have been positive?

JV: Yes, I think so.

TS: We can talk about Central America until the cows come home I think, figuratively speaking.

JV: We haven't gotten to Grenada yet.

TS: The invasion of Grenada is our next interview. Again, it's interesting to see how, just the way you've described it, there are these ongoing crises. There's the Soviets in Europe, and the Iran-Iraq War, which we haven't talked about either, is back there. Central America is there. And then come these crises like Grenada and Lebanon, which get heaped on top of everything else because they're happening today.

JV: Right.

TS: So the next time we talk, we'll go to Grenada. As I think we mentioned earlier, what happened makes the news but the real news stories start after it's over, with a lot of the discussions of what did and didn't go well.

JV: Right.

TS: Your name actually shows up in the newspapers more after the fact, after the invasion than during. And your picture too.

JV: (*chuckles*)

TS: Anything else you want to add about Central America at this time?

JV: No. I think, again, I would reiterate that it came out better than we get credit for. You look at Central America today, and it's a lot different from the Central America of 1980-81 or '79.

TS: It sure is. Economic problems persist, but that level of violence has gone away.

JV: Right. And we certainly have room to criticize the governments of Central America, but they have room to criticize ours also. But they're certainly a lot better as far as treating their own people than they were at that time.

TS: Yes. I'll agree to that as well. All right, I'll turn these off for us.

**END OF INTERVIEW**

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