

Narrator: Gen John W. Vessey, Jr

Interviewer: Thomas Saylor, Ph.D.

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

TS: Today is Tuesday, 26 March 2013. This is another of our interviews with General John W. Vessey, Jr. My name is Thomas Saylor. Today once again we're at the Vessey residence in North Oaks, Minnesota, on a slightly overcast and cool early spring day.

General Vessey, we wanted to start today by going back briefly to our conversation from last week, which was about your time as Presidential Envoy to Hanoi for POW and MIA issues. You had some things you wanted to add here.

JV: Yes. It occurred to me after we stopped that we didn't talk about some of the other people involved, and I think it's very important that we do that a little bit. First I would like to mention the two principle State Department officers that assisted me during these six years. During the first couple of years it was David Lambertson,¹ who was then the Deputy Assistant Secretary for East Asian affairs. He was followed by, the last three years it was Kenneth Quinn,² who had the same job. Both of them were outstanding Foreign Service officers who had distinguished careers both before and after this particular job, and both were particularly knowledgeable about Vietnam and the general situation between Vietnam and the United States.

TS: How were they specifically helpful to you during your six years as Envoy?

JV: First they kept me straight on what our consistent policies had been through the years since the end of the Vietnam war and what sort of attempts at negotiations had been made during those particular years. Both were very good at that. And of course I think they were both put in as part of the party to make sure that I stayed on track as well. (*chuckles*) I would say that I think at the very beginning that David Lambertson was a little skeptic about whether or not I was the right guy for this job, but it turns out that we got along very well and as I say, he went on to a distinguished career. He was ambassador to Thailand from 1991-95.

Ken Quinn had a special talent. He was married to a Vietnamese woman whose parents had been Christians in Hanoi before the Vietnam War. Ken later was ambassador to Cambodia during some of the terrible times in Cambodia, [and] was himself shot at a number of times. A great American. Today he works in Des Moines for a nongovernmental

¹ David F. Lambertson (b. 1940); U.S. Foreign Service officer. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State with responsibility East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 1987-90; Ambassador to Thailand, 1991-95.

² Kenneth M. Quinn (b. 1942); U.S. Foreign Service officer. Deputy Chief of Mission, Philippines, 1988-90; Deputy Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 1990-94; Ambassador to Cambodia, 1996-99.

outfit involved in feeding the hungry parts of the world, [World Food Prize Foundation]. We stay in touch regularly. Those two people were very important to the success of anything that I was able to do during the years I had that job and ought to be mentioned.

We also did mention Carolyn Fredericks; I had forgotten her last name and [now] remember it. Carolyn Fredericks was a Navy chief petty officer who worked in the Chairman's office, and we took her to Hanoi I think the last three or four visits. The first trip we warned her about rats in the dining room, (*chuckles*) and she had no love for the idea of seeing rats. One thing about living in the Hanoi guest house, you had to remember that you needed to have a tin soap dish with a firm cover on it because the rats would come into the bathroom and eat your soap when we were there. And occasionally you would see a rat running across the floor in the dining room of the Foreign Ministry guest house.

Carolyn's first trip, I warned her whatever you do, if you see a rat, do not scream. So we were in there and the first thing to do was check into the guest house and then have lunch before the first afternoon plenary session. Sure enough, I looked across the dining room and there's a rat running directly for Carolyn's feet. Fortunately she kept her cool and there were no utterances out of her. But she said it was the hardest thing she did during the whole trip.

(07:15)

TS: That's an inauspicious beginning, if I may say so. This Foreign Ministry guest house was a remnant of the French colonial times? Was it that old?

JV: Yes.

TS: What kind of an image did Hanoi make by the late 1980s, just to look at and walk around in?

JV: When we first went there in 1987, Hanoi was still a mess. The only motorized vehicles belonged to the government, either army trucks or something like that. Traffic was all bicycles and things of that nature.

TS: The buildings, was it still possible to see damage from the wartime? Or was that pretty much moved aside?

JV: You could still see some damage from the war, but much of it had been cleaned up. You sort of got the impression that downtown Hanoi was not seriously damaged, but there was a lot of inactivity at that time. Unemployment was high. As I said before, despite the fact that Vietnam had once been a major rice exporter by this time there were lines to get rice. It was rationed. But in the course of the next six years it began to change rapidly. They freed up agriculture. By the time I made the last trip, in 1993, there were Japanese refrigerators and televisions for sale.

TS: So you could literally see this blossoming of the economy.

JV: Yes. Right.

TS: What's interesting is that with these periodic visits you get snapshots in a way. So it's not this gradual day to day change. You literally can see things a year or two years later in the same locations I imagine, too, which make that comparison easier.

JV: Right. I think I talked about the guy with the filling station on the road from Noi Bai [Airport] into Hanoi.

TS: Yes. And it literally became a filling station, didn't it?

JV: With his five gallon plastic cans of gasoline to begin with, it was an Esso station six years later.

TS: That's progress for you, right?

JV: Yes.

TS: And the vehicles on the road to match it, it sounds like it.

JV: Indeed.

TS: Very good. Anything else you'd like to add?

JV: We could go on forever about it.

TS: This is one of those cases where you just might be right, because the nuances of this particular case and the back story here is both long and complicated, and contentious as well.

JV: Yes. And emotional on both sides.

TS: That's it. And that's what struck me reading accounts in the newspapers or accounts by individuals who themselves have a personal attachment to this situation. These are all individual human stories, and the people who are committed in organizations then or even later feel this in a personal and emotional way if we read their testimonies. I suppose that makes your major work challenging, but also conversely, satisfying when you could show demonstrable progress.

JV: Yes, but also sad. I remember several of the women whose husbands were missing and reported missing, and who had been caught up. Their husbands' cases had been raised by these hucksters who were purveying myths to the American public. And the phone calls that I got from those women hoping that somehow this would lead to a resolution of their husbands' cases. And it kind of never did.

TS: What's an example of one of those phone calls, if you don't mind talking about them?

JV: I don't want to mention the woman's name, but she called a couple of times a year when someone had given her a new tidbit that had allegedly come out of Southeast Asia that might lead to concluding that (A) her husband was alive or (B) the Vietnamese knew more about it than they were disclosing. Of course for me, I'd have to tell her that we would run it down, and we did. In every case.

TS: And what's sad about this in one way is that we're talking twenty years in some cases, mid '60s to mid '80s, or about that.

JV: Yes. Right.

(14:00)

TS: Now for the military or for the United States government, at what point are these Missing In Actions moved to a new category? Because otherwise, you mentioned last time, Missing In Action means the pay grade continues.

JV: I have forgotten the date, but there was a date that the Defense Department chose that declared all the Missing In Action "presumed dead, body not recovered."

TS: Okay. That was a phrase I saw in the records frequently, BNR. And at that point then accounts are closed in such a way [that] death benefits are paid out if they haven't already, and pay stops.

JV: Right.

TS: But in peoples' minds, [this] might not close the books.

JV: It did not, in a number of cases.

TS: A few moments ago you used the term huckster to refer to some of the people, and they are talked about in the newspaper accounts over years, who were doling out information. That's a pretty pejorative term.

JV: If I could have found a stronger one, I would have used it.

TS: You're talking about multiple people here, or organizations.

JV: Yes.

TS: And do you want to imply that they knew they were simply milking and bilking people?

JV: I can't answer that. I didn't know, but for some of them the answer had to be yes. For some of them, they absolutely had to know. The people who cooked up the phony photographs and so forth, they had to know what they were doing was wrong, and cruel in many cases.

TS: Yes. That too. Will this issue perhaps only pass from the scene when, demographically, the people from that generation have died?

JV: Yes, I think so. It has made a change though, certainly in the Department of Defense. We now have a special office for the missing and unaccounted for. In earlier wars, Missing In Action were presumed to have been probably killed on the battlefield and ground up by tanks that rolled over your body or something like that. Of course the nature of warfare itself has changed. We talked about the importance of the helicopter and the better communications and so forth. Even as long ago as Vietnam we were still communicating with people who were on the ground and had a chance to be rescued. Of course the capability of doing that today is much greater than it was at that time.

TS: Oh, my gosh yes. Almost like the Stone Age, looking back at the technology from the '60s and early '70s.

JV: Right.

TS: We don't have near the number of people committed on the ground that we had in Vietnam or in World War II, where we had millions of men on the ground, where even a small less than one percent missing in action rate translates into tens of thousands of people.

JV: Right.

TS: Let me suggest we move on then to the Defense Science Board. Now the Defense Science Board, DSB, specifically the activities during your years as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs was a main topic of our interview of 20 December 2012. So we talked about the DSB, its origins, its charter, its purpose, et cetera in the past.

So I'll just briefly for the record put a couple of things in here. One, to remind us that it was established in 1956 "as a committee of civilian experts appointed to advise the Department of Defense on scientific and technical matters." That's from the definition at the DSB site itself. And from the DSB charter this phrase, that the DSB provides "independent advice and recommendations on scientific, technical, manufacturing, the acquisition process and other matters of special interest to the Department of Defense. The Board is not established to advise on individual DOD procurements, but instead shall be concerned with the pressing and complex technology problems facing the DOD in such areas as research, engineering, manufacturing, et cetera."³

Just to start us out, this is a very broad and far reaching set of responsibilities. It can scarcely be written more broadly, quite frankly.

JV: Right. And it was written broadly with malice of forethought, I would say.

³ Charter, from DSB website at <http://www.acq.osd.mil/dsb/charter.htm> Accessed 14 February 2014.

TS: Be that as it may, that's what we have. That's the charter we have. One just looks at those categories, research, engineering, manufacturing, scientific, technical, I mean that covers a good lot of what DOD is concerned with or needs to be concerned with.

From the information you provided, you served on the Defense Science Board from 1986 until 1998, a period of twelve years. So I wanted to just start by exploring how you would contrast your involvement after your retirement, that is post-1985, with how you interfaced with the Defense Science Board when you were the Chairman.

JV: What you didn't point out is that the way the Defense Department had set it up, the two people who could task the Defense Science Board were the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. So actually when I was Chairman, in theory I could say that the Defense Science Board worked for me. I think the more accurate way to put it would be that I could ask the Defense Science Board for help. And of course after I became a member of the Defense Science Board, then I was just a consulting member of this group of experts.

TS: How did you perceive your background as former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs as an opportunity or a challenge now that you were an appointed member?

(22:00)

JV: The one thing that I could bring to the Defense Science Board that none of the other members could bring is opening the door of the office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff easily. I'm sure that was one of the reasons I was asked to serve on the Defense Science Board. But I could also bring knowledge about the functioning of the armed services and how they did their job, and how some particular recommendation from the Defense Science Board might fit into what the armed forces did. And perhaps reshaping the recommendation in a fashion that would make it more likely that it would be followed by the armed forces.

TS: You weren't the only person on the Defense Science Board with past military experience.

JV: No. No. When I was there Admiral Ike Kidd⁴ was also a long time member, and we had a few others that came in and out.

TS: Were you the first former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs to be on the Defense Science Board?

JV: I think I was. I wasn't the first former member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to be on the Defense Science Board.

TS: The first former Chair though.

JV: I think so.

⁴ Isaac C. Kidd, Jr. (1919-99); U.S. Navy admiral.

TS: That's what I thought too, but I couldn't find all the records. How did you come to be a member, since it wasn't the standard procedure to simply appoint the former Chairman?

JV: I was asked by the then chair of the Defense Science Board to become a member. I had a great deal of respect for the Defense Science Board. A lot of really smart, loyal Americans who gave up a lot of time to work on difficult projects for the nation without remuneration of any kind. Just the idea of working with a group like that is attractive.

TS: You talked about people on the board. During your tenure, who were some of the significant or memorable people that you recall serving with? It's a large group, I know.

JV: We had people like the former head of Bell Labs. We had George Heilmeyer, the chief scientist for Texas Instruments earlier; he went on to take over when AT and T was split up and went on to take over the remnants of Bell Labs. Bert Fowler, a long time radar expert from MIT. Norm Augustine, who had been Assistant Secretary of the Army for Research and Development when I was Vice Chief, and was later chairman of the Defense Science Board and later on was the CEO of Martin Marietta and then Lockheed Martin. Robert Herman, a chief scientist for General Dynamics.

TS: Some of the best and brightest from our scientific community, in other words.

JV: Yes. Right.

TS: What's interesting is even searching through online information or newspaper reports, a very low profile. We asked people about the Defense Science Board and most people, even knowledgeable ones about government, have never heard of the Defense Science Board.

JV: Right.

TS: Is that by design?

JV: I don't know whether it was by design, but it certainly was the way the business was conducted. The reports weren't publicized. They went directly to the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Sometimes they were publicized only because the Secretary of Defense thought it was useful to publicize them or to support a decision that he was making.

TS: But by no means. I cross-referenced a year by year listing of the reports issued by the Defense Science Board – [older examples of] which are available online to read in their entirety – and newspapers reports of the same time to look for which ones actually were publicized, and eighty percent of them weren't.

JV: Right.

TS: So you'd see occasionally, just as you've described, some announcement, often from the Secretary of Defense's office, talking about the results of a Defense Science Board study. What's curious is that perhaps the previous four had been left uncommented upon.

JV: Right. And from time to time the Congress would ask that the Secretary of Defense have the Defense Science Board look at certain things.

TS: So you could be involved in a wide ranging series of projects that may or may not have any connection to each other.

JV: Yes.

TS: As a member now, given that was the way the Defense Science Board worked, with a number of projects running at the same time, how did one involve oneself? Did you insert yourself into projects, or were you invited to be part of them?

JV: The duties, they were controlled by the chairman of the board at the time. The chairman and the vice chairman. It was usually sort of a split of the duties to make sure that everyone was pulling part of their load but wasn't overburdened. All these people were employed elsewhere.

TS: As you've described. Yes, that's right.

JV: Some were teaching in universities and others were employed by major firms in the country. But the other thing that the Defense Science Board could do would be to bring on other experts. That was the wonderful thing about the board itself. Not only did it have the knowledge of the individuals, but those people knew others who were experts in particular fields. Who could be brought in for task forces, to look at given subjects. So you wound up working with some of the brightest people in the country whatever project you were on.

TS: What are some memorable ones you were on?

(brief pause in recording)

TS: There is a chronological list of reports issued by the Defense Science Board, and these are available by the way at the Defense Science Board website.⁵ All of these reports in PDF format online, in their entirety.

Starting with these reports in the 1980s there are two reports, one from 1987 and one from 1989, both on the use of commercial components in military equipment. This is something that the Defense Science Board visits more than once. What's the context here?

JV: If you look at the development of military equipment through the years after World War II, you'll see the time it takes to field a piece of equipment and get it through the Defense Department Acquisition System has increased steadily through the years. For example, the

⁵ Defense Science Board website: <http://www.acq.osd.mil/dsb/> Accessed 14 February 2014.

great debates that are going on today about the F-35⁶ and the enormous cost of it. I don't know when the F-35 program was started, but I'm sure that it's at least ten years old. What happens is that technology changes. The longer the program lasts, the more the technology will have changed from the time you instigated the program until you eventually field whatever it is you were trying to field.

Whereas you look at the automobile industry, for example. The products they produce aren't nearly as complicated as a fighter airplane, but nevertheless the models change with great frequency and sometimes there are substantial improvements in the automobiles. If you look at the electronics industry, particularly computers or something in that particular line, you'll see a new smart phone coming out probably six months after the last one you just bought came out, which was the hottest thing on the market and the most advanced you could get. Somebody has made it obsolete six months later.

So the question is, why can't the principles that apply in the commercial world be applied to the Defense Department? If you could, certainly you could save time and field things faster. You go back and look at World War II; look at the fighter planes we were producing during the early days of World War II – and World War II was a relatively short war compared to the wars we've fought in recent years – and look at the difference in the fighter planes we were producing at the end of World War II.

TS: They're light years apart.

(35:20)

JV: Indeed. So why can't the Defense Department find a way to exploit the innovative speed of the commercial world in fielding defense equipment? That was the basic question that the Defense Science Board had to address at that time. Of course I have forgotten the exact conclusions of the report, but my recollection is that there are some reasons for doing things the way the Defense Department did them.

For example, they wanted standardized hardware. If you made a gadget that had nuts and bolts on it, you wanted nuts and bolts that were amenable to the tools that were in the Defense Department's million tool kits that were out there and not have to buy a new set of tools. So if there was a question about whether or not you should have the head of the bolt this size or that size, and if this was the size that you already had the tools for, make it with that size bolt. So there were reasons. But they didn't necessarily have to delay the speed of the acquisition.

On the other hand, there were certain things that, it didn't make any difference. If you're going to acquire something that was in fact going to be obsolete in six months, acquire it and count on throwing it away instead of keeping it forever. And by and large the way the government operates is, you buy something you expect it to last – maybe not quite forever, but a long time.

TS: There's the tension though, isn't it, because products, particularly you referenced technology a little bit ago, they are technologically obsolete even if they still work sometimes.

⁶ Lockheed Martin F-35: a single seat fighter aircraft, in development as of 2014.

JV: Yes. A truck that runs and hauls the load it's supposed to haul, it really doesn't make any difference whether it has a square box or some new-fangled appearance. It makes no difference in the capability of it. Keep the old one running.

So those are the things that the Defense Department had to address, and the recommendation of the Science Board was to be a little more flexible in the procurement of equipment and recognize that there are certain things that you can buy directly off the shelf of the commercial market, save both time and money. Don't make a big long procurement program out of buying hammers or something like that.

TS: And those are great examples from the '80s, as I recall, that procurement policies or procurement procedures were used for things that could simply be purchased from Menards or Home Depot.⁷

JV: Or go to the Home Depot and buy it off the shelf.

TS: And save a lot of money.

JV: And time.

TS: Also in here, by 1988, as reported as well in the *New York Times*, the Defense Science Board had become publically critical of SDI, that is the Strategic Defense Initiative or Star Wars program of President Ronald Reagan. The SDI dates to about your time as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, so you had exposure to that program at that time. President Reagan hasn't even left office and the DSB is taking a stand on SDI, and it isn't a positive one.⁸ How do you remember discussions at the Defense Science Board about SDI in the late '80s?

JV: I think the point of the Defense Science Board's criticism was not about the concept of defense, whether or not it could work, but the idea was pursue things that you know will be useful and that it's worth spending the money on, and don't reach too far with a lot of money. As I remember, the particular study the point is that, yes, there are things where a lot of research needs to be done in order to do this particular thing, whatever it happens to be. Recognize that just simply throwing money at it won't necessarily solve the problem any faster; the important thing to do is spend the money that we're spending wisely. I think that the DSB at the time thought too much money was being spent on some of the research projects that were unlikely to bear fruition quickly.

TS: At meetings of the DSB, were there plenary sessions or meetings where there really was an exchange of opinions among members?

JV: Always. Always. You can't get that many smart people in a room without having some terrific arguments, and there were. (*chuckles*) And that was part of the fun of the Defense Science Board.

⁷ Menards and Home Depot: home improvement retail stores.

⁸ *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force Subgroup on Strategic Air Defense (SDI MILESTONE PANEL)*. May 1988.

TS: I thought that might be the case, but I wanted to confirm with you. What kind of debates or discussions, if we want to use that word, do you recall about SDI? Because in public discourse, SDI was a contentious issue.

JV: Frankly, you had people on the Defense Science Board that thought the whole thing was a waste of money and wouldn't work. But you also had true believers that believed that it would work and could work, and was worth the effort.

TS: With those poles, where did you come down on that argument?

JV: It was a hard stretch for me to transport myself into some of these schemes that had space-based shields that would prevent attacks. My own view at the time was [that] we'd already done an awful lot of work on ballistic missile defense, and pursue the things that we knew that would work. Then pursue the far reaching things that we didn't know whether or not they'd work, but do it sensibly and with caution about the money being spent on it.

TS: So is that saying that you would recommend additional research and development monies being put into SDI by 1988, or maybe not?

JV: Yes. Recommending yes, that certainly we should put additional money into it – if you wanted a defense, and I think it was prudent to pursue defense. The people who were against it were more against it... I shouldn't say that; I don't want to generalize.

TS: But after the downfall of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991 there were pressures on the defense budget. Defense budgets fell in real terms in the 1990s.

JV: Indeed. There was a huge peace dividend for the American people. It's not been recognized much, but there was a huge dividend to the American people. Around two and a half to three percent of GDP which no longer went to defense.

TS: Does that, as an extension, make these discussions or decisions about things like SDI even more complicated, because we have less money to split up?

JV: It does, but it makes those discussions more important, and that the decisions that you make be made wisely with a clear look to the future. Despite the fact that the Soviet Union had collapsed, they hadn't thrown away or gotten rid of the intercontinental ballistic missiles or the nuclear warheads that were on them. Not only that, but clearly the danger of these falling into other hands was there.

TS: Could one argue it was even increased by the fact that the Soviet Union was gone?

JV: Certainly.

TS: Let me head in our agreed format here. The next report we wanted to talk about, as an example of the work the DSB was doing during the time you were on it, [is the] 1993 Defense Acquisition Reform.⁹

JV: And I think if you'll look through that list of topics you'll find Defense Acquisition Reform listed not only a few times, but many times.

TS: (*chuckles*) I am looking at, at least three phases that I can come up with here, and a supplement.

JV: And it's a subject that you can read about today.

TS: Yes. Okay, in lay language, what does defense acquisition reform mean?

JV: It means getting the F-35 out in less than ten years and at lesser cost to the taxpayer and still have it be the best fighter plane in the world.

TS: So we're talking here about fiscal issues as well as timetable issues.

JV: Management issues, principally.

TS: Where does the DSB come in on this? What is the angle here? Those are the objectives we're looking at, to mold or to modify both fiscal and timetable and management issues. How does the DSB tackle that?

JV: By looking at every phase of the way the Defense Department did its business, and asking can it be improved and how can it be improved?

TS: Does that necessitate having conversations with people at firms that are directly part of this pipeline of production?

JV: Indeed, and with all phases of the Defense Department involved in the interaction with those firms.

TS: Were you on any task force or task forces that were specifically involved with defense acquisition reform?

(49:45)

JV: I was indeed. In fact you know, that job is a massive job. I've forgotten exactly what particular tasks I had in each of those. We looked at it a number of times while I was on the Defense Science Board. We were put into work groups to look at specific facets of defense acquisition. I would say it's one of those ho-hum subjects that reappears. With regularity.

TS: Should the conclusion we draw from that be that it's tough to make progress, or there's just an awful lot to do?

⁹ *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Defense Acquisition Reform.* July 1993.

JV: All of the above I'd say. It's tough to make progress, because you've got the Congress looking down the Defense Department's neck or throat or whatever it is continually, and critiquing the Defense Department. I would just cite an example that has nothing to do with the Defense Science Board, although we may have looked at it while I was on the Defense Science Board. I was later on the board of Martin Marietta, a defense contractor.

(brief pause in recording)

TS: Defense acquisition form, once again, is central to not only this decade but other decades as well. I mean questions of how we acquire it, how we pay for it, and how we pipeline things to production.

JV: Right. As I said, we wind up searching for perfection. We want to get as close to it as we can. At the same time recognize that we're never going to get there completely. Yet when the Defense Department has to answer to the Congress, you'd think perfection was something that was routinely achieved.

TS: Certainly expected, if one reads the congressional hearings transcriptions.

JV: Right. And I would say that not only recent congressional hearings: you could go back to congressional hearings in the Civil War and find the same thing going on. The Hellfire Missile was a Martin Marietta program, and it was a hurry up program. The Defense Department wanted it in a hurry, and I've forgotten exactly why it was. Anyway, Martin Marietta did a good job of getting it out in a hurry and getting it out below the estimated cost. Yet I remember one of the years when I was on the audit committee of Martin Marietta, and we had a year where we had more government inspector days in the factory that produced the Hellfire Missile than we had worker days in that factory. So that gives you some idea of how complicated defense procurement is.

TS: In everyday language it sounds like it's red tape and bureaucracy.

JV: It is. Right.

TS: Is there a way to cut that Gordian Knot, or is it simply part of what we have to accept with defense production and procurement?

JV: It certainly has plenty of room for improvement. I think if you look at the recommendations of the Defense Science Board and look at what's actually done in the Defense Department, you'll see that the ratio of implementing Defense Science Board recommendations is probably about the same as the batting average for a Twins infielder.

TS: That bad! *(both laugh)* And I think that's a good point you make. These are recommendations.

JV: Exactly.

TS: And they are requested and passed on and perhaps acted on, acted on in part or acted on not at all.

JV: Right.

TS: In 1996 the DSB had a summer study series entitled, "Tactics and Technologies for 21st Century Military Superiority."¹⁰ I'll let you talk about that. What's involved with that?

JV: This was an exciting study to do. We divided the Defense Science Board up into red and blue teams and we had teams that simulated being adversaries of the United States and low income adversaries, that is, people who weren't major powers.

TS: That's an interesting point that you bring up. Because for all the conversations that we've had through the time when you were Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, as you reminded us, so often it was clear who the other side was: it was the Soviet Union. And our focus was NATO and Europe, and everything else was tangentially related to that. You've just described a scenario where we're creating new adversaries, in a sense. Within the DOD or the DSB, when we closed our eyes, how did we envision who these adversaries were now?

JV: We didn't take on that political task. We didn't say okay, it might be this nation or that nation. But what we said is, in the Defense Science Board, this could be a nation whose GDP is X and X is the square root of the GDP of the United States or something like that.

TS: A different economic category.

JV: Right. A poor country. What could they do in the technological world that existed today if they wanted to attack the United States? How would they go at it to achieve their objectives with the defense forces that the United States had? Using technology that was available on the commercial world. Our point was that you could now buy transistors. You could buy thousands of transistors for a penny, and that's anybody's penny, not just an American penny. What could you do?

We created some fairly formidable problems for the United States, and then the issue for the Defense Science Board was how to deal with that, how to answer those. The whole object of the exercise was to tell the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the JCS, this is the world we live in today, where a third world power is able to do this if they choose to do this. We're not suggesting that they will choose to do this, but you need to be aware of the fact that this can happen. So that was part of that summer study and it was I think an exciting and informative summer study for the Defense Department.

TS: In a way, the old bipolar world was easier to plan for, wasn't it?

JV: It was.

¹⁰ 1996 Summer Study Task Force on Tactics and Technology for 21st Century Military Superiority. October 1996.

TS: So now we're challenged with trying to figure out who the adversaries might or could be?

JV: Right. And what they could do.

TS: And we're trying to face this with steadily declining real military budgets.

JV: Indeed.

TS: I can imagine that you were, as a former military person on this board, useful as far as asking or answering questions about military strategy or options.

JV: Yes, but for me even more interesting was, what can the military side of the house do? What can we do to prepare ourselves, our forces, for the world that we might foresee here in the next few years? And perhaps the experiences we've had in Vietnam and Afghanistan are examples of the sort of things that were talked about during this particular summer study, or were proposed. I must say that in looking at how we've dealt with the problems, I would say that not everybody listened to what the Defense Science Board had to say.

Last night I was watching National Geographic; I've forgotten what the title of the program was, but it was something about the present war. It was a show about a helicopter outfit in Afghanistan. It was a medical evacuation helicopter outfit. It was well done. The principle part of the show was to get across that the conditions under which these soldiers had to operate and what life was like them, showing the difficulties under which they operated.

But I looked at the other things that were around, what had been constructed for them, in terms of the camps they were in and so forth. You could see a world that had changed very much from the military world that I lived in, in the various wars that I was involved in. That is, life was a lot more comfortable for them, physically comfortable. Now the stress of the war that they were in was very real and was correctly portrayed, but life was pretty good except there was the danger that they were in. Housing, food, support facilities, comforts, personal comforts. Communications with families.

TS: Almost real time, all the time.

JV: Yes.

TS: In a way that reading accounts of Vietnam in the 1960s was light years away. It was a different world.

JV: Yes. And of course that was light years away from World War II.

TS: Right. You've described some of those conditions there, and it was dugouts and lean-tos and unheated quarters at times. And that I suppose was an improvement over World War I.

JV: Yes.

TS: Another one you've selected for us to say a few words about, from 1997, "Deep Attack Weapons Mix Study."¹¹ It's an intriguing title. What's behind that?

JV: (*chuckles*) I checked that off [on the list] because of its interesting outcome. It was primarily a look at intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine launched ballistic missiles, bomber force capabilities, nuclear weapons and conventional weapons; that is, the ability to attack targets that were a long way from the United States.

TS: That's the "deep" part of that title.

JV: Right. Depending on what the nation wanted to do, which was why nuclear weapons were stuck into it. It was a study that had a lot of technical aspects, that is, looking at attacking deep underground targets, for example. Whether nuclear weapons were needed and whether they'd actually work. If you didn't want to use nuclear weapons, what sort of capabilities did you have with conventional weapons penetrating deeply buried targets? and so forth.

We had a representative from each of the services. This wasn't a big study group from the Defense Science Board; it was fairly small. But we did have special expertise from each of the services.

They had a very bright Air Force officer, Thomas E. Cedel; at the time we became friends, or at least acquaintances; we were fellow Lutherans, for one thing. A little bit later, after the study was finished, he retired from the Air Force [in 1997] as a full colonel. I think his last job was ROTC at the University of Michigan. He was the professor of military science and tactics at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. I had lunch with him and his wife at Ann Arbor, and he then retired from that job and took a job on the faculty at Concordia Ann Arbor. He later became the first president, first non-clergy president I think, or non-rostered president, of a Concordia when he moved [in 2005] to Concordia Austin. He is now the president of Concordia Austin [since 2007 known as Concordia University Texas].

(1:10:00)

TS: The last thing we have checked here is a report from 1998, called "Nuclear Deterrence."¹² That's an interesting title as well, because in the past, for decades of our conversations, the subject of nuclear deterrence had an unspoken meaning to it. It had something to do with relations with the Soviet Union and the buildup or non-buildup of nuclear forces. What does it mean by 1998?

JV: Let me say that first, the title of the study that was done was a coverall, sort of camouflage title. Really the study was a joint Defense Science Board-Defense Policy Board study. In fact I was the chairman of the study. The basic question was, what do we do with the tactical nuclear weapons?

¹¹ *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Deep Attack Weapons Mix Study (DAWMS)*. January 1998.

¹² *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Nuclear Deterrence*. October 1998.

TS: By 1998 what do we do with them?

JV: We got rid of most of them.

TS: What do you think caused the question to be raised to begin with?

JV: I think what caused the question to be raised was, the [Clinton] administration wanted to know what to do with them and had to make up its mind.

TS: As you remember, what were the different viewpoints here? I mean if we look at how the arguments developed.

JV: The basic argument for them was that the Soviet Union continued to field them and hadn't got rid of theirs. Russia had taken over the Soviet Union's tactical nuclear weapons and continued to modernize them and keep them as part of their defense establishment. For us the argument was, we think we've got non-nuclear capabilities that permit us to win on the battlefield and that we don't need this backup of nuclear weapons that we once had. But then there's the hard question that comes up: what if the other guy actually uses them?

TS: Right. And in a sense isn't that the root of what caused the escalation over decades, before the Cold War ended?

JV: Indeed, yes. And I must say, it turns out that by the time the DSB finished its study that the administration had already decided what it was going to do. The outcome, the conclusion that the DSB arrived at, had little to do with what happened to the tactical nuclear weapons for the United States.

TS: How did you come down during the discussion, as a part of this group? What was your opinion of what to do with them?

JV: That we needed to keep enough of them around to keep the expertise alive in how to build them, how to field them, how to take care of them and how to use them if we had to do it.

TS: What did the Clinton administration decide?

JV: That we wouldn't.

TS: They would be essentially completely removed?

JV: Yes.

TS: What's the situation with tactical nuclear weapons today, some fifteen years later?

JV: We still have some capability for air delivered tactical nuclear weapons, and ground launched weapons are not in the arsenal.

TS: So silo based weapons for example.

JV: Well, the silo based weapons are still there; we've got those. But we don't have such things as artillery launched weapons or battlefield missiles.

TS: There's a differentiation between those two.

JV: Yes. But the other thing that that study did was look at the proliferation of nuclear weapons and what the United States could do to slow the proliferation of nuclear weapons in terms of dissuasion, deterrence, disruption, destruction.

TS: This is a new game, in a sense. Not really a game, but it's a new set of circumstances from the time before the collapse of the Soviet Union, isn't it?

JV: Yes.

TS: And as you said a little bit ago, more challenging for a number of reasons.

JV: Yes. And you can look at it today with the IAEA¹³ unable to get a good look at what Iran is doing and the President of the United States assuring the Prime Minister of Israel that we will not permit Iran to get a nuclear weapon. Of course you sort of sit there looking at the world of what I know of, what we have done with nuclear weapons, and you want to say to the President, not publically or through the newspapers or anything, but if you're sitting alone with him in the Oval Office, you want to say: How are you going to do that?

TS: Indeed. In a sense it's the unspoken question.

JV: Right.

TS: And this has happened in the past too. Politically it's what has to be said, and it's what public opinions, whether here or elsewhere, want or need to hear. But it's when one digs a little below that, that the details get sticky.

JV: Indeed.

TS: That's a conversation I'd enjoy having. It was 1998 as well that you departed the Defense Science Board.

JV: I did, yes.

TS: Was it a term that expired or did you make a decision to leave?

¹³ IAEA: International Atomic Energy Agency, founded 1957 and headquartered in Vienna.

JV: My term expired and I made a decision to leave. Actually I left at the dinner meeting in 1999. It was the 60th anniversary of my signing an enlistment paper with the Minnesota National Guard, and I decided that sixty years was long enough (*chuckles*) to be doing that. But I said I will stay on as a consultant to the Defense Science Board, and was still on their roster as a consultant. Up until the automobile accident of a year and a half ago [in September 2011] I was still doing some task force work with the Defense Science Board.

TS: So your relationship with them lasted for decades.

JV: Indeed. It's a great outfit. If every American knew what the Defense Science Board did and the effort that this remarkable group of people put forth to help the country defend itself just for asking... They have some fun, too. As I say, there's never a meeting where there's not some really boisterous arguments about what's being addressed, but yet there's a dinner in the evening and they're all friends.

(1:21:00)

TS: Those are professional, not personal disagreements.

JV: Right.

TS: There's a difference. Suffice it to say, you stayed with it for a number of decades.

JV: It's intellectually stimulating and a great group of people to be around. I still get daily emails from a number of old Defense Science Board people.

TS: It's not the only thing you were doing at the time. You had your hat in a number of rings which, as I've noticed talking to you over the decades here, seems to be a pretty standard operating procedure for you, to have multiple things going at the same time.

An interesting but shorter lived involvement was in 1987, with the Moscow Assessment Review Panel. This was one that, before we had mentioned it, I had completely forgotten about this incident. But I went back and did some research on it.

For the record, for context: in early 1987 as reported in the media, and specifically for this quote in the *New York Times*, "there was concern in Congress and intelligence agencies that major damage had been caused by Soviet penetration of the Moscow Embassy, specifically by recruitment of Marines as Soviet spies." What a story line. That right there from an article in the *New York Times* of 20 January 1988, by Richard Halloran, called "Envoy is Blamed in Moscow Spying." Indeed, the Cold War is still on full bore here.

It's 1987. Bring us up to speed. The newspaper talks about this, but tell us what's going on here. Moscow Embassy, Marine guards liaising with Soviet women: this almost sounds like some kind of science fiction or who done it story, but it happens to be true. What are the details that we need to know to put on the historical record here?

JV: Unfortunately I'm not sure how much of our report, which was fairly highly classified, and I think it probably still is, I'm not sure how much I can disclose legitimately about that, except that what was in the newspapers. One of the Marine guards did have a liaison with a woman in Moscow who turned out to be a Soviet agent. Additionally there were other issues. At the same time, we were building this new embassy.

TS: Right. And had been for a while.

JV: Yes. For quite a while. The Soviets were making sure that there was nary a corner in that place that wasn't bugged (*chuckles*) and wired directly into the KGB headquarters.

TS: That came out in the newspapers, and it would be funny except for the fact that this thing had dragged on for years and cost I don't know how much money.

JV: Right.

TS: So although we wanted to laugh, we really couldn't. This story comes to light, and again to go back to Richard Halloran's story, "in April of 1987 President Reagan asked former Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird; Richard M. Helms, former Director of Central Intelligence; General John W. Vessey, Jr., former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staffs; and Diego C. Asencio, former ambassador to Brazil, to study the Moscow episode."¹⁴ Anything called an episode has some kind of dark corners. This is reported in the papers at the time as well. Really, what was or what should we remember as the significance of this issue?

JV: I guess first, it was an embarrassment for the United States and for the State Department particularly that this should be going on in the embassy, that is the business with the Marine guard. Secondly, embarrassing in this construction of the new embassy that it would get as far as it did before we discovered that it was being especially well wired for sound.

TS: That is embarrassing, that we hadn't better control of the construction.

JV: Right. So we did indeed get this task.

TS: The President, did he pick up the phone and call you again?

JV: Actually George Schultz called me.

TS: How was this put to you? Secretary Schultz, how did he put this issue on the phone?

JV: Please be a part of this team looking at this. I've forgotten exactly what he said, but something like, "We've got egg on our face and we need to get to the bottom of it and figure out how to prevent it from happening in the future."

TS: In the archives, in your papers at the National Defense University, in the photograph section there is a photograph of you in Moscow in 1987, the four of you posing there in Red Square for this snapshot. When you went to Moscow, on the ground, what were you looking to ascertain or to prove or disprove?

¹⁴ Richard Halloran, "Envoy is Blamed in Moscow Spying." In *New York Times*, 20 January 1988.

JV: We weren't looking to prove or disprove anything. We were looking to find out what was the situation in the embassy, what had happened and why did it happen, and how do we prevent it from happening again? I think that we can best perhaps summarize it by saying that, the analogy that we drew is that our embassy in Moscow is sort of like a long range patrol behind the enemy lines on the battlefield. And unfortunately we didn't train or treat our people who were involved in it as though they were involved in a long range patrol behind enemy lines, and that we didn't sufficiently arm them against the enormous effort that the Soviets and the KGB would take to find out about what was going on.

TS: One might ask how, after decades of the Cold War, would we underestimate the Soviets?

(1:29:20)

JV: It was hard for me to understand that. I think it was hard for our team to understand that. I think, suffice it to say, without disclosing what we said in the report that we wrote afterward that it was not well received by many people in the State Department.

TS: The report. Yes, the records show that the panel met May, June, July 1987, and prepared a report for the President, which he accepted but which was not publicized. In fact Richard Halloran's story only appeared the following January, saying that the report had been submitted and had been accepted. Lots of passive voice, but not a lot of details. Would you say that this incident and the findings led to substantive changes in the way that our embassies were organized or constructed or managed?

JV: At least at the time – I don't know whether it's true today or not – it did lead to changes in the training that our people, particularly that were going to places like Moscow or places behind the Iron Curtain, received, and the support they received while they were there. I believe I can say that the report was useful. It wound up with senior Foreign Service officers being ... (*longer pause*) with careers curtailed because of what had happened, when actually the system itself was at fault in failing to train our people for the very rigorous and demanding job. Basically, if you were going to Moscow or going to Paris you got about the same training.

TS: That could be the root of, part of the problem right there.

JV: Right.

TS: What does this mean? I'm thinking about the Marine guards that are stationed at all of our embassies around the world. Nearly all of them in any case. From a military perspective, as a military man, what happened to the Marine detachment that was at the embassy? Do we look at individual people, or does the whole group need to be changed? How does that work?

JV: Again, training needed to be changed and the selection and training needed to be changed. And the leadership needed to be paying attention to the fact that they were in fact a patrol behind enemy lines.

TS: It sounds from what you're saying, to think of it that way.

JV: Exactly.

TS: It's not a shooting war, but nonetheless it's the Cold War.

JV: Right.

TS: Does that mean that the individual Marines responsible here also faced disciplinary action? Or could it be said that they weren't trained sufficiently and it's not their fault?

JV: As I recall the guy that was involved did face disciplinary action. But again, selection and training had to be improved.

TS: That's something that you've said consistently from the time you were in Italy in World War II. You've been a proponent of that, that if we look at situations we can prevent a lot of situations, if we frontload the other stuff first. We train people effectively. We maintain equipment. And we select people carefully. I've heard you say that a number of times.

JV: Right.

TS: Somebody's not listening to that, because we continue to have challenges. That seems like that might be an effective way to start.

JV: Yes. And you can see how it happens and understand how it happens. The guy that was selected got sick or his wife got sick and he couldn't go and you had to plug in a replacement. Somebody looks for the first one. You can take any situation where you have some troubles and somewhere that has happened.

TS: The best laid plans, and suddenly it's compromised by one piece like that.

JV: Yes.

TS: Given the possibly confidential nature of that program, we'll leave that alone.

JV: I don't know whether we've discussed it or not; I know I mentioned it to you but I'm not sure whether it's been on the recorder here. But the very fact that this particular group wound up getting its picture taken in front of the Dzerzhinsky statue.

TS: Felix Dzerzhinsky?¹⁵ No, I didn't know that.

JV: When I was Vice Chief we were trying to figure out how to get more foreign area officers with good experience and knowledge about Russia and the Soviet Union. So what we

¹⁵ Felix Dzerzhinsky (1877-1926); Soviet political figure. Best known for establishing and developing the Soviet State Security, or Cheka.

eventually did was take a couple of Army captains who were graduates of the Defense Language Institute [in Monterey, California,] and had studied Russian and we sent them to Moscow to take menial jobs in the motor pool for the U.S. Embassy in Moscow. We made them drivers, chauffeurs. Undercover. The trip for this particular group for the Moscow Assessment Review Panel was very interesting, because Mel Laird was in charge. When you're on the Mel Laird team, you do things the Mel Laird way.

TS: Now you knew the Secretary, right?

JV: Oh, yes. Very much. Anyway, we had one of those captains as our driver back and forth, that took us from the place where we stayed – we stayed in this old Soviet guest house that was a converted Czarist palace, in Moscow – drove from there back and forth to the embassy. This captain, Mr. So and So, was our driver. By this time he'd been in Moscow three or four years, so his Russian was good and his knowledge of Moscow was good. Anyway, one afternoon we wanted to go on a little sightseeing tour of Moscow, so he just drove us around. In fact I think that picture in Red Square was probably taken [that day].

TS: It was all four of you together. You were casually dressed, in front of St. Basil Cathedral I think.

(1:38:30)

JV: Yes, right. But anyway, Dick Helms wanted to see the Dzerzhinsky statue. At that time it was in this traffic circle that was near the KGB headquarters, in a busy part of downtown Moscow. We got out and walked around and this young captain said, "Why don't you go out there and get your picture taken with the statue?" Of course it was four o'clock in the afternoon Moscow time and the traffic was heavy. This young captain convinced a Moscow policeman to stop the traffic so that this group could go across to the statue (*chuckles*) and get its picture taken.

TS: That's the one I wanted to see in the archives.

JV: Somewhere around I've got that picture and I hope I can find it, because it would be a good one to put in with our talk about this particular subject. I often wondered if the then head of the KGB might be looking out the window and wondering.

TS: I wonder how long the statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky survived.

JV: It didn't survive the fall of the Soviet Union.

TS: No, I wouldn't think so. There was a Stasi Regiment in East Berlin, a parade battalion named for Felix Dzerzhinsky.¹⁶ Boy, they disappeared pretty quickly too [after November 1989], as did all the things about Felix. Had you been to Moscow before this?

JV: No, that was my first trip to Moscow.

¹⁶ Felix Dzerzhinsky Guards Regiment (German: Wachregiment Feliks E. Dzierzynski), part of the East German Ministry for State Security.

TS: So you actually visited Moscow before the Soviet Union vanished off the map.

JV: Right. In fact I was to have a dinner meeting with the then Chief of the Soviet General Staff, Sergey Akhromeyev,¹⁷ who knew I was coming as part of this group. He had asked me to dinner, but two days earlier, [on 28 May 1987,] a young German flying his Cessna had flown into the Soviet Union, flown into Moscow underneath the Soviet air defense system, and landed in downtown.¹⁸ The then Chief of the Soviet General Staff was busy that night handing out pink slips to the air defense commanders. *(laughs)*

TS: Yes, well, it's all about training and selection, right?

JV: Right.

TS: I have one more brief thing to cover today. Is that all right?

JV: All right.

TS: It's the Commission on Integrated Long Term Strategy, that you were also a part of, in 1987 and 1988. I hadn't heard of this, to be honest, but I looked at the members of the commission and it was a who's who of heavyweights, quite frankly.

JV: Indeed.

TS: Of course your name is on there, but Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, General Andrew Goodpastor, Judge William Clark, and the list goes on. You're keeping good company here.

JV: Yes.

TS: What was the Commission on Integrated Long Term Strategy? What was its purpose?

JV: It was to advise the President and the National Security Council on what to look at for a long term strategy of the United States at that time. We were looking at the next twenty-five years or so. We were spending close to six percent of GDP for defense and the question was, are we spending it wisely? Should there be a change in direction?

(1:43:45)

TS: The Soviet Union was still right in front of our eyes, right?

JV: Indeed.

¹⁷ Sergey F. Akhromeyev (1923-91); Soviet military figure. Chief of Staff of the Soviet Armed Forces, 1984-88.

¹⁸ Mathias Rust (b. 1968), a West German civilian, landed a private plane near Red Square. Several high ranking Soviet military officials were dismissed in the aftermath of the incident.

TS: Zbigniew Brzezinski had published a study about this time or a little before, in a sense saying the Soviet Union has some serious structural problems; he even prophesied the end of the Soviet Union within several decades.¹⁹ He didn't predict it within a couple of years. So there were at least voices here that saw serious structural issues with the Soviet Union.

JV: Right. Right. And there were other voices saying, why spend so much time opposing the Soviet Union? They're here to stay. Let's learn to get along with them and recognize that their existence is something with which we must live.

TS: In a way that argument had been out there since the early 1970s, the whole détente era was essentially around that core, right? Let's just agree to disagree.

JV: Right.

TS: By this time, by the time you're on the Commission on Integrated Long Term Strategy, where did you fall on that argument in regards to the Soviet Union?

JV: At the time, I came to the commission with what I knew from what our own intelligence services were providing us as the look we had at the Soviet Union. They were still, obviously the outward manifestations were still dangerous; that is the Soviet Union was adding SS-18s faster than we were adding our new ballistic missile. They were adding warheads to their nuclear force faster than we were adding warheads to ours. There was no slowdown in the modernization of the Soviet armed forces in Eastern Europe. So it looked to be the same dangerous Soviet Union.

On the other hand, from my own perspective, we had improved our position to the point where I was reasonably comfortable that the Soviet Union had to look at us and say hey, we should find a better way to get along with the United States because the United States is not going to lose a war with the Soviet Union. The United States and its allies, that is to say. So there appeared an opportunity perhaps for some change.

Then through the time, this group also hired a bunch of experts in other fields to look at what's happening in the Soviet Union: the economics of the Soviet Union, what's happening to the world in general in terms of its economy, what's happening to natural resources.

TS: And there's a number of reports on specific subtopics like the ones you're alluding to.

JV: You had one of these five foot libraries of reports and subordinate reports.

TS: In fact as I was looking about the subject matter, it was all over the place. Long term requirements and priorities for defense and expenditure, but also there were reports examining U.S. policy in third world conflicts. So it wasn't just an East-West bipolar fixation here.

¹⁹ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Game Plan: A Geostategic Framework for the Conduct of the U.S.-Soviet Contest* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986).

JV: No, no. It was a look at the globe actually. Principally the globe through the eyes of the United States and the Soviet Union, and that confrontation. So there was a lot of good and interesting study done and a lot of things learned at least that I didn't know before. Demographics was another subject.

TS: What were your specific contributions? In a sense you've been asked onto this. What did they want, where were you plugged in?

JV: I was with the main study group obviously. Jokingly I used to say that my duty was to stand up about every three days and just simply assert that won't work and then sit down (*chuckles*), and let all these geniuses try to figure out what I meant by that.

TS: Maybe you could talk about what it's like to be on a policy group where you've got Zbigniew Brzezinski and Henry Kissinger and others at the same table.

JV: You do a lot of listening.

TS: Is this the first time you had worked with or around Henry Kissinger?

JV: No, he'd been around. I don't remember exactly what the specific things were, but I had met him a number of times and knew people that had worked for him closely.

TS: And Brzezinski of course was National Security Advisor for President Carter, so him you knew directly.

JV: Right.

TS: And Judge Clark you knew too actually.

JV: Certainly.

TS: Was this commission limited to just its brief tenure or was it something that went on longer that you were no longer part of?

JV: No. It wrote its report and that was the end of it. It did indeed predict the end of the Soviet Union. But again, sometime in the next couple of decades.

TS: And that's what showed up in the newspaper too, because that was the headline maker.

JV: Right. That was the headline maker and it was sort of the ha-ha, look at what these crazy guys have predicted. And of course the ink was hardly dry...

TS: At the same time policy analysts look the economic statistics of the Soviet Union or East Germany or any of those East Bloc countries in the 1980s, and the embarrassing thing is perhaps how we didn't see the economic decay or collapse of the entire East Bloc before we

did. Like you said a few moments ago, the appearance of threat or whatever the phrase was, was still there: building missiles, military. But the foundation, the underpinning was...

JV: In fact this happened close to the same time that we did the Moscow Assessment Review Panel, and the evidence of it, just in the little view that we got to look at in Moscow with the Moscow Assessment Review Panel, you could see the seeds of decay. Economic decay.

TS: What did you notice that caught your eye in that regard?

JV: First, we landed at the airport in Moscow in a U.S. Air Force airplane. That was the first time a U.S. Air Force airplane flew into Moscow. It was at Mel Laird's insistence that we come in in our own airplane.

TS: As opposed to transferring in Finland or something.

JV: Right. We had picked up a KGB crew in Finland on the way in, to make sure that we did it safely and so forth. But as we were taxiing to the terminal, you could see this long line of hangar queens out there on the taxiways at the airport of Moscow that obviously were being salvaged for parts to keep other airplanes running. Whether it was looking at the subway, or looking at street sweeping, with women with brooms made out of twigs sweeping the streets. You'd think gee, if this were Minneapolis or even Brainerd, Minnesota, you would have had somebody out there with a John Deere tractor with a broom on it doing it in one-tenth the time and with one one-hundredth of the people involved in getting it done. And wherever one looked, one saw those sorts of basic inefficiencies.

I remember on the way out, this particular VC-135 that we flew in I had flown in before. It was one that had a tendency to have starter troubles. I think we talked about the starter troubles we had when I was supposed to go to the ceremony in Israel, and we had to change a starter. On the way out we had our KGB crew in the cockpit sitting behind our people, and one of the starters broke. We had a takeoff time, I've forgotten what it was but it was maybe fifteen or twenty minutes away, and the starter on this outboard engine broke. The crew was prepared. They knew of the danger of losing a starter. They had an extra starter. They opened the hatch, dropped the ladder down. The crew was out. They get out, change the starter, start the engines up and we made the takeoff time. And you could just see the eyes on this KGB crew get bigger and bigger to realize that, hey, these guys can do something we can't do. (*chuckles*) I can't tell you how proud I was of those Air Force sergeants who fixed that starter on the taxiway in Moscow, and the crew made the takeoff time.

TS: You talk about efficient propaganda. It's almost like you couldn't have staged or written a script better than that.

JV: Right. Right. And I think they probably believed that we did that.

TS: Those economic inefficiencies, those are the same images that I saw in East Germany in 1986, 1988 and '89, when I was there. It's the everyday life stuff that just, it worked but just barely sometimes. The levels of inefficiencies to produce something or transport people or to communicate, they almost didn't equate with the image projected by that country to the outside world, and also accepted by us on the other side.

JV: As the true picture.

TS: Right. I mean the true picture of the Soviets or the East Germans by the late '80s was their Olympic teams, or their military hardware and their parades on May Day.

JV: Right.

TS: I keep thinking, if we had dug just a little deeper. I mean you and I saw this stuff as just tourists almost, right?

JV: Right. [And there were] drunks on the street.

TS: Yes. One thing we always noticed in the grocery stores was the food section; it was sometimes sparse. The produce, forget it. But the liquor section was voluminous and always well stocked.

JV: That big department store in Moscow, GUM.²⁰ We went in there, and [Sam] Walton²¹ would have been absolutely embarrassed to have a Walmart look like that.

TS: And that's the showcase store in the capital city.

JV: Exactly.

TS: And in the case of East Germany, East Berlin was the show window. It's when one got outside of East Berlin, the smaller the town the more incredible the scenes of deprivation or economic inefficiencies, to the point where stores sometimes didn't have anything on the shelves. That was it for me; that was when I consciously noticed a disconnect that you described too, that something's wrong with the picture we're believing here.

JV: Yes. And that's why that section, the economic section of the report from the Long Range Strategy Commission, was obviously so realistic to me. These guys are right.

TS: It must have been difficult for policy makers in the United States to read that though and say, You're right – we need to rethink or revise the way we've approached the Soviet Union or the East Bloc. But that didn't happen as a result of this study.

²⁰ GUM: State Department Store; found in many cities of the former Soviet Union.

²¹ Samuel M. Walton (1918-92); U.S. businessman and entrepreneur. Best known for founding Walmart, a chain of retail stores.

JV: It didn't happen as completely and as suddenly as it might have, but actually I think that there was definitely a change in the urgency of some of the things that we were doing to counter the Soviet nuclear threat, for example.

TS: When you say reduced urgency, what do you mean by that?

JV: We don't have to spend this much money this fast. And what I would say to you is, the United States government is like one of those huge tankers – you don't turn it very fast. And I think that for political leaders, presidents, who had run on specific programs and particularly with defense, where you were talking about a sizeable chunk of the federal budget and a pretty good chunk of GDP, changing it rapidly... You're not going to get anybody to run out there in the first place to say, "I've changed my mind. This outfit is not as bad or as strong as we thought they were." Because first, you don't know all of that is true. This is a study done by a bunch of smart people, but it wouldn't be the first time smart people are wrong about this. And I'm responsible for the defense of the United States.

TS: And like you said a moment ago, politicians have run on certain positions, and to do a 180 degree turn on those is dangerous at best. And the fiscal realities that you also alluded to, budgets are budgets, or are continuing resolutions in our case nowadays, but monies are committed and can't necessarily be changed tomorrow just because I have a new idea.

JV: Right.

TS: That looks like an interesting commission to have been a member of.

JV: It was. It was.

TS: As a final kind of question today, I was reading the transcript from when you retired from the military and you were looking forward to putting all this Washington stuff behind you. Yet within a couple of years you've got a full plate of stuff going on, and we're just looking at some of the things that are going on. So how do you square that? You've had enough and yet you clearly haven't had enough.

JV: Well, you get asked to do things, and I don't think any of the things that I was asked to do were unimportant. And also I believed that I could make some contribution, and believed that I was duty bound to do so.

TS: That's an interesting word, this concept of civic duty or citizen duty. Was that a tension for you? Because in a way you spent a lot of time away from home, for decades.

JV: Yes, it was a tension. And in some ways I was overcommitted at this particular time, in the '80s and '90s.

TS: Did you know that at the time, or because you had been so busy for so long did this just feel like normal?

JV: I think the latter is the case. You wound up juggling plane schedules to get from one place to another. And at this same time, later in the '90s, I got involved with the Council on Foreign Relations. So you wound up going to Washington, taking the shuttle to New York, and going back to Washington for the next meeting or something like that. You wonder, Why in the world am I doing this when I could be down on the dock at Little Whitefish?

TS: And how did you answer that question for yourself?

JV: I'll do it until this project is over. (*chuckles*)

TS: I'm tempted to say famous last words here, because your commitments stretched for a very long time. By the middle of the '90s, you'd been retired for ten years from the military, how much of your time are you spending away from Garrison, Minnesota?

(2:05:00)

JV: I might have to look at the calendars to look at what that was but, there was seldom a week that I wasn't gone someplace. I think we tried to make sure I was there for whole weeks when the kids would come during the summer.

TS: If you had to do that retirement period again, that first ten, fifteen years, would you do it the same way?

JV: I think I would plan it a little more carefully. I would commit myself to so much time for civic duties and so much time [here]. Because there are duties at home, too. We laid out some projects for ourselves that we would take on there at home that didn't get as much attention as I would like to have given them. But both Avis and I were still vigorous at the time and we had some fun in addition to what we had to do for the nation and the church.

TS: I notice even now you have commitments. When we try to schedule meetings, we have to work around your calendar. With all due respect, you're ninety and I'm still impressed by your work rate. The commission was the last thing I wanted to at least touch on today, so if it's okay with you I'll turn our machines off.

JV: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW

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