GEORGE H. W. BUSH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH EDWARD J. DERWINSKI

May 3-4, 2001
Charlottesville, Virginia

Interviewers

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Young: Let me begin by welcoming you, Secretary Derwinski, to this Oral History interview for the Bush Oral History Project. I have a few words to say that I say in all interviews to make sure that everybody here has been informed about the ground rules. Then we'll go around the table to have each person say a few words for the purpose of identifying their voice so that when the things are transcribed it's easier for the transcriber to connect the voice with the person.

We all know that these Oral History sessions, including this one, are conducted under published ground rules that call for strict confidentiality of anything that is said in the room. The only person in this room who is free to report to outside people what goes on here is you. We don't do that. The record of the session, the transcript, as I was discussing with Ed Derwinski before the session, goes first to him. He will be allowed to edit it to his satisfaction, and that edited version will become the authoritative record of what happens here. We all know that after that point, our whole purpose is to make this material available, mainly for the benefit of people not yet born, so that they will be able to get the first-hand story of the people in the Bush administration and that administration as they saw it.

As Ed Derwinski and I also discussed, one of the purposes of these strict confidentiality rules and the opportunity for editing, is the hope that all the people who come here will speak candidly to history. We hope you will feel free to say what you want, how you want to say it in confidence, and if you prefer some of that not to get out into the public domain, eventually you will have the opportunity to control it. So, if anybody has any question about this now, let's put it on the table. Okay, let's go around the room. I won't need to say anything because I've already had enough to say to recognize my voice, but let's go around the room.

Masoud: I'm Tarek Masoud. I'm a research fellow on the Oral History Project.

Scott: Wilbur Scott. I go by the name Will, Will Scott. Professor of Sociology, University of Oklahoma.

Riley: I am Russell Riley. I am product of the University of Virginia and recently returned as a research professor with the Oral History Program.

Derwinski: I guess I'll have too much to say. Well, is it all right to proceed the way we discussed? I just start running?

Young: Right. We're going to start with how you got involved, how you came to get connected.

Derwinski: Well, I thought to give you a total picture of the life of a Cabinet officer before and after. I have a few points that would be in order. [redacted]

I went to a State Department committee meeting, and it was a tough subject. An American ship owner had used a special provision in the law relating to our subsidy of merchant shipping to take most of the business of shipping supplies to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO] base in Iceland. That NATO base is basically a U.S. Navy and Air Force base. The Icelanders, in giving us the base rights, had originally intended that their Merchant Marine would handle the cargo business.

I went to the State Department meeting. It was classic. All they did was meet and agree to meet again. They were not about to make a decision. So I went over to Iceland and came back and made a few adjustments—I had to call Lord Carrington, who was then the NATO's number-one diplomat and administrative officer. Our solution to the problem was that we took this American ship—*Rainbow*—and we gave them other contracts from the U.S. Navy. So most shipping to our facility in Iceland then reverted to the Icelandic Merchant Marine companies. To do this we had to get the U.S. Navy to come along. The only way I could do that was to have Lord Carrington call on Mr. [John] Lehman, and say, "We're going to lose that base unless you come along with an agreement."

They gave *Rainbow* a contract to carry the supplies to our Air Force base in the Azores and supply bases along the African coast. I had to inform the Merchant Marine Committee that American employment would stay the same, and no American merchant seaman was going to lose his job.

Actually, it wasn't difficult. It was something Shultz wanted, so we did it. Later, when I was leaving office, they asked me to serve as their Counsel-General and I thought, *My, this is going to be great. I'll get some work to do and keep myself active.*

I don't want to shoot off on tangents, but perhaps sometimes to make a point it will be necessary. You notice that my bio states that I directed the VA [Veterans Administration] Department with 174 hospitals. We're down to 173. I managed to close one. But you should know here, since you're in historical-minded Virginia, that you have three hospitals, one in Hampton Roads one in Salem, and one in Richmond.

The one in Salem was directed to my attention because when I was Secretary a problem was uncovered, and the media pounced on it. The grounds there are very large and quite nice, but there's a rather dense wooded area. Somebody wandering through that area—this is back in 1990—came upon the remains, some bones, and so the police were called in. It turned out that the bones were of a veteran who the record showed left the hospital without signing out. They presumed that he went home. They checked back home. He never did arrive, so nobody knew where he was. He'd evidently wandered into the woods and either tripped and fell—and passed away there, and his bones were not discovered for years.

How do you explain that? All the VA records show that they looked for him. I went down there and had a press conference and laid out the records so the press could see that they had tried. My recollection is that the man had disappeared in the mid '70s. Bones were located in 1990.

In the meantime, I had a chance to look at Salem and ask a few questions. One of the questions I asked was, "How did this hospital start?" My discovery will tell you a lot about the VA. That hospital is in Salem because in 1932, at the Democratic National Convention, the one Virginia delegate who supported Franklin Roosevelt was also the Congressman from that area. The rest of the delegation supported Al Smith. After the election, Roosevelt called this gentleman and said, "You were helpful. What can I do for you?" His answer was, "I'd like a VA Hospital in my district." So he picked Salem, and Salem became a VA Hospital.

Later on I'll get to the point of telling you how difficult it is to work with Congress and how provincial many Congressmen are as they approach the VA—at the expense of good management and at the expense of the taxpayer.

I recall a comment from President Bush that he had thought my years of experience in legislative and executive branches were the reason he put me up for the position.

Young: This whole question of how you connected up, how you got chosen in the early days—

Derwinski: Well, nothing prepares you for the VA unless you've been a VA bureaucrat or medical practitioner with administrative responsibilities in the VA. As a young Congressman, I naturally kept an eye on my casework, and we had a steady flow of veteran complaints. I was in Congress from January '59 until January of '83, and veteran complaints weren't the biggest problem. The veterans really weren't much of a problem. Usually there was some complaint about treatment at Hines Hospital or the other Chicago area hospitals. We'd call, and in no time at all it was taken care of. There was really no major VA problem as such.

As a Congressman, I didn't get much of an education in the VA. I did serve on the Post Office Civil Service Committee, and at one point we rewrote the Civil Service laws. So when I finally got to the VA, I ran into some of the things we hadn't quite cured in our effort to reform the Civil Service.

Young: Was Bush in Congress when you were there?

Derwinski: Yes. He was there briefly. And then, I also worked with him at the UN [United Nations] and the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] because they happened to fall in Foreign Affairs Committee jurisdiction. So I had a good relationship with the President-to-be. The problems at the VA are unique. It doesn't relate to any other department. We should have a better relationship with the Department of Defense. Eventually I think we will. In fact, 20 to 30 years down the road, I wouldn't be surprised if the VA and DOD [Department of Defense] medicine merge. It's a logical thing to do, and if you get over jurisdictional disputes I think you'll get over the veterans' objections once the World War II and Korean veterans leave the scene. You won't have as much difficulty in getting recent veterans and DOD better aligned. I think it would be mutually beneficial.

We have our own constituency. My frank opinion is that less than 15 percent of the veterans belong to any veteran service organization. Their numbers are always exaggerated. In addition, you've got to crank in the fact that the veteran who is an activist usually becomes a multiple joiner. For example, at one time or another I belonged to five different veteran groups. And I could probably join a few others if I wanted to, just by paying dues. I belonged to the Legion, VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars], AMVETS [American Veterans], Polish-American Veterans and Catholic War Veterans. So when you're counting up the veteran membership, you have people like me sitting there counted five times. My brother is the same: He was a Korean War veteran, and he belongs to the Legion, VFW, and the AMVETS.

With rare exceptions, every veteran organization is run by a small group of career, top-level veterans. They select the national commander—really, there is very little democracy in those groups. A clique keeps control. If they can get more money from the VA, they don't care where the money goes, as long as they can put a headline in their publication "XYZ Veteran's Group gets one billion more for VA. Please send in your dues for next year."

Scott: Before you leave that topic—could you digress just for a couple of minutes? I'm wondering how a Polish-American kid from Chicago—from the wrong side of the tracks, to use your phrase a moment ago—ends up in the Republican party?

Derwinski: Well, I have about three explanations for it. First, when I was a young man—in fact, just before I was drafted—I attended Mt. Carmel High School in Chicago. During the war, they had an accelerated program for any student who wanted to graduate before he was drafted, and go on to a semester or two of college before he was drafted. So I took advantage of that, and I graduated when I was 17 and enrolled at Loyola in Chicago. One of the first courses I took was History of Europe from 1815 to 1914. It was available and fit my schedule, so I took it. The professor (I'll never forget him) was Father Rubik. I guess these days we would say he was an émigré from Austria. He was a monarchist. He was an older gentleman, and he thought the world would be fine if every country had a benevolent emperor like Franz Joseph.

I was brainwashed, innocently enough, by this good Jesuit priest. But if he's going to make you a monarchist in the sense of historic affection, well, he makes you a Republican. [laughter] Without knowing it, he planted the seeds for me to be a Republican.

My dad was in local politics as a Democrat. My mother was a Democratic Judge of Election. If you were Polish and Catholic in the city at the time, you were also a Democrat. There were few exceptions. But when I got back from the service I found, to my great interest—not surprise, but great interest—that my dad had become militantly anti-Roosevelt. The issue was Yalta, the fact that Poland had become a communist country. Along with Czechoslovakia, Romania, Hungary, and Bulgaria had all been assigned in the communist world by Roosevelt's decisions at Yalta. And my dad was very active in Polish-American organizations. His grandfather had come from Poland, so he still had feeling for the old country.

I have to be careful when I say this—he hadn't become Republican, but he was militantly anti-Roosevelt. There I was with my monarchist education from Loyola and my dad now becoming anti-Roosevelt. Then the '48 campaign, which was the first year I was eligible to vote, Paul Douglas was the candidate for the Senate. The attorney at the savings and loan was the Democratic precinct captain, and he took me to one of their ward rallies. Douglas helped me become a Republican because basically he stood up and made a speech damning Herbert Hoover. I thought, wait a minute. Hoover left office 16 years ago. We've had a world war, we're having problems getting the country out from under the war-time imposed federal controls, we've got other headaches, but the whole point of Senator Douglas' address was "Elect me because otherwise the Herbert Hoovers of the world will be running the country again." I thought that was an incredibly poor presentation and intellectually dishonest.

Now, I got to know Senator Douglas a little later, and I understood where he came from and why he would feel that way. So when I finally voted in my first election, I voted for [Harry] Truman as did a lot of people. But by 1950, though, I was voting Republican. I'll never forget in the '50 primary I walked in, and my mother was there, still a Democratic election judge. I knew all the ladies in the precinct, and they all said hello, and handed me a ballot without even asking. They handed me the Democratic primary ballot, and I handed it back and said, "No, I'm voting Republican this primary."

Oh, my poor mother almost died on the spot. She came home later and she said, "How dare you? You ruined the family reputation! You're a Republican!" She said, "At least you could have told me what you were going to do. I would have left the room when you came in."

Young: You made your point.

Derwinski: Does that answer your question?

Scott: Yes.

Derwinski: Ideology wasn't an issue in the first campaign. It was more geography and distribution of representation. I started off quite conservative. In '64 I was [Barry] Goldwater's campaign manager in Illinois, but as time went on, I realized I was slowly moderating. I wound up a liberal in foreign policy. I was an internationalist, a free-trader supporting the foreign aid program, things of that nature, but pretty consistently conservative on domestic issues. "Government that governs least governs best" fit my thinking. But there were always exceptions. I was never so rigid that I couldn't compromise.

The late Mo [Morris] Udall and I were co-sponsors of what is now the U.S. Post Office, the Udall-Derwinski Bill, 1969. Then under [Jimmy] Carter they had a Civil Service director by the name of Scotty Campbell, and he came in and convinced me they had to reform Civil Service. I said, "Fine, what do you want?" He said "Well, we got some of the suggestions right from the old Hoover Commission on revamping government." He didn't have enough Democratic votes because the unions controlled too many Democrat votes, so he needed Republicans.

I provided the Republicans, and we hatched the deal. The deal was that there'd be no right to strike for federal employees, there would be no compulsory union dues, and at that point—it changed much later, but at that point there would be no weakening of the Hatch Act, which at the time kept most federal employees out of active politics. If they didn't change those areas, we Republicans on the committee, would support the bill.

In the process, this deal Mo and I had made—again, this was the Udall-Derwinski Amendment—became reform of the Civil Service. One of my members said, "I don't trust Carter. I don't trust those guys." So I called Scotty and said, "Look, my members don't trust you. Could we go in and see the President? Just give us five minutes and have the President tell us that we have the deal."

Sure enough, about two weeks later I took the nine members of my committee in to see the President. One man is still active in Congress, Ben Gilman, who is the chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee. Ben was also on the Post Office Committee. Ben was opposed to the bill because of union influence on him from New York, but Ben also came because he hadn't had a picture with the President, and he wanted a picture for his wall. So he came to get a picture. The other eight came to be told that we had a deal.

The President came in and worked the room. Everybody got a handshake and a photo, and he said, "I appreciate you gentlemen coming here, and I understand your support for my reform of the federal Civil Service. I appreciate that, and also the conditions that you want. I absolutely tell you that I will not sign a bill if it provides the right to strike for federal employees, or compulsory union dues, or any weakening of the Hatch Act. You have my word."

We thanked him and turned. The Roosevelt Room at the White House is named after Theodore Roosevelt. The President turned to go back out, he got to the door, but he suddenly came right back. "Wait a minute," he said. "One thing I've forgotten. I know that a lot of you Congressmen are reluctant to call me." He said, "You can call me personally. If you have a problem in your district, or if you need help in your district, you just call me personally, and I'll take your phone call, and I'll work with you on this." And he turned and walked out.

I turned to Scotty Campbell and said, "What was that all about?" He said, "The old man forgot you're Republicans." [laughter]

Scott: Just a couple of words about your time in the military, since you're a veteran.

Derwinski: My military time was rather uneventful. I was drafted, of course, and I didn't object. In fact, at that time there were damn few people who did. The morning I showed up at the draft board, I was only worried that I might be rejected. I didn't want to be 4F. I wanted to go in the service. I wasn't overly eager, but, by God, I had to go.

I finished basic training, and we were going to be shipped over to Okinawa. But we got there just after Hiroshima and Nagasaki were bombed, so there was no battle time left. I had infantry basic training in Texas, a place called Camp Maxie near Texarkana. Then I spent a year and a half in the Army of Occupation in Japan.

Young: Where were you in Japan?

Derwinski: I started in Yokohama, in an antiaircraft unit, which was actually by that time dismantled. So we were an antiaircraft unit with no antiaircraft gun. This was right at the base, on the waterfront in Yokohama. Then I was transferred to Tokyo because I was a little more literate than some of the other boys. I became a postal clerk at the APO. My total service time was 23 months. The day after the war ended, everybody in the infantry unit I was in at the time who had more than a year and a half or two in the service, immediately were writing to their Congressman, "Bring me home." I saw first hand the way we totally dismantled our military, which came back to haunt us five years later when we were not really prepared for the Korean War. The same thing happened after the Korean War. Of course, now we've gone to an all-volunteer Army, it's a different relationship.

Young: Tell us a bit about how you were approached, with whom you talked, and walk us through your appointment as the first Secretary of Veterans.

Derwinski: In my case, it was entirely President Bush.

Young: He called you?

Derwinski: I first met President Bush in '66. I already had four terms under my belt. Somewhere in that earlier interview I had with the Miller Center, I made comments about how the Republican Party emerged in the south. Of course, Bush was one of the new wave. When I first went to Congress, there wasn't a single Republican Senator from the 11 Dixie states. Now half of them are Republican. There were only a half a dozen or so House members. Of those, three or four came from the hills of Tennessee and North Carolina. Here union sympathizers existed during the Civil War and therefore were Republican. The hill folk had remained—well, for a variety of reasons, they were union. And they're still Republican today.

The other Republicans we had were one from suburban Virginia, the suburban area, and another was Dick Poff. He was down in the military area in Norfolk, probably elected by the military folk. We had at the time one Republican from Texas, one from Florida—Bill Kramer was from the Tampa-St. Pete area. Eight men out of 11 states. But in '64 we had the breakthrough because even though the Goldwater campaign was a disaster, we elected House members in Alabama, Mississippi, one in Georgia, and one in South Carolina. Then in '66, which was a very good Republican year—that's the year Bush was elected—we got three or

four in Texas, a couple in Louisiana, half a dozen Florida, North Carolina. All of a sudden, we had 35 or 40 southern Republicans.

Now, when George came in, he went to the Ways and Means Committee. That was the Republican way of saying to the Texas economy look, we're taking good care of your boy, send us more. It was good politics. It worked. Well, George was there for two terms. In '70 he went home and ran for the Senate and lost. He thought that was the end of his career, but President [Richard] Nixon appointed him the UN ambassador. By coincidence, it was my turn as a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee to serve at the UN. We send two men to the General Assembly session every year. The odd-numbered year it's the House members, the even-numbered years it's two Senators who aren't running for re-election that year. So my turn was '71, and because George was a reasonably good friend by then, and he was the Ambassador, instead of just coming up for a half a dozen perfunctory meetings or special events or receptions, I moved my family up there on Labor Day, and worked full time as an Ambassador to the UN from Labor Day until two to three days before Christmas.

Now, those were the days before the House had electronic voting, so I missed 10 or 15 votes. Because in those days, under the rules, your key votes were usually non-recorded. That changed when we got the electronic voting procedure. So at the UN, George and I grew much closer. Once he knew that I was going to be there full time, they gave me speaking assignments, and they gave me a couple of tough committees. I worked six days a week. Saturdays I usually covered the desk for the speeches that were being made in case we needed it, using the right of reply.

In '73, Nixon brought Bush in to run the Republican National Committee. One of my avocations in politics is helping the Republicans try to get the so-called ethnic vote, and basically, you're talking about ethnic Europeans because the Asian vote and the Hispanic-speaking vote, we keep separate. So that would be basically eastern and central southern Europe. So George was there as the national chairman, and I was the man he used whenever he had any questions in that area. I was their one-man speaker's bureau for eastern European groups. From there he went to China.

Masoud: Liaison office.

Derwinski: And then, of course, I was on the Foreign Affairs Committee. He had a couple of hearings before us. I traveled to China at that time with the delegation when he was there. Then he came back to run the CIA. Again, I related with him on committee levels. So we had a long continuation. Then in early '79 he became a candidate for President. I thought, *What the hell. He's an old friend, I'll support him.* So I ran and was elected a Bush delegate to the national convention. In fact, there was only one other delegate with me from my district who was a Bush delegate. We broke through, and we were the two "Bushies" from Illinois.

I left the Congress because I was sliced up in redistricting. My district, where I was happy and, presumably, my voters were happy, suddenly was in five different pieces after the reapportionment. Actually, it was a court decision. Republicans and Democrats were in a logjam, couldn't agree on the map. It went to court, and the court took the Democratic map. So

I spent the next six years at the State Department. In the meantime, I would usually go up and have a light breakfast with President Bush about once a month.

Young: As Vice President or as President?

Derwinski: As Vice President. About half the time we'd be discussing world affairs, which was always his preoccupation, and half the time we were discussing politics.

Young: He didn't discuss his forthcoming campaign with you?

Derwinski: [redacted]

Now, since I was at State, I couldn't do much in the campaign, although I did continue to do my ethnic work, probably breaking the regulations as I dashed around for the Bush campaign. I was told later—in fact, the President told me himself—that when he was elected, he kept an index card in his pocket with a half a dozen names of people he wanted to put somewhere. And my name was on that list. Finally, one morning early in December, I got a phone call from the then-Vice President, President-to-be. He called me at my office at the State Department about 8:30 in the morning and, fortunately, I was there.

"Ed," he said, "I have a tough position for you. I'd like to have you be my Secretary of the soon-to-be-created Department of Veterans Affairs. What do you think about that?" I said, "Give me a few minutes to think about it, and I'll call you back." I was ready to say yes, but I thought I'd play a little hard to get just so he didn't think I was that easy. So I called back about 15 minutes later and said, "I've given it thought, and I'll be honored to do this for you." And he said, "Okay, you're going to be announced today at two o'clock."

I was trotted out with Lou [Louis] Sullivan, Sam Skinner, and Manny [Manuel] Lujan that day. He said to me, "Now Ed, there've been an awful lot of leaks. Please don't leak this until the announcement." "Okay, don't worry, Mr. President. I won't." I was told I could bring my family to watch the announcement. I didn't say anything to my staff. I was supposed to go to the Christmas party that day, so I had on a bright green, Christmas kind of green jacket, with a wild Christmas tie. I said, "I have to go home and change." I knew my wife could not contain herself. If I told my wife that I was going to be selected for a Cabinet position, she'd start by calling her mother and then every woman crony she had.

We had lunch that day. Actually I'd agreed to have lunch earlier with a friend of mine at the Democratic Club in Washington. So I thought that was a perfect place for me, I'd be hiding. Nobody would be looking for me in the Democratic Club. I called my daughter, who was working in Washington at the time. My son, Michael, was home for the weekend from Denison

University. I think he'd just come home for Christmas break. I told them to be in my office. So had lunch with Mrs. D. and never told her anything. Picked up the youngsters at the office.

We used to come in the West Gate at the White House, and then we'd park the car between the White House and the old EOB [Executive Office Building]. As we walked through a little tunnel into the old EOB. I stopped them there in that tunnel. There was nobody around. I said, "Okay, now we're going in for this gathering, and President Bush is going to be there, and I'm one of four people he's going to announce for his Cabinet. So that's why you're here, and I couldn't tell you before because the President said no leaks." So we marched in, and everything went on schedule, and there were no leaks that day.

So we got up there, and the first question they asked Lou was, "What's your position on abortion?" He started to answer and then realized he would be booby-trapped, so he just said, "I haven't been briefed. My position will be the administration position once it's hammered out." They asked me one question: "What brought about your appointment?" I tend to be less than formal, and I tend to be somewhat sacrilegious. So I just said, "When the President first came to Congress in 1967, the first day of the session he was standing next to me and turned and asked where the men's room was. I showed him where it was, and he's been eternally grateful, and that's why I'm in the Cabinet."

It did get quoted in a few places. Manny Lujan had the better background. He was going to Interior. He had served on the Interior Committee for 20 years, and he comes from a state with a lot of national forests, and they have that famous underground cavern there, Carlsbad Caverns. So he was fairly familiar with what the Interior Department did. But, boy, I was really cold on the VA.

Young: Weren't the veteran groups interested in who was going to be appointed? Where were they in all this process of selection?

Derwinski: I had a meeting with them a week later. They had a few rules. One of them was they assumed that whoever would be appointed would be a veteran, so I fit that. While I had no direct relationship with veteran issues, I was on record as supporting veterans' preference, for example, which we protected in the Civil Service reform. They knew that. They knew I tended to support the military budget, which really is a minor thing for them, but in principle they genuflect to supporting the military. If you asked the typical veterans leader, he would tell you, "The hell with the military. Give us more for the VA."

So on national defense issues, having protected the veterans' preference in federal hiring, being a veteran myself, I was on good grounds. And I had never, as far as they knew and as far as I knew, done anything that was anti-veteran.

Young: But wouldn't others have been lobbying because there was some change in personnel going to happen?

Derwinski: Usually there are a number of senior retired officers who would like to cap their career by going into the Cabinet.

The man who was in the position as administrator of the VA, General [Thomas K.] Turnage, was a National Guard general by background. He wanted to stay and become the new Secretary. His deputy, Tom Harvey, wanted to become the new Secretary. There were a couple of others. But the way it was explained to me, my name was on that list that Bush was carrying, and the list was getting smaller, and the list of appointments also was getting smaller. So Bush looked at it and said, "Ed will fit in VA."

Young: Did you have to submit the usual personal background stuff and all that?

Derwinski: Oh sure, all that. Selection came first from the President. I want to get to the process, the committee.

Scott: It would have been that quickly? He calls you in the morning, and you're announced in the afternoon? That wouldn't—the background check and everything—

Derwinski: Oh, they started the background check after the announcement. Of course, one of his aides came up to me before we went up on the stage and said, "We have had this coming pretty fast, but you don't have anything in your record—" I said no.

I don't want to sound like I'm boasting too much, but I was very well positioned in the Congress, in the sense that even though I was labeled as a conservative, the Democrats knew that from time to time I had voted with them. Then I'd had these two, what we thought were major legislative accomplishments with Mo Udall, and I was never overly critical of the Democrats during their administrations. In fact, during the Vietnam War, I was supportive of [John F.] Kennedy and [Lyndon] Johnson engaging in Vietnam. I had no difficulty with the Carter administration. I didn't vote with them often, but I wasn't very verbal about it.

In fact, in my previous interview eight years ago—I think this is still very accurate. When I first came to Congress—I was elected in November of '58—actually, I came in as green as hell. I had had one term in the state legislature but never thought I'd run for Congress. Our candidate died, and they threw me into the breach, and I was lucky enough to win. So there I was. It seemed everywhere I went I was unprepared. I was really unprepared to get to Congress, but the old timers sat me down. One of the things they would say was, "Now look, kid, the first thing you do is you get a good caseworker, and if you serve your constituents well with casework, you'll go a long way to be re-elected." And that was the rule in the '50s. The

rule today is, the first person you hire is a press aide, and the first thing you do is look for headlines.

My relationship with Democrats was good. They never lobbied me, I never lobbied them, and I would vote for them periodically, and everybody was happy. So I could tell this White House staffer, "I have no problems. I'll have no problems with Congress."

I was still on the board of a little savings and loan. My grandfather had started it, my dad ran it before he passed away, I ran it before I went to Congress, and I turned it over to my brothers. It was not a stock association, so there was no conflict of interest. What little I had in savings was in federal U.S. savings bonds. I didn't have any stocks. I had no conflicts of interest I could think of off the top of my head, so I could honestly say I won't have any trouble.

Well, subsequently I had this little battle with Cranston, but it was not the old Senator's battle, it was his aide, Mr. [Jonathan R.] Steinberg, who waged the battle. We rewarded him later by putting him on the veterans' court.

Young: That was a reward, did you say?

Derwinski: I say that with tongue in cheek. He wanted to get on the court because he knew Cranston wouldn't run again, so he had to look around for a little security. When they first approached me, they sent an emissary. This was after we'd had a bit of a bruising battle. Ironically, it wasn't too public. It went on behind closed doors most of the time. They sent an emissary to me asking, "Would you oppose Steinberg if he wanted to go to the court?" And I said, "Hell no! Get him there as quick as you can." That was just common sense. I can't think of a better way.

It had already been agreed that [Frank Q.] Nebeker was going to be the presiding judge. We'd put Don Ivers, whom I inherited as the VA counsel-general—he was a Republican—and a couple of others, including former Congressman [Kenneth] Kramer of Colorado. [redacted]

Young: Do you want to talk about your confirmation and then about your appointments?

Derwinski: Sure, whenever—

Riley: Jim, can I ask a question that pre-dates that? Actually, there are two questions. One is you said that you met with the Vice President on a number of occasions to talk about politics and so forth. Could you tell us a little bit about the substance, if you recall any of your political conversations with him? He's a sitting Vice President in a position that in some respects looks very good to be elected President, but in some respects historically is a very bad place to be. The tensions he had were in being a loyal Vice President to a very popular President and yet

figuring out how to establish his own standing independently with the voters. My assumption is that he must have consulted with you about these things.

Derwinski: Partially. You have to remember again how we related and how we worked with each other. He knew me, first of all, to be a loyal Republican. He knew me to be interested in foreign affairs from my service with him at the UN. He also was in Congress his second year, when I put the postal reform through. So he knew I was sort of Mr. Post Office of the Republican Party. He also knew that becoming a Republican coming from Cook County was a rarity, and he also knew that I was very politically conscious. But we never sat down and discussed his ideology and philosophy.

He'd say something like, "What was your reading on that vote the other day?" or "Why did the Democrats press so hard to override that veto?"—things of that nature, the current political issues. Or I would sit there and have breakfast with him in the mid '80s, and he would say, "What does the party look like in Illinois?" He'd ask me questions, knowing that I was a political animal and that even though I was tied up at the State Department in the exalted world of foreign policy, I didn't miss an issue when it came to domestic politics.

I limited myself to out-of-Illinois appearances to ethnic groups. I remember I was in Detroit, Cleveland, Milwaukee, Boston, Syracuse, Buffalo, Rochester—all the ethnic cities. I did that on week-ends, when I was free from my State Department duties.

Riley: When you were approached about the Veterans post, had you given thought to—were there other positions in the administration that you—?

Derwinski: Oh yes, good thing that you mentioned that.

Scott: What post would you have—?

Derwinski: You do understand, of course, that the easiest thing to fall in love with in Washington is foreign policy. Everybody loves to be important in foreign policy, meet world leaders, solve world problems. Yes, I'd been at State for six years. Before that I was on the House Foreign Affairs Committee for 22 years. I had my very special interest in Eastern Europe, even as a youngster, in foreign policy, because of my Polish background. Poland at that time was still—we used the term "captive nations."

Young: He and Baker didn't always get along, did they?

Derwinski: [redacted]

Riley: United Way.

Derwinski: Yes, that's right. That was before that gentleman set them back years with his embezzlement scheme, remember?

Young: Yes.

Derwinski: So I was running the United Way campaign that year. I'd looked at the figures about two weeks before it was to end, and every department had come in, and they were all very close to last year's figure. A couple had gone above. The VA had gone above because since I was the boss, by God, they were being more generous. The only department that hadn't sent anything in yet was State, just a trickle. So I called Jim Baker, and his secretary put me through. He was not at all pleased that I was interrupting his management of the world with a trivial thing like the State Department's contribution to an annual fund-raising. "Don't worry, it will be taken care of." And he slammed the phone down. He could have been waiting for a call from the Prime Minister of Britain at the time. I don't know. I'm sure my call wasn't particularly timely, but that was Jim.

I'd been at State for six years, and I had fallen in love with running the world. I wrote the President-to-be a polite letter saying that I'd love to serve in his administration, and that because of my committee background and now six years of active service as an under Secretary of State, there were a number of positions I thought I could fill, and I would be pleased to direct his attention to it. I put Director of the Peace Corps, Director of the Aid Agency, and one other, Ambassador to the UN. I thought that might tickle his attention because he knew how hard I worked years ago when I served under him.

Just after Thanksgiving, I got a phone call from Jim Baker, who by that time had moved to the State Department, had a transition office there. So he called and said, "Ed, I've got a couple of assignments that I'd like to have you consider." I said "Yes, Jim, what is it?" He said, "Ambassador to Poland or Ambassador to Yugoslavia." And right on the spot I said, "Well, Jim, I'll save you a lot of time. I don't think that you could get approval for me from the government of Yugoslavia." I had done a lot of work on Balkan history, and I was a proponent of the role of General [Draza] Mikhailovich versus [General Josip Broz-] Tito in the civil war they fought in Yugoslavia during World War II. Mikhailovich was the loyalist and monarchist, and Tito, of course, the communist. That was a Roosevelt–Churchill decision to supply equipment to Tito rather than Mikhailovich, even though the king was in London, in exile, as leader of the allied country of Yugoslavia. So I said, "I don't think they'd give me a chance.

I've been too outspoken about Mikhailovich and anti-Tito, and I don't think it would be comfortable for them. And it wouldn't be comfortable for me."

"Now in Poland," I said, "it's probably even worse. They'd probably go along," I said, "but I'm Polish background, and I'm anti-communist, and I couldn't put up with them. If I was your ambassador, I'm not sure I could be objective in reporting back to you because I wouldn't like what I was seeing to start with. So I don't think that it would be fair to you to have someone with my point of view as ambassador." He said, "Well, you think about these things anyway, and I'll give you a call in about a week." In the intervening period I got the call from Bush.

Young: We can move to your confirmation and your appointments. At what point were you briefed? Not before your announcement, when were—?

Derwinski: When I look back, it was understandable because the other departments had gone through this every four and eight years. The VA was at that time an agency, and the agency got less attention. The agency, just in terms of being a challenge, wasn't as great. As a result, this was new for the VA. Now, what happened was, after I was nominated, I got the paperwork. I think I spent two or three days filling out the forms and the clearances, and all that sort of stuff. The FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] came around weeks later and interviewed the people I listed.

The Senate committee didn't get into this until after the first of the year because my selection announcement and early stages of processing were just before Christmas. That's when Cranston and Steinberg surprised me by throwing this issue at me. What they did, when I was back in the Foreign Affairs Committee in '78, I had a run-in with one of the other committee members [redacted] That was my role. [Don] Frazier accused me of giving information to the Korean embassy on part of his investigation. That was in '78. [redacted]

The issue came up in '83 when I had to be confirmed by the Senate for the counselor position. It came up only verbally. They talked about it at a meeting, and they asked me a couple of questions, and I answered. Four years later, which would be early in '87, I was moved from the counselor position to Under Secretary of State for Security Assistance. And again we went through the same drill. They asked me a couple of questions. In those two cases, I was confirmed by the Senate by voice vote. The committee vote for a matter of record, but the floor vote was voice vote. [redacted]

So Alan Cranston called a special meeting of the committee, in executive session. The only people there were the committee members, two staff people, Steinberg and one Republican,

and myself. I came in unaccompanied, no aide, no legal advisor. Of course I knew everyone on the committee, and they knew me. Cranston apologized for what he was going to have to do, but, by God, he had to get this straight and, "You said this in '87, this in '83, this in '78."

At which point Jay Rockefeller interrupted and said, "Okay, I understand the problem is that Mr. Derwinski stated different things. Now, this allegation first came up 11 years ago. [redacted] and if you'd asked me a week or two later what John Jones said to me about an issue, I'd have a hard time remembering. How do we expect him to remember exactly what occurred 11 years ago with everything that has transpired in his life and in his work? As far as I'm concerned, there's no issue here." At which point Alan Simpson said, "I agree." They just terminated the meeting. Then they met publicly and at that point voted me out of committee. Then when they went to the floor, Cranston delivered sort of "I don't really like this, but he's a nice man, and he made a mistake." The vote was 96-0. The issue just blew away.

Young: That was my next question.

Derwinski: No, they never did ask. The only meeting of that kind I had was with the VSO [Veteran Services Organizations] leadership. They called a meeting, and Dan Quayle appeared—he was Veep-to-be. Dan and I sat down with many national commanders and Washington-based employees of the veteran organizations—

Riley: Was there a reason for Quayle being—

Derwinski: Yes, he needed the education, too. They were trying to give Quayle things to do. So he sat in with me. I laughed at it because early in that campaign, remember, he got into trouble when the charge was made that he had joined the National Guard reserves to avoid the draft. The only question the veterans really wanted to ask was, "Do you love us, and are we going to get more money?" My answer was, "That will obviously depend on what's in the President's budget." I said, "Look, I'm not at the VA yet. I don't have the answers." The other thing—remember, the VA did not become a Cabinet post until March 15 of 1989, so we had an extra two months. At the same time they confirmed me, they had a simultaneous vote and confirmed me to be the last administrator. So I was the last administrator of the old VA as an agency.

I remember the first decision I made, by the way, when I came in. We had a transition team. I have to tell you this. Transitions within the same party are harder than transitions with the opposition, because Mr. Turnage, my predecessor, had wanted to be Secretary. It wasn't that he wasn't cooperative, but he was obviously disappointed. His deputy had wanted to be Secretary and wasn't selected. Their political appointees were unsure where they'd be. So it was really difficult.

I had three or four people. Ironically, none of them came into the VA with me, but they handled the transition. Then I went in in January, after the 20th, after the President was inaugurated, as administrator. We were preparing for the ceremony, which was held on the

White House lawn, to elevate us to Cabinet rank. The first issue I did hit, though, was the budget. The veterans were demanding an extra billion dollars in supplemental. We looked at the figures, and I asked, "Well, how much were we short cut? How much were we trimmed in our internal battles with the Bureau of the Budget?" I guess it was something like $700 million. [redacted]

I said, "Okay, what do you think we need?" They all said somewhere between $500 and $600 million. At the time, my old friend Jerry Lewis was the ranking Republican on the appropriations subcommittee, so I went to him and said, "Can we work this out without any unnecessary debate? Here's a White House figure, and here's what my career people tell me, and here's what the veterans want. What do you get?" So they wound up giving us a little more than we asked for, but not quite as much as the veterans wanted, which was good. And they did it without any debate. But then the supplemental appropriation by federal budgeting was really charged to the previous administration. It wasn't charged to Bush.

Now, in the first Bush budget, [Richard] Darman cut a billion dollars, roughly. Darman's reasoning was, "We'll let the Congress give it to us." And I argued that that was dumb politics, that we didn't get any credit from the veterans, "we" being the Bush administration. I wanted the full figure that we knew that Congress would give us. And I managed to win that debate. I had to go to the President. Darman pulled me aside a little later, and he said, "From now on, I don't want you to go to the President any more. We'll meet privately in advance, and we'll agree." Well, he really was saying he didn't want to get run over in public. I told him, "Well, Dick, I will never play that game of asking for less, knowing we're going to get more." I didn't think that was good politics.

At the time the Iraqis invaded Kuwait, and the President ordered a build-up of our forces, we received a call from the Defense Department asking how many beds we had available. Should there be casualties, they would come from the battle areas to a VA hospital. That had been the pattern through history, depending on logistics.

That was one of my first lessons in how inefficient the VA really was. They gave me a report showing we had 111,000 available beds in the VA system. I said to Tony Principi—my deputy secretary—I said, "Tony, I'm not going to work off this figure. I want a recount. I want you to fire off a request to every hospital director asking for a precise, as-of-today, bed availability."

Overnight 22,000 beds disappeared. The figures came back, and they gave them to me about a week later: 89,000. Now, naturally I started to ask what happened. Well, one of the facts is that the individual budget allocation to each hospital was based on beds. So they inflated the number of beds they had just to increase their own budget. Rich Bell, the chief of staff, and Tony Principi sat in on the meeting, and Dr. [James] Holsinger [Jr.], who had just come in as head of the medical area. I said, "Look. No bullshit here. We cannot give the DOD anything but the precise figures. The law says they have to know how many beds we have available. Now I want to know." So, fine. Everybody suddenly jumped to attention, but what happened was when we sent the report over a week later, we had to report 89,000 available beds. That was one of my painful lessons at the VA.

Young: Can I get back to the appointment of your people? You referred to Principi. You brought him in as deputy?

Derwinski: No, I didn't.

Young: But could you tell us about—you had six assistant secretaries—

Derwinski: I didn't bring in a single crony or confidant except my personal secretary. She had been with me in Congress for 24 years. She went over to the State Department with me. She was with me at State for six years. So I brought her over to the VA. She retired two years later. She had her full time in. She was the only specific employee I had. What happened with Tony—who, by the way is now the Secretary—I had a call from—

Young: Chase Untermeyer?

Derwinski: No, I'm not sure Chase was there yet. Chase ran the White House personnel. Maybe he was on board for the transition, I'm not sure. But they said, "We've got a couple of people. If you don't have a candidate for deputy, could we send somebody over?" I said, "Well, I don't have a candidate. I'm not going to have one. I don't have anyone on my horizon that I want to bring in as deputy. So, if you've got some people, let me know." Now, meantime, I should add, Tom Harvey, who had been the deputy, came to see me and asked if he could be considered as deputy secretary. He had been the deputy administrator. I said, "Tom, I've given up my choice. I'm not making the choice. You go to the personnel people. If you can get their clearance, fine. I'd be happy to have you as my deputy, but I'm not making that call."

Tony was the front-runner. Tony had endorsements from Alan Simpson and Frank Murkowski, who were both members of the Senate committee. So Tony came in, and we chatted for a few minutes, and I liked his manner. He had had a brief stint at the VA earlier, and he had worked on the Senate veterans committee for three or four years. In the meantime, he had gone back to California to practice law. I remember the conversation. He came in, and we chatted briefly, and I said, "Look, Tony, I don't have a candidate. If you have the political muscle to become the deputy, fine, but what I want you to do first is spend a couple of days here in town seeing all the people you know who might know me. You get a frank opinion from them as to what I'm like, what I might be to work for, what you're going to face as my deputy. Whatever your sources are, use them, find out what you can about me. Then you decide if I'm the kind of man you want to work for. And if you have the political clout, it's your job. If you decide I wouldn't be the kind of man you want to work for, that's your decision." So that's what happened. I have no idea who he spoke to, and I have no idea what they told him. A couple of days later he came by and said, "Well, if you still feel that way, I'd like to be the deputy." I said, "Get your political clearance, and it's yours." It was that simple.

Young: He was given to you. What about the other assistant secretaries?

Derwinski: The others came out of personnel. One gentleman, Tony McCann, who became the finance officer, was an old OMB [Office of Management and Budget] hand. He was a good man with figures, and we had a good career deputy for him, Mark Catlett. I remember his name because his uncle is the basketball coach at Virginia Tech, so it's a name you associate with something. You know Virginia Tech is the other school here.

Young: We've heard of it.

Derwinski: Ed Timberlake came over as Assistant Secretary for Legislative and Public Affairs. I'm trying to think of who else was in that group. They came through the White House political personnel.

Young: Sort of out of central casting?

Derwinski: Yes, and they all fit well. Look at that White House organization chart there, and let me tell you exactly how we were organized. The chart is almost irrelevant. First of all, Tony and I decided that since he had his legal background and worked with the committee on some of the issues, he felt more at home working with the Veterans Benefit Administration. So Tony took that, lock, stock, and barrel. I took the health services, lock, stock, and barrel. The general counsel and inspector general, I had an identical understanding with each. It was their job to tell me what was going on. For example, to the counsel general I said, "You come in any time and tell me what I can and what I can't do, what's legal and what isn't, what's right and what's wrong legally. It's up to you to keep me on the straight and narrow, and it's up to you to be my constant legal advisor." I never told him where I wanted to go. He told me what I could and couldn't do.

The inspector general, when I came in, was an acting, a fine gentleman, but rather weak, I thought, so I asked for a new applicants, we accepted Steve Trodden. He had been deputy Inspector General of the Army. He came over, and I interviewed him and said, "Well, the job is yours if you want it. The only condition I have is that I want you to go into this and dig like hell into this outfit. We have an awful lot of waste, an awful lot of poor administration. We have some sloppy work. All the human failings of bureaucracy are in this VA. It's too big, too cumbersome to be efficient, and you just go out and find any damn thing you can and come right in to me, and I'll support you." I never interfered in any investigation. Once in a while I'd call him in and say, "Look, could you expedite this? This is getting hot, can't wait for your bureaucracy to get at it." So we never had any problems. I worked with those two.

Tony worked with the Board of Veteran Appeals and the Board of Contract Appeals. I did veterans liaison, but I had an intermediary. A retired sergeant major of the army was my liaison to veterans groups. Tony did the finance and planning people. I did the cemetery system and congressional affairs. [redacted]

[redacted]

Young: You mentioned some of these functions, like veterans liaison. You handled also congressional and public affairs. Were there assistant secretaries in those posts?

Derwinski: Oh sure. As I mentioned, Mr. Timberlake, who was a—

Young: Did you select all those people?

Derwinski: No, they were sent to me. I didn't select anyone. Didn't try to.

Young: Were these people put forward by any of the veterans groups, do you suppose?

Derwinski: No. The only man at that assistant secretary level who was not a veteran was Tony McCann. Tony came in entirely because of his expertise in the budget. He was the Assistant Secretary for Finance and Planning. The others all earlier in their lives had been veterans.

Young: I see.

Derwinski: I had one other man I brought in as sort of a special assistant, and he wound up basically in human resources. His name is Irwin Pernick. Irwin was on my staff at State. He was a career foreign service officer. When I was leaving, he came in and said, "You know, I'd like to go over to the VA with you." He didn't know anything more about the VA than I did, but he was a veteran. He graduated high school in '57, was drafted then, served his two years, went to college, came out of college directly to the State Department. Irwin became at first sort of a troubleshooter, and then he gravitated. He did a lot of my work, the work and contacts with the Vietnam veterans, which I realized was a very different group than the standard VSOs. All of the [American] Legion, VFW, DAV [Disabled American Veterans], AMVETS, would all go to great pains to showcase the Vietnam veterans who were in their ranks.

When Mrs. [Bonnie] Derwinski comes in to see you, she'll tell you about how we brought the veterans into the program called Very Special Arts, which is run by Jean Kennedy Smith. We brought our handicapped veterans who are artistic—sculptors or painters or performers—into that program as a way of improving their mental state. It worked very well, a very good program.

I guess I should tell you up front that we really didn't follow this chart methodically, because the only thing I ever ran before I ran my congressional office and my office at State—where I had about 10 people who answered to me—I ran the little savings and loan back home before I got into politics. There were about eight or 10 employees at the time. All of a sudden I've got a quarter of a million, and I've got a chart like this.

Scott: Can you describe for us what your philosophy was as national director about what the nation owes its veterans? In your meetings with the VSOs, did they ask you that question at all?

Derwinski: They never really did ask, and it came out along the way. I feel that we have a special obligation to any veteran with a service-connected disability, especially combat-related. And I think, if I had to over-simplify the description, I would tell you that I think we don't do enough for some of the combat-related veterans who still have problems. We probably do too much for the veterans who went through the service and came out without any complication whatsoever in their life. Sure, you give up two years or whatever it is—and I'm not a really good example because I came in near the end of the war, not early in it. But I think if you take into account what we've done, starting with the GI Bill of Rights in 1944. We have an

excellent insurance program. If there's anything wrong with it, it's administrative snafus. [squeaking door] Oh, excuse me, that's Mrs. Derwinski.

Mrs. Derwinski: Excuse me. I know taping is going on.

Young: We can interrupt for a moment [introductions going on]. Maybe you'd better sit to the side, because I see there are wires everywhere.

Derwinski: What we haven't done is change with the flow of medical progress. We haven't changed enough. Nor have we changed with the demographic adjustments of our population, so that we're over-built in some areas. I honestly don't think we're under-built anywhere. We have more than enough facilities to serve the veterans who should get the care. [redacted]

When I made my first [redacted] tour of the country, I went to the large medical centers, talked to some of the people at medical schools, and I came back and told our head medical officer. I said, "You know, I really think we should scrap the whole system and turn all the resources into making the VA the leader in geriatric medicine. Because the one thing we know is that every one of our veterans is going to get old, and we're not ready to handle enough old veterans. If they're old and they're financially destitute, we want to be able to take care of them. And to do that, we have to move from the general hospital services we maintain, which in many cases are for the convenience of the medical school, not necessarily the VA. And we turn the VA into the geriatric medicine area, go into it full steam. In a few years we could catch up and we could serve our veterans well."

I was looking at the charts. When I took over at the VA, the average age of a World War II veteran was 65. Now it's 77. The Korean War veterans' average age is about 10 years younger than the World War II. The Vietnam War veterans' ages were in the late 30s, now in the 50s. If you look at the data, now we've reached that point where the World War II veterans are passing away. But, more than that, also they've reached that age where they require the specialties of geriatric service. If the VA were structured to serve that need, it would be a tremendously effective entity.

Now, I don't like to overwhelm you with what sounds like trivial anecdotes, but there are some things that are—I laugh sometimes when I tell them—but they're sad. For example, we have a program, on Valentine's Day, of stimulating youngsters in schools to send Valentine cards to veterans. The whole idea is to say, "Oh, it's Valentine's Day, you're not forgotten." The staff goes to the bedside of every veteran in the hospital and says, "Here, Joe. Here's a bunch of Valentines a youngster sent you because it's Valentine's Day."

And as a result, I know half a dozen instances where in VA hospitals, they get patients a week before Valentine's Day, if they come in for a boil under their fingernail, they'll ask if they would mind staying in the hospital for a week so they'd be there on Valentine's Day so that when the youngsters come by, or the Red Cross ladies—all sorts of people come in on

Valentine's day—they have enough patients. Because the last thing you want is a whole bunch of volunteers to descend on an empty hospital.

There was one specific case, Marlin, Texas. Marlin is a little town about 50 miles south of Waco. I went there just because I was wondering what the hell that hospital was doing there in the middle of no place. It turned out that years ago, Congressman, Tiger [Olin Earl] Teague had been chairman of the Veterans Affairs Committee. Well, that was once in his district, so he put a hospital in Marlin, Texas. The day I went there I came in unannounced so I could get a good look at what was actually there.

I walked into the dentist's office, and there were two dentists. They conceded to me after a little round of questioning that they averaged one patient a day each. I came by there about 11 in the morning, and they'd each had their patient for the day. I always took one aide with me, and he quizzed some people while I quizzed others. He was wandering around with the chief of security, who told him—we were there about two weeks after Valentine's Day—that they had held in about a dozen men on Valentine's Day because they were so short of patients.

Now, I mentioned that I closed one medical center. I think there's a reference somewhere in the notes. They tell the classic story about when Lyndon Johnson was President, he tried to close a few VA facilities. Of course, he really ran afoul of the fact that he was also escalating the war in Vietnam, so there was a contradiction, but I'm sure the facility that they intended to close probably was meritorious from an administrative standpoint.

We had damage at that time to our medical center in San Francisco, major damage. Luckily, no loss of life or anything, no injuries, but fairly major damage sustained by the medical center in Palo Alto and damage to a medical center north of San Francisco. We had had an earthquake in the late '60s, and there was extensive damage to VA medical center in southern California.

I called in the appropriate staff people and said, "I want a report if you don't have one. If you have records, come back tomorrow and show them to me, of any VA hospital that's located on a fault line and could be, therefore, a logical candidate for damage if somewhere down the line there's a major earthquake in that particular area. Do you have such records, and if so, what could you tell me?"

They came back a few days later, and there was a hospital north of San Francisco in Martinez, California, which was right on that major fault line that runs through California. I remember telling Tony, "Tony we'll be out of here in a couple of years. Chances are there won't be another earthquake while we're around, but somewhere down the line there will be." So we looked at that, and I said, "Okay, we're going to close that hospital." I gave them 30 days to prepare a distribution plan to distribute the patients, some to Reno, Nevada, some to San Francisco, some north to an Oregon Medical Center. The staff were given their options of transferring to any adjacent VA—for that matter, we said any VA hospital in the country.

Instead, we would build clear off the fault line a modern new outpatient clinic that would serve the immediate needs of the veterans in that area. Of course, everybody just sat there silent. I said, "Okay, do it, period." Then, the next thing you know, I had delegations of doctors coming

in to see me—the VSOs went crazy. I had to go out to California on a speaking engagement, and I decided I would go to Martinez, look at it myself. I got a frantic call from headquarters saying, "They've got placards. They're going to picket you. The employees know you're coming." So what we did is we sent word we're not coming, and I drove up there anyway and came by about seven in the evening and looked around. By that time all the picketers had left and gone home for the day, so nothing really happened.

But the point I'm getting to is that I thought—I was right—that you couldn't ignore the risk. Yet the system was willing to live with the risk because everybody was thinking, *Well, hell. I don't want to move to Reno*, or *I don't want to have to drive an extra hundred miles to San Francisco. I don't want to do this. I don't want to do that.* The veterans were saying, "Oh, outpatient clinic? I want a hospital." All those human factors. The personal unwillingness to give up something that was there.

And if you look at the system, in Cleveland, for example, we have two hospitals, about five miles apart. They ought to be integrated. Each one of them could handle the patient load that they both now handle. The same thing in the New York City area. The same thing in Pittsburgh. [redacted] For some reason in our history, probably congressional demands of some sort, they were built that way. In Chicago, my hometown, there are two hospitals about six miles apart. While one is affiliated with Northwestern University, the other one is affiliated with University of Illinois—that helps explain it, the University of Illinois Medical School.

So fine, but you have to look at all of that and think, *If you could start a new system today, would you have this sort of thing?* You wouldn't. A good administrator would never construct the system that way. Therefore, if you had an effective, better-structured, better-managed system, would there be beneficiaries from it? There would be two classes. One would be the veteran who would be better served by a better-distributed, better-allocated system, and the taxpayer. The VA is a fairly expensive operation. It budgets up to 40 billion dollars. You could save four or five billion and actually improve services.

Scott: Earlier we were talking about the issue of what the country owes its veterans. You said obviously, for service-connected things, particularly combat-related, actually we don't do enough. Also I think in your answer it's clear that we give a whopping proportion of our overall services for non-service connected stuff. What about the issue of what's service connected? In other words, if someone's legs are blown off by an artillery shell, then obviously it's service-connected, but what about other things where it's not as clear what's service connected and what's not?

Derwinski: You have to start with the fact that it's an imperfect system. If they have a medical discharge, they should be served, period. Now whether there are certain flaws administratively or over the years procedurally in the medical discharge system of the military, that's not for the VA to question. If you have a medical discharge, you should be entitled to whatever the VA is able to do for you.

There's a second group that we have to focus on because we know the modern society we're in, and that's alcohol or drug addiction. In the VA we have some very good facilities. I've discussed that in detail with our doctors, and they've tested, and in certain fields our people have done amazingly well. I had a discussion once over whether you could treat addiction on an inpatient versus outpatient basis. Doctors will debate this, but you could make a fairly good case for the fact that your percentage of cure is just as good with outpatient treatment as inpatient. By tradition, we do it inpatient. I've looked at the different ones. We've had complaints, for example, specifically in Cleveland. I was out there and looked at a situation once where a guard shot a drug peddler who was brazenly walking through the halls at the hospital selling drugs to the patients. Confrontation then ensued; he tried to run away, and the VA guard shot him.

But I looked at the statistics, which showed basically the results didn't vary much. What it did show, though, is that if you completely isolate that patient in a rather remote area, you have higher rates of success. For example, there's a hospital in Fort Collins, Colorado, where about half the patients are drug addicts. If you leave the hospital, you're in the middle of no place. The air is clear, the scenery beautiful, and there are no temptations of modern life. And they have a good cure rate, good success rate there. We have a couple of others like that—Prescott, Arizona, up in the mountains, is wonderful. It's the isolation. To those people who say, "You could do this outpatient," I say, "How could you, out of a hospital in downtown Pittsburgh, where the man or woman goes home for the weekend at least—if not every day—back to the environment in which they had the problem?"

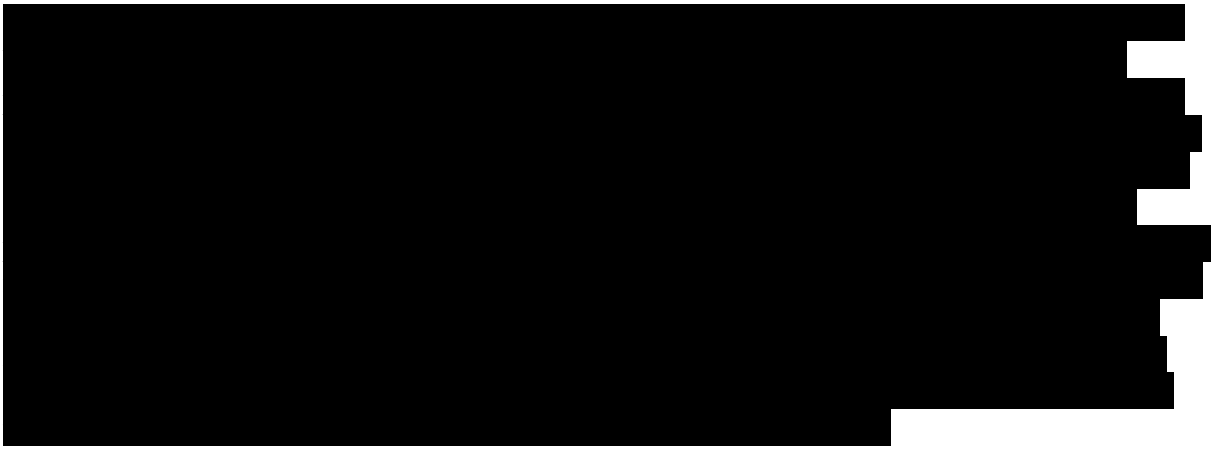
But your main point is something we always struggle with: How do you allocate the resources? My argument with the veterans service organizations is that they always wanted to throw money at the VA. They didn't care where it went, how it was spent. All they wanted was to be able to say to their members, "We got you more money this session." [redacted]

In fact, I'll tell you another anecdote. Tony and I shared this experience. In our term, we did manage to effect some small savings, and they were always consolidations that produced efficiency of some sort. We consolidated some regional offices, one in particular—we closed an office in Dallas. There were, if I recall, 22 employees in this office. Again, we went through the standard procedure. They could transfer if they wished to the hospital, they could transfer to another federal agency, they could move to the new office, or, if they were eligible, they could take their retirement. All those options were there.

I got a call that the Texas congressional delegation wanted to meet with me. So I said, "Tony, why don't you come along with me?" I had served with most of them. This was six years after I had left the Congress, and Texas didn't have much of a turnover. So I went in and sat down, a

couple of polite minutes and then the one-two punch. Jack Brooks, who at the time was Chairman of the Judiciary Committee, and Tom DeLay, who is current number one nemesis of the Democrats in Congress. They came at me. "You are not going to take one job out of Texas. We don't give up jobs in Texas. We get 'em. And you will not do any of this, you will not do that, and you will not close that office. Do you understand?" [banging on the table]

I sat there. "I understand," I said, "thank you very much. Am I excused?" "Yes, you're excused." I said, "Okay. Thanks, guys." We walked out in the hall, and Tony said to me, "Well, now what do we do?" I said to him, "[redacted] We're going to do it." Now, I wasn't being flippant or silly. I also knew that, it so happened, the move of the facility included an increase in personnel and a facility in Sonny Montgomery's district. He was then chairman of the committee. So I knew that I would have no trouble with Sonny. There was also a second adjustment increase that happened to go to the senior Democrat on the appropriations subcommittee. So I had my bases covered. I also knew that they couldn't get up on the floor of Congress or in committee and say, "There's 22 jobs being moved, and we're not going to tolerate it." You can't argue a petty little thing like that.



Young: Maybe we ought to wait until after lunch to get to the whole Agent Orange affair, which bears on a lot of these issues you've been discussing. The question of how you decide what is service-connected beyond the drug, it may or may not be, and beyond the medical discharge?

Derwinski: The VA has, I think, a rational approach. We do, by law, give priority to service-connected. But then, with a lot of the treatment of veterans for alcohol or substance abuse, you add a presumption that the roots of their problem could have been service-related, even though the discharge wouldn't necessarily show it. The same thing applies when you—it's a little more of a stretch, but it's a humanitarian thing—have a veteran who is destitute. He deserves that care. The system is there, the system is big enough. Nobody will ever streamline or should try to streamline the VA to where you would serve only the service-connected. You've got to have that extra room. But the point is, we have much too much room, unused now. We'll go into that in some detail when I explain what Dr. [Louis W.] Sullivan and I tried to do, and how we ran into a buzz saw.

Let me go into one other subject, though, to show you the problem that we'll be leading up to. Don't you have something there about my debate with the veterans over aid programs for Vietnam? Let me give you the background of it. It was one of my first run-ins with the VSOs. The proposal was made early in the Bush administration to try to expedite accounting of MIAs [missing in action] and possible POWs [prisoner of war], although only the most extreme zealots hold to the opinion that there are POWs being held. But the MIAs is an ongoing effort. In the process, the decision was made that if we would provide the government in Vietnam with some specific technical assistance, they would in turn be cooperative in letting us search for MIA sites. Most of the MIAs are from planes that crashed, and we couldn't get there to rescue the pilots if they survived.

The man who was assigned to supervise the program, and who was going to go to Vietnam with this financial inducement in his hand, was former General [John W.] Vessey [Jr.], a very respected former four-star general. He came in to see me, I said, "You know, I think it makes sense, because we have the group interested in POW/MIAs, and if we could use this new approach and get an accounting, hopefully of thousands of MIAs, that's well worth the investment."

When I'm talking about veterans, I'm generally talking about the Washington-based staff and/or their national officers wherever they might be. The Legion is in Indianapolis, the VFW is in Kansas City, the DAV is here in town, in Washington. These are the professional veterans, who are making a living working off veteran groups.

General Vessey made a very solid presentation, laid it all out. This is what we'll do, this is what we hope to get. These are the goals: We want to reduce the number of MIAs, and this is one way to get at it. We're not going to get to examine the different sites unless we have the cooperation of that government. The veterans didn't want to hear this.

Well, I went public and said, "I completely support General Vessey and the effort, it is in the best interests of the families of MIAs." Theirs was a classic case of the immediate knee-jerk reaction against that money going to anything but the VA. When I refer to the services we're rendering, I'm absolutely convinced that we could do a better job for more veterans with less money if we were allowed the administrative flexibility that prudent and solid administration would offer. Right now, I'm afraid we're going to be a little too late to put in a good enough geriatric system to serve the World War II veterans. They're fading away too fast. But we certainly could get one in place to catch the Korean War veterans when they hit that age 10 years from now, and the Vietnam veterans when they hit it 15 years from now.

Young: When General Vessey made his presentation and it became a public controversy, were all of the VSOs opposed? Did they have a united front on this? Did the Vietnam veterans?

Scott: I think they also raised the issue, did they not, that some of the medical equipment went to North Vietnamese soldiers?

Derwinski: They said it would be diverted. Well, of course, the war was over. There's only one country there, and it is ruled from the north, and it's sad but it's true. What we were giving

them was surplus equipment. Obviously it would be diverted to whatever elements in their community they wished. We couldn't control that. But if that gave us access to dozens and dozens of sites where our records indicated our planes had gone down, that was the investment we were making.

Scott: But there were no Vietnam veterans groups, or no other veterans groups that broke rank with this? Was it a solid front?

Derwinski: I'll tell you why. Remember the old days when they used to refer to GM, Ford, and Chrysler as the "big three"? Well, in the veterans' world, you have really the big four, but the big three are Legion, VFW, and DAV. The fourth one in terms of emphasis is PVA, paralyzed veterans, because they are the wealthiest. They have millions and millions of dollars. They do very well, where the other three have the members. Because, for example, if there is someone at this meeting representing the Catholic War Veterans, or Polish War Veterans, or Italian-American War Veterans, chances are that that person was also a Legion or VFW member or both. The big three all compete with each other to take the credit for any increase in VA services or budget. That's the main argument they try to use to justify the continuing membership. Their financial situation really depends on keeping that membership up.

We had this meeting, the Legion, VFW, and DAV, those three, pounced on General Vessey. I had told him in advance that I thought that would happen. He thought he could handle it, but he may as well have been talking to a room full of deaf people. They were not listening. They had their minds made up. "By God, this is a terrible misuse of U.S. equipment," they said, "by God, no."

Young: But the Vietnam veterans were with them?

Derwinski: I'm not even sure of that, [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

Scott: When you mention the organizations, by and large you haven't mentioned one like Vietnam Veterans of America, VVA. Do they not figure into the mix here of veterans politics?

Derwinski: They have tended to focus primarily on the needs of their veterans, the Vietnam era. I would imagine that at one time early on, when there was that image of the Vietnam

veterans, which was unfair—when most of them came back home they were going to be difficult in their behavior and so forth—for some reason that tended to lessen their effectiveness as an organization. I didn't run into any of that. I knew when I'd go into a drug rehab facility I expected most of the veterans there would be Vietnam era, because the alcohol abuse tended to find older veterans.

[redacted]

Young: But you knew where the men's room was.

Derwinski: I knew where the men's room was. One of the secretaries I had inherited came in and said, "They want to know where to put the security man's desk." I said, "What security man's desk?" Well, they decided—"they," it turned out, was some staffer somewhere below me—"they" decided that there ought to be a full-time security man outside my office to screen and to watch any dangerous person who might come in. So I finally got a hold of somebody who was responsible for this and said, "Now exactly what are you trying to do?" "Well, sir, some of the veterans come in, and they might be dangerous. They might get past the guard down on the first floor, and they might get up to your office. We think we ought to have a guard out here, and he's got to have a desk."

"Stop right there. Nothing like that," I said. "I'm not going to be a high-profile publicity-hound kind of Secretary. If a veteran has a gripe and he thinks the system hasn't heard it, if he gets by the guard and comes up here, I'll bring him in, I'll listen to him, and I'll turn him over to somebody who's an expert and can handle it. I'm not worried." I said, "You're not going to be running my office as if you were guarding Fort Knox. I'm not going to let you do that. We're not going to have anything like this."

I was there four years, and I never had one episode. Every so often, someone would come in, and one of my secretaries would say, "Somebody's here. He's a veteran. He won't say what he wants, but he wants to talk to you." "Bring him in." They'd bring him in, and I had an arrangement where a minute or two later, someone would poke his nose in the door and say, "Could I help you, Secretary?" Just in case—not that we had a problem, I listened to his tale of woe, and led him out the door. "Go down to room 505, and Mr. Smith is waiting to take care of your problem." That's how we handled it.

That's a long way of going around to tell you that my experience is that the Vietnam groups were part of everything, but they basically focused on their special concerns. I forget the gentleman's name, but he ran a very good program up in Boston for homeless veterans, to bring homeless veterans off the street. They tended to be Vietnam veterans. I remember going up to one of our hospitals, and I got diverted to the School of Podiatry there in New York. They took me to one of these veteran shelters where their trainees were on duty, taking care of the homeless veterans. The first thing, they don't take care of themselves real well under the conditions they're living in. They have special problems with their feet, so they have these podiatry medical trainees there. That was the Vietnam veteran type.

Everything else was in place for them, the educational program for those who wanted to use it effectively, and the mortgage program. People forget that the overwhelming number of Vietnam veterans came home and adjusted. It's unfortunate that the media focused on the occasional problem and didn't report the fact that most boys came home and went back to their jobs or went to school and pretty well handled the situation.

Scott: When you look at your organizational structure there, and you have a significant outreach program that operates a separate structure, and it's off site, the Vet Center program. Did you have any problem with that arrangement?

Derwinski: I had a problem only in that I was concerned that the program help people, and that they didn't get there and stop right there. My worry was that they didn't do enough to keep the veteran upwardly mobile. I remember one Saturday I went to a Notre Dame football game and popped in at the veterans center in South Bend just to see. That was my big worry, and I kept nudging the director to show me the progress they're making. "Don't just tell me you have extra people coming in, tell me what they're doing later. Are they getting jobs? Are their health problems being addressed?" That was my real concern there.

The other thing to remember is that—and this applies to all veterans—usually when a veteran comes home from the service, if you don't take advantage of the programs available to you reasonably soon after you're back, you usually don't at all. When I came home from the service I didn't go back to school. I worked days, and I went to night school under the GI education benefits. But if you come back and don't go back to school for four, five, six years, you never do. Of course, if you marry in a reasonable time, then fine. Then mortgage loans are available to you. When I was drafted in World War II, when you came out of the service you had the option of dropping your life insurance. I hope most people keep theirs. I forget what the rule is now, but I remember, life insurance you could always drop, but people made a good investment in it. It's a good program, and it's administered well. It's one of the few programs we administer very well.

At the same time, I have to smile. When Tony Principi was confirmed last month, he made it a point to say, by God, he was going to see that the computers in benefits talked to the computers in the medical section, so the veterans could walk into any sort of office, and they would know exactly who he is from top to bottom, whether he'd been in school, whether he has a mortgage, how often he'd been to the hospital. They can't do that now. And yet, 12 years ago, Tony and I were facing the same problem.

I made a reference a couple of times to going in unannounced to hospitals. I would do that occasionally to a benefits office. I walked in to the benefits office in California, L.A., not too far from the UCLA area. I went in the benefits office and walked around unannounced, had one local staff person with me. The first conclusion I reached after I just wandered around, that place was ready for a fire—just stacks of files everywhere. A little flame here or there, and they'd have all their records burned. Nothing was computerized, nothing was stored in vaults—they're just out there in the open, stacks and stacks of files.

I finally wandered into the director's office and said, "When are you going to clean that mess up? When are you going to get that put away safely?" Bad enough they probably couldn't find half the files when they looked for them, much less the security, or the thing that hit me immediately—the firetrap. Those are the things—those administrative defects are out there. You've got some of the finest doctors in the world treating our veterans when they come out of those medical schools. The faculties of the medical schools are also VA doctors one day a week. So you have tremendous ability put to work there, but the total coordination and efficiency of the entire organization is a shortcoming.

Young: You mentioned about your charge to the Inspector General. Were you disappointed, or was the Inspector General helpful to you?

Derwinski: Unfortunately, it's a government problem, and it's a problem within the world of Inspector Generals: It always takes time to get a report. Just like the Congressmen, we used to use the Library of Congress or just use the General Accounting Office. You'd ask the General Accounting Office for a report on a specific case, and by the time you got it, the issue had either died or resurrected itself without help. I would occasionally chide my Inspector General, "Damn it, Steve, I want that report this year, not two years from now."

Young: Did he ever accompany you on your unannounced visits?

Derwinski: No, I wanted him to keep his distance from me. I'll finish on this note. I had a habit, I coined the term for him, "surprise raids." I would show up unannounced at the VA medical center. I would usually travel with one aide. Maybe on rare occasions I would take two, but usually it was one. Sometimes I'd go alone and have a regional official meet me. The idea of it was just to keep people on their toes, and it worked. It was a tremendous psychological thing. Then it became a game, because the people were calling the headquarters saying, "Let us know when the Secretary is going to come out here." Well, by God, they're not going to get any leaks from the front office.

I got my plane tickets then from a travel agency in Chicago. I would call, get the tickets, take an aide, and all I would tell the aide is, Monday morning, eight o'clock, meet me at National Airport or Dulles. He'd meet me, and only then would I tell him where we were going. We'd get on the plane, and off we'd go. Then we'd just walk in unexpectedly. From a psychological standpoint, it was great. You'd walk in, and their jaws would drop.

I remember walking in the Albuquerque, New Mexico, office. I flew in, spent the night at an airport hotel, and walked in the next morning with Senator [Pete] Dominici's local administrator. All this was prearranged and carefully kept under control. I walked into the VA hospital, walked into the director's office, and the young lady there recognized me. She reached for the phone. I said, "Don't you dare, don't you touch that phone. Which is your boss's door?" Second door. "Don't call him."

I walked in the door, just knocked, walked in. He saw me, got up, fell back and said, "Oh my God." I said, "'Mr. Secretary' will do." Usually I had the aide circle the facility with the head of security, or the head nurse, and I would take the tour with the director of the hospital and the

chief of medical staff. I'd ask questions, and they'd point things out, and I'd have a few notes, a few ideas, or a few bits of information about them that I'd check out. When it was over, I'd slap them on the back and say, "Good work," and go back.

I'd call in my head of medical staff and tell them, "I think this is amiss there." For example, I went in one day to the Cleveland Hospital. It was a Saturday morning. The VA hospitals on weekends are empty. Everybody goes home, including patients. So I came in Saturday morning, walked up to the information desk, said, "I'm Secretary Derwinski. Would you call whoever's in charge? I'd like to tour the hospital." I sat down. I had a local benefits person with me. I sat there for two hours. Nothing happened. This fellow with me got antsy. I said "Calm down. We'll wait. Let's see how this thing plays out." Two hours later, we were still sitting there.

I walked up again, said, "You did understand me that I am the Secretary of the VA, and I want to see whoever is in charge?" "Well, I called, and they haven't come." "Well, call them again." In the meantime, this man with me couldn't stand it any more. He said, "Do you know who this man is? He's in charge. His picture is out there on the front wall next to the President's in the entrance area." He looked up, said, "I never saw that picture. I come to work through the back door." Finally, a person showed up about 10 minutes later, not by design, by accident, a chaplain who recognized me.

I said, "Reverend, you're just the man I want to see. I need help desperately. Can you find someone who's charge?" So they found a doctor. I took the tour and asked a few questions and left. Monday morning, I called in the head of medical and said, "What if I was a newspaper reporter, and I came in and said I want to look at the hospital, and you kept me waiting two hours? Can you imagine the kind of story you'd have? You've got to get your system to respond. How will your director back there justify my sitting there over two hours and not getting any attention after I'd identified myself?"

In fact, near the end of this run, we were getting false sightings. I was in my office one day in Washington, and Dr. Holsinger came by. He looked in and said, "Oh, you're here." I said, "Yes, I'm here, why?" He said, "Just had a call from Seattle. You were seen in the cafeteria there this morning." So I thought that served a good purpose.

For example, one of the things we'll talk about at some point is the battle I had with the veterans groups over smoking. I walked into one of the hospitals, I think the one in Temple, Texas. By that time, I had my no smoking ban in effect. I walked in and walked past the little enclave where they had all the vending machines. Right there next to the Coke machine was a cigarette machine. I said to the director, "What are you doing here? How do you justify this machine?" "Well, we're not selling them. The contractor who provides the vending machines is selling them." Not any more. So I told Dr. Holsinger, "Tell that so and so to get those machines out of there." "They make money for the canteen." "Fine. Find another way to make money for the canteen." The issue there was a very simple one. I would tell them, "The VA cannot claim to be a legitimate provider of medical care and condone smoking. You can condone smoking, but then you can't claim to be effectively serving your patients."

Young: The squeaking door is going to drown us all out, so let's just stop the tape.

[BREAK]

Derwinski: I'd like to suggest one thing if I could. At some point I'd like to go back to the notes of my appearance eight years ago and give you some corrections, and then I'd like to take Professor Scott's copy and go with that a little, and that will take us into Agent Orange. Earlier, I'd start on page eight, that's the suggested topics that Mr. Russell drew up. At some point I'll go back to the veterans groups and talk about their total role and so on, which is in your second paragraph. In your third paragraph, you just had a little line that caught my eye: any work with the First Lady. That's why I've got Mrs. D. here, because that's exactly what she had to do, and she can give you some interesting insights.

Young: Should we start the afternoon with her?

Derwinski: We can start with her, [redacted] She wrote a book, which was a jab at Washington society and Washington protocol, called *Wife Of*, in which she was not a person, she was just "the wife of." Mr. Riley asked, if there was any work with the First Lady? Well, Mrs. Derwinski was "the wife of." There were only a couple of women in the Cabinet, but their husbands weren't viewed as "the husband of," but "the wives of" worked with Mrs. Bush. So Bonnie, I'll turn it over to you now.

Mrs. Derwinski: That was a very big thing in D.C., "the wife of." We used to tease about it, but Mrs. [Barbara] Bush's style was such that you never actually felt you were put upon for anything. But you always knew you served a purpose and you had a place in the four years of her husband's administration. She did it very subtly. Early on, it was probably during Inaugural Week, we were all at the Blair House socializing, and she was taking us through the Blair House and explaining a few things. She pulled a chair out in the dining room of the Blair House, and she said, "Isn't this beautiful needlepoint?" We all said, "Yes, Mrs. Bush, yes it is." And she said, "Well, this is what Mrs. [Jacqueline] Kennedy had the Cabinet wives do."

My Chicago came out in me, and I said, "Pardon me?" She said, "This is what Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy had the Cabinet wives do—needlepoint these chairs." I looked at her innocently and said, "You're not going to make us do that, are you?" And she kind of chuckled and said, "Well, I don't think we're going to make *you* do it." And I said, "Okay fine, as long as you don't expect *me* to do something like that, I'm all right."

So we knew she would like us to assume a role in the four years that our husbands or our spouses were going to be in her husband's Cabinet. I was always very careful, because I had a rule of thumb that whatever I did, whatever I gave my name to, either as—I like my middle name—Bonnie Hickey, or Bonnie Hickey Derwinski, it always had to be of benefit. I always wanted to see the results stay on, no matter where I went and no matter where my life took me. When I started something, it was always going to be there. I was very fortunate early on when Ed was Secretary. I put my name to an organization called CARE [Committee for American Relief in Europe]. That's the relief organization, CARE International Relief Organization.

Through CARE I got to meet several interesting people. One of them happened to be Mrs. Jean Kennedy Smith, the sister of the former President, and she has an organization in D.C. called Very Special Arts, much like her sister Eunice [Kennedy Shriver] has the Olympics. It's an educational affiliate of the John F. Kennedy Center, and it's for the disabled. She and I happened to be on a program together. I had a bad habit. Having been a professional person myself, I would go into a room, and I would say I was Bonnie Derwinski. I would never introduce myself as Mrs. Edward Derwinski, the wife of Secretary Derwinski. That was how you were supposed to identify yourself during those times, and I had the bad habit of not doing that.

She came up and said, "I heard you're Bonnie Derwinski, the wife of the Secretary of the VA." And I said, "Yes I am." She said could we talk, and I said sure. She said, "I have this organization, and it's called Very Special Arts. It's a program designed for the disabled, and I have been trying for many years to get into the Department of Veterans Affairs to see what we could do for our disabled veterans." So I said, "Send me some of the material. I'd like to do some research on your organization and your program and see exactly what you're all about and what takes place and see how it could be of benefit to the veterans of our nation."

Well, as it turned out, I fell in love with the program. I found it fit very, very well with the VA because of all the hospitals and the disabled veterans across our country and what kind of a benefit it could be for them. We just celebrated our tenth anniversary out in California about two years ago—the program is that successful. It's still ongoing. It's a very therapeutic approach, and we use arts. When I say arts, I mean any kind of arts, crafts, and music. They hold a large program at the VA Richmond Hospital for disabled veterans, where they actually get up and perform or show their art and things like this.

So when I forged this partnership with Very Special Arts, I came to the VA, and as Ed has been telling you, being from the political arena in Chicago and having owned my own business, I was used to saying, "I want this done," and it got done. I was not used to bureaucracy where when I said, "I want this done," it went to this level and this level and this level. Finally it was at a level, and a general counsel came in to discuss with me the fact that it possibly could be a conflict. So I tried to explain to him that the train was moving, and he either got on the train or he just got out of the way because it was going.

So we started this program, and we took it all over. After studying it, and seeing how it would fit with the veterans department, and setting up different kinds of restrictions on where it would go, I decided that our first kick-off would be Chicago, only because it was still our city. It was

a place where I could get things done. I could get the mayor to come aboard, I could get the Governor, and we had four very big VA hospitals there that were willing to work with me on the program.

We set up a series of art shows at all the different hospitals in a week. We did a Monday, Wednesday, Friday, culminating with a big program on Friday night at the Chicago Cultural Center. They do different kinds of festivals in different parts of the country, at the different VA hospitals, at the different centers where we have it. It's all very therapeutic. The program is set up so that we have residents in training. They'll go in, they'll teach arts, they'll do crafts with the disabled veterans, anything to encourage them. Early on in Ed's statement, when Mr. Scott mentioned about the outreach programs, one of our purposes, even with the VA program that Mrs. Bush was very aware of, was that this was a link back into society. They didn't stay at a certain level. It opened some doors for them to assimilate back into society. I still find it rewarding.

We celebrated one of the international festivals for Very Special Arts. We call it VA/Very Special Arts, and we went to Brussels. There was a young man, a disabled veteran in Rhode Island, and I met him very early in the program, probably 1989. At the time, he was at our Rhode Island outpatient clinic's outreach program, and he had been diagnosed with all kinds of problems. Through this program, he started writing poetry, and he actually had a book published. Eight years later, he performed his poetry at the international festival in Brussels, and he thought that I had come to Brussels for him. So I let him think that. I went to all of his performances and things like this. But one of the things he was able to share with me—and that's why I said the four years that Ed spent at the VA and the time I spent functioning as "the wife of" were probably four of the most rewarding years that I will ever have experienced in my life—this gentleman came up to me, and this is just one of a hundred stories that I could go on with you about. He came up to me, and he said, "Mrs. Derwinski, because of you and because of this program that you set in motion at the VA, I have gotten my life back together. I have re-established my relationship with my daughter whom I had not seen in 13 years, and I feel I am back to being part of society." This was one of the things that we were hoping to achieve through this program.

Mrs. Bush was very, very supportive. We actually did a couple of festivals—we did a festival at the Very Special Arts gallery, and she showed her support by coming and being part of it. So yes, we did play a very, very significant role. What was interesting with Mrs. Bush and her style was that you could do as much or as little as you wanted as "the wife of." You never felt that you were being asked to do anything. You thought she would like it if you did something, but you were never pressured.

We successfully opened a child-care center for the employees of the VA. Again, I forged forward and decided that they needed a child-care center. They had lots of employees, but it was being bogged down and bogged down, and I wasn't happy. So I went to Mrs. [Sarah] Brady, and Mrs. Brady and I went to Mrs. Bush, and we forged a partnership among the Department of Veterans, the Treasury, and the OEOB. We did not call it the White House. We called it the Old Executive Branch. We forged a partnership, and we opened a day care center. What was taking me months and months until Mrs. Brady and Mrs. Bush got aboard, we

opened in six months, and that's still ongoing for all three of the agencies. So that was one of the other things that were successful during the four years. She never did get me to needlepoint, even though that was one of her big things.

Masoud: Did you spend a lot of time with Mrs. Bush?

Mrs. Derwinski: What was very interesting was yes, I was fortunate enough to spend quite a bit of time. Mrs. Bush was very good to us, the group of us, during the Gulf War. For everyone in the world it was a very trying time, but she also realized that there were a group of us, Mrs. [Alma] Powell, Mrs. [Lynne] Cheney, me, and Mrs. [Susan] Baker, who basically for 100 days, or longer, six months, didn't see an awful lot of our husbands.

Young: Right.

Mrs. Derwinski: So she made sure we had lunch together every couple of weeks, a very private lunch upstairs in her private quarters, with no one present, and she was very good at letting any of us vent.

Masoud: Did you talk politics in general with her? If the administration was getting battered in the press, would she say to you, "Bonnie, you know, we're getting—"

Mrs. Derwinski: She was very interesting. She would talk. I remember one time, at one of these lunches, someone had an opinion about something. Mrs. Bush has a unique way of letting you know what she wants to talk about and what she doesn't want to talk about. So yes, we would be allowed to talk about whatever we chose to talk about. She never put any restrictions on us. She never said, "That's not a subject we'll discuss." If it was a subject you wanted to get off your chest, she'd let you discuss it, but then she'd move on if she did not want to—

Masoud: What were the kinds of things she wanted to focus on?

Mrs. Derwinski: Literacy was one of her big things. That was a very big thing. She enjoyed talking about the program that I started, because it was enabling people, and she liked the whole idea of that.

Masoud: Did she ever talk to you about her life with her husband?

Mrs. Derwinski: Like how many times she had moved? Ed and I have only been married 15 years, and I was always in awe because of the fact that here I was, a kid from the south side of Chicago, either sitting next to Queen Noor having lunch, or at the Blair House, thinking *What am I doing?* One evening Ed was out of town, and I got a call from the White House saying, "Mrs. Bush says you have to be at the White House this evening because they're entertaining all the Catholic cardinals" —and we're Catholic. I said, "Oh my God. I'm not dressed. I'm at work," blah, blah, blah. They said, "No, you didn't hear the first part of this, Bonnie. She didn't say, 'Do you want to be here?' Mrs. Bush said you're to be here." I said, "Okay, fine."

I went to one of my assistants and grabbed a string of pearls and something else from somebody else, and off I went to the White House. I think this will explain it best to you what type of personality she is. There you are with [James] Cardinal Hickey and [Joseph] Cardinal Bernadine, and we're up in their private quarters and things are going on. Paul and I once talked about how many times we'd been at the White House, and how I never did become jaded by it. This night we were all upstairs, and we were chatting about everything, and we walked down the stairs. I'll never forget. Cardinal Hickey and Barbara and I walked down the stairs, and she kissed me good-bye and said, "See you, Bon." I said, "Okay," and walked out the door. I didn't realize that I wasn't walking out of my girlfriend's house until a Marine sergeant saluted me and said, "Your car is here," and I did a double take. It was as if, "What do you mean, my car is here? I just left my girlfriend."

It was that kind of thing. She had a knack for doing this. She and the former President had a relationship with my husband (Ed) that dated back 30 years. This isn't telling a story. It was after the Gulf War, and they invited us all to Camp David. We were at Camp David, and she walked into church with a hat on. It was kind of a funny hat. We were in the first pew, and she bent over to kiss Ed. Ed looked at her and said, "Oh, I love your hat." She said, "I've seen some of the clothes *you* wear." And I was as if, oh my God. These are just anecdotes and little special things I remember about her. I knew she liked Frango mints. Frango mints are candy that is made only at Marshall Fields in Chicago. It's a little piece of chocolate. Marshall Fields has a store in Houston, and she loves them. So this day we went to Camp David, I called Chicago and had them ship me Frango mints, and I took them up to Camp David and gave them to her.

During the course of the day we finally got to the barbeque, and I said, "Are you going to put your Frango mints out?" She said, "No. They're mine. I'm not sharing them." She was the type of woman who could put you at ease and make you forget that she was the First Lady and that you were part of this much bigger picture. She had a knack for that, she truly did.

Riley: I guess I feel compelled to ask if she talked about her children?

Mrs. Derwinski: Yes. She talked more about her grandchildren, but she did talk about her children. She talked more about Dora because Dora was there. Dora lived in town. I'll never forget the day we went down—I don't know what we were in Texas for—and she was very proud and she introduced me. She said this is my son, the Governor of Texas. I said, "I think I know him now." So in that sense, yes, she did let us be mothers, too. She let us be women and mothers and things like that. She was always very supportive of any of our endeavors, especially if they were of benefit to other people. That was a very big thing to her.

As I said, this program that we started and is still ongoing at the VA has become a very big part of my life. Even under the Clinton years, I was the honorary chairperson. They kept me on as the honorary chairperson for the eight years that I really didn't feel I should be there, but they brought me back a couple of times for different things. The program is wonderful, it truly is. They just had a big one at the VA hospital in Washington, D.C.

Young: Getting back to that program. You ought to say something about what went on in the veteran hospitals where you were conducting the programs. Were Veterans Administration personnel involved, or was it just the site, and the Smith Foundation and your group brought in people to train the veterans?

Mrs. Derwinski: We actually used a lot of the volunteers. There's an actual department in the VA called the volunteer services, and we used that. We also used our therapy section of the hospitals, so that we could train them on the different programs and how to implement them and how they should be progressing. That's really how it's done.

Young: But the veterans who got into this program, were they designated, or did they just wander in?

Mrs. Derwinski: They just kind of wandered in. None of them were chosen. The volunteer agencies and the rehab therapists and things like that would let them know that it was going on. I can remember a veteran in Chicago, a Vietnam vet, was lost, on drugs, things like this. He was in the hospital, then he was an outpatient, and they didn't even have pencils or Crayolas. They handed him a box of pencils. You should see the art he produced from that. Then I took it a step further and got him involved in one of our art programs in Chicago. He wanted to give me a painting one day, and I said, "No, no. You can make some money from that painting. You don't give away your art. This is something very special." But then I have other art hanging in our homes that actually came from veterans.

Young: Did you travel around?

Mrs. Derwinski: Mrs. Sam Nunn, I got her very involved in it, and we traveled everywhere. We did programs all over California. We did programs in Florida. I did programs in Georgia. I did programs up in New York, naturally Chicago, all over.

Young: But you didn't travel as "the wife of."

Mrs. Derwinski: Yes I did travel as "the wife of."

Young: Were you ever at one of the surprise raids?

Mrs. Derwinski: This I can tell on the record. One day he did do that to me on one of his surprise raids, and I really was upset. It was a Sunday morning, and we were in upper New York. We pulled in, and he said, "I have to stop in this hospital." I don't know whether he had heard anything about the hospital. We pulled in, and he got out of the car. He walked in and said to the woman at the reception desk, "I have none of my identification. I have my driver's license. I am a veteran, and I have chest pain." Well, they went into action. I mean, I saw nurses moving, all this kind of stuff, and he finally had to admit to one of the nurses, "No, I'm Secretary Derwinski." She got very angry, and I don't blame her. I really don't blame her. He had to apologize and everything. He had to write a letter of apology. I said, "You have to write her a letter." I didn't blame her. I would have gotten mad too.

Young: Mr. Secretary, your face is red.

Derwinski: I was just testing, because they don't have emergency units. They don't have emergency staff. So I thanked her. I said, "Listen, you did a good job." I told you earlier, I waited in Cleveland for two hours once. In this case, I went up to the desk. I identified myself and explained, as Bonnie said, I don't have my discharge papers, but I'm a veteran. This woman called out, and 30 seconds later this nurse comes down wheeling a mobile…

Mrs. Derwinski: EKG.

Derwinski: …and immediately took my blood pressure. And then she was calling a doctor, and I said, "Wait a minute, stop. I just came to test you. I'm the Secretary."

Mrs. Derwinski: And she didn't laugh.

Derwinski: No, she wasn't too happy. Then I wrote a letter of commendation for her file and everything else.

Mrs. Derwinski: I think one of the other things I have to address before I excuse myself is Mr. D. was talking about the different organizations, the American Legion and the VFW. And it was probably one of the few times that the Veteran Department was successful in getting all of the…

Derwinski: VSOs.

Mrs. Derwinski: …behind a project. They all supported the VA Very Special Arts program, to the point where I had a meeting one time with two of the top executive directors, who would never sit down together, never. I had this meeting, in innocence, and I invited them all, and didn't give them an opportunity to say no. This wasn't like, "You can come or you can't come. This is a very important thing to the veterans. It's a benefit to the veterans, and if you really, truly support the veterans as you claim you do, you will show up at my meeting." And they all showed up. That's one of the things the two of them teased about, the fact that they had never sat down to a meeting together. I said, "Well, the two of you will behave yourself then. I won't seat you next to each other." So they just laughed, and they fully supported our program, and they still do, which I'm very, very proud of. I really truly am.

As a matter of fact, I have been thinking about it—we put out a calendar this year. I'll send you down a bunch of them. It's a natural 2001 calendar, VA Very Special Arts calendar. I'm proud of it, not for myself, but for the Department. I'm proud of it that the Department, and the people in the Department took it seriously enough to continue it.

In the beginning, one of the things that was most important when Ed took over and one of the things that we tried to emphasize, was to make them understand that they were now a Department. They were no longer an agency. They were lifted to something a little bit higher, and they could strive to this. It didn't give them this little kind of recognition. This program gave them national and international recognition. Here they had veterans going all over the

world, disabled veterans in Brussels. I mean, how, why? Because of a little program. One time, when I was out in California, I said, "I know all of you have worked very hard on this festival, and I know you've spent hours saying 'Mrs. Derwinski is a crazy old lady,' but how do you feel today?" And they said, "Wow, we feel great." And I said, "Then we've all won." So this isn't a program that started under Ed's watch and stopped. It's still ongoing.

Scott: What portion of the activity does the funding from the private foundation pay for? For the festivals or the actual programs within the hospital, or the—

Mrs. Derwinski: What's very interesting is that it varies. It's one of the few things I will walk the halls of Congress for. I don't lobby normally, but that's one of the few things. We do get monies from Congress because Mrs. Smith's organization is a not-for-profit, so there are certain lots of money that come from her, and there are certain amounts of money that actually come from the VA. But in the VA budget, they are actually allotted a certain amount of money, and thank goodness for Sonny Montgomery, because I did go in, knock on doors for them, because I felt it was that important for the veterans, especially after you see the pluses and the results from it. There were just too many pluses that they shouldn't have gotten the money when it was being distributed for other things. We could find some money somewhere for this program. It was that important. And they must think it's that important, because the Congress still gives it.

Young: What surprised you most when you became a Cabinet Secretary's significant other?

Mrs. Derwinski: What surprised me the most?

Young: Yes. Was this all just like second nature?

Mrs. Derwinski: Oh no, none of it was second nature.

Young: I mean, the needlepoint outraged you, instead of being a surprise.

Mrs. Derwinski: That was a bit of a surprise. I don't think any of it became second nature. When I think back, much like you're doing here today, when Ed was nominated and then confirmed, my girlfriends held a lunch for me. They sat me down at this luncheon, and they handed me a tape recorder, and they handed me batteries, because they know me well enough, and they handed me tapes. And they said, "Do us a favor. Once a month, talk into the tape, and just tell us what you've done over the last month." And I've done that. Now I go back and read the tapes and I think, *Wow! I did that, or I did this, and it's like, wow.* They always tease that I should put them together, because I didn't take any one of the four years' minutes for granted. It was an unbelievable four years. The people you met, the things you got to do, the opportunities it afforded you. And I worked a full time job during that time. I was Director of Congressional Public Affairs for Immigration for seven and a half years. So besides being "the wife of," I also had a full time job. But I think that role was the most important.

What surprised me were the Bushes and how wonderful they were and how at ease they could put people. I mean, as I said, to walk out the door of the White House, slam the screen door,

and think you're leaving your girlfriend's house when you've actually just left the White House, that's pretty overwhelming. She accomplished a lot there. I think that was it. Just all of it. The whole VA thing was just an experience. I mean, how many of us grew up with an Uncle Joe who was in the army, and he was just Uncle Joe in the corner. I grew up on the south side of Chicago. I had an uncle who was in a Japanese camp, and things like this. But it didn't come home to roost until I realized there was this whole Department out there that benefits us, the veterans, and that they deserve it for what they've done, or what they've given up, or what they sacrificed.

Young: So I've got to ask what you biggest disappointment was.

Mrs. Derwinski: None. I had not one disappointment. Is that bad?

Young: There's almost always a downside, some people say, to politics in Washington.

Mrs. Derwinski: What was the down— Well, I had Chicago politics under my belt. I mean, Chicago was hardball, so I was pretty used to it. My dad was a former state representative, and I had run for Congress back home. Thank goodness it had prepared me; otherwise, I probably would have been eaten up by it, because it's a rough town.

Derwinski: Tell your slightly embarrassing stories about the Queen.

Mrs. Derwinski: Oh, that one is a bad one. Mrs. Bush teased me about that. Another call came in one morning. I'm at work, doing what I'm supposed to be doing, and I get a call that I have to be at the White House. There's a coffee for the spouses with Queen Elizabeth. And I said, "Oh my God, here I go again." I had a suit on. I had been at an appointment or something. I show up at the designated spot at the White House. You asked about disappointment, but I thought it was funny. I show up at the designated spot, and all of a sudden all the other spouses are saying, "Oh my God, Bonnie, what are you wearing?" And I said, "I thought it was real nice. What do you mean?"

Well, normally the protocol office would call and say, "Mrs. Bush is wearing blue, and she's wearing long." What that meant was we didn't wear blue, but we wore a long dress. Or we were going to a luncheon, and Mrs. Bush is wearing green and a short dress. So that meant we wore short dresses, but we didn't wear a green suit. Well, that morning I showed up in a purple suit, and I'm standing there, and Queen Elizabeth is in a purple suit. So the only two people at the breakfast in purple suits were Queen Elizabeth and me.

So I'm walking through the line, and the other spouses had already told me, "You're not really going to go to the coffee." I said, "Yes, I'm going to the coffee. I'm hungry, what the heck." So I walked in, and Mrs. Bush kissed me and said, "Are you okay?" I said, "Oh Barbara, I would have never done this." She said, "It's okay. Don't worry about it." I said, "But I don't have a hat to go with my suit. Would you get hers? It's gorgeous." She started to laugh, and she said, "Okay." That was not a disappointment, but it was one of my embarrassing moments, one of the funny ones.

I'll tell you another story about Mrs. Bush, and I can't say enough about her because she is just a genuine charm. The day we were up at Camp David, it was a very busy day because we were all there, and lots of activities were going on. But every time I saw her, she had two different colored gym shoes on. And because she and Ed are always goofing around and everything, I didn't know what was going on. So finally, towards the end of the evening, it was just getting to me. She walked out of their house at Camp David where we were having the barbeque, and sure enough, she had another two—she had a red one on and a yellow one. I looked at her, and I said, "Barbara, I have to ask. It has been killing me all day long. Why? Why have you had on a blue shoe and a yellow shoe, or a blue shoe and a green shoe?" She said, "Because Keds sent me 39 pairs of shoes, and I want to get everybody to see all of them." So she wore two different colored shoes all day long. That just shows you her personality. There are no airs about the woman. She is a charm. But she also knows who she is. Don't ever underestimate her.

Riley: Let me ask you a question. For those of us on the outside, it's never possible fully to get an understanding or maybe an appreciation of the relationship that spouses have and the degree to which a Cabinet member or a Vice President or a President will rely on their spouses for moral support and advice. Because you've had this experience, you would be a better commentator than most about the President's relationship with Mrs. Bush and the extent to which she was somebody that he relied on for these kinds of support. Could you comment on that?

Mrs. Derwinski: I probably could only comment about Ed's and my relationship, not so much theirs. But just watching, observing them, and seeing how they relate to one another, I think he would take great solace in someone like her, only because her head is screwed on straight, and her feet are on the ground. In Ed's and my relationship, you know, we listen to one another. We might make our own decisions, but we do listen to one another and then that would play in any kind of a decision-making role. One time, at one of these private luncheons, Mrs. Bush went around the table and said, "Are you okay, Bonnie?" I said, "Yes, I'm okay. I just came back from my anchor." She kind of looked at me, and she said, "Your anchor? What are you talking about?" I said, "I just came back from Chicago, and in Chicago I know who I am. My feet are on the ground, and my head is screwed on straight."

So I don't ever underestimate him, because D.C. can kind of blow you away if you let it. And she was that type of person. She was most comfortable at home in Houston, but she was also just as comfortable with a head of state. So I'm sure, just having observed them and watched them or listened to them, or have the President drag me one time into their private be room and say, "Look at this rug. She needlepointed the whole thing. It only took her six years." He's as proud of her as she is of him. As to whether she played a more typical wife role than other people have, I don't think she did. But her voice could always be heard somewhere along the lines. If not heard, seen. She has a very strong hand, I believe.

Well, I thank you for this opportunity. I'm going to kind of disappear for a little while and take in the grounds and just kind of relax a little bit. Are there any other questions? Did I explain the VA Very Special Arts program to you?

Masoud: I think we could spend a lot more time on it—

Mrs. Derwinski: Only because it's such a benefit. But I will send you some materials on it.

Young: Yes, I would love to see it.

Mrs. Derwinski: I'll pull some materials together from VSA, which is Very Special Arts, which has actually been around for 25, 27 years now, and our program for the last 10 years, just so you can have it for your information. As I said, I've always measured my successes by if they are still going on, and this one actually is. I'm really proud of it. That doesn't show, does it? I'll turn you back to the boss.

Young: Okay, you wanted to go through some of your previous remarks and do some fine-tuning?

Derwinski: Right. I was amazed. I think I told you, I came down thinking I was to brief the group on the Reagan administration, and I wound up doing this. So I had to ad-lib a lot.

Scott: They're pretty coherent, really.

Derwinski: Just to fill in the gaps. I mentioned I was at the UN. I had to work closely with Bush. And he had an interesting style. At the UN, first of all, all the countries' delegates are told in advance how to vote. They're all instructed, including ours, of course. But George Bush decided that he would still use the American style political oratory, which made for good press quite often, and which at least produced a situation where a lot of the Ambassadors come and say, "Well George, on a personal basis I agree with you, but my instructions were—"

But one thing I remember in particular, we were there, and he was leading the debate for the retention of Taiwan as China. That was 1971, when the UN voted Taiwan out and Beijing in. We were there at the U.S. desk, George Bush and I, and three of our career diplomats. The vote was announced, and we lost by a vote. I looked at George, he looked at me, and at that point the Taiwanese delegation got up and walked out. So we got up and walked out. Our three careerists just sat there. We were reflecting the political opinion, or political response, if you want to call it that.

I made a reference to John Sununu. He did a great job, but remember, he got into trouble. The media hounded him because, if I recall right, he was a stamp collector, and he would take his government limousine and dash off different points to stamp collector rendezvous. When he got the heat, other complaints accumulated, and he wound up having to leave. [redacted]

Then, you'd asked for some information, my commentary on the campaign. The problem in the campaign started just after the Persian Gulf War when they had Mr. Bush up in the high 80s in the polling. All the young whippersnappers in the White House were on top of the world.

We're going to waltz in. And then to add to it, the serious Democrats or highly regarded Democratic would-be candidates, like Governor [Mario] Cuomo, Governor [Jay] Rockefeller, Senator [Bob] Kerry of Nebraska, and a number of others, dropped out and left the field to Bill Clinton, who everybody laughed at as Governor of a backward state. Then all of a sudden, the whole issue turned. The war was forgotten, the economy was the big issue, and that's where we were caught.

[redacted]

I started under Ike [Dwight D. Eisenhower]. I was too new to study much, but my guess would be that, of all the Presidents I served with, Ike was the only one who wasn't over-awed by that sort of thing. He had commanded the forces that won the war, so I imagine being President was not quite as awesome. But, Kennedy, if you look at his history, his main interests were foreign policy. If you look at Johnson, same thing. If you look at Nixon. Nixon loved foreign affairs, and, of course, he had the background for it. Jerry Ford—notwithstanding his comments about Poles and Yugoslavs, he loved foreign policy. Carter did. Reagan did the key things. He focused primarily on the Soviet Union. He let George Shultz have a lot of elbowroom running the State Department.

The President's total preoccupation, especially leading up to and after the Gulf War, was foreign policy. He would be chatting, as Bonnie mentioned, going out for a picnic to Camp David, and then I'd be walking along with him and he said something like, "You know, I really had a tough conversation with Mitterand the other day. He just doesn't understand." So I listened for five minutes while he told me how frustrating it was to deal with Mitterand. Well, if you said that to the average American, they'd look and say, "What the hell. I don't give a damn about that. What about inflation, or what about my job security?" [redacted]

I'll give you one case that related to the VA, and from there I might as well go on and explain why I was terminated. That sort of flows. I was out at the DAV convention, which was being held in '92 in Reno. I went out there early. I got along with them fine, by the way. They weren't on my back as were the Legion and the VFW. I was very well received. The President flew out there. We met him at the airport, took him in, had a bunch of veterans who claimed they knew him from Texas or Connecticut there to shake hands and take a picture. And we had a man who had been his flight instructor in flight training in World War II when he was trained as a Navy pilot, a sort of a reunion. Bush certainly remembered the instructor. So the old gentleman was there, and it was all nice. Then he got up to deliver his speech.

The first half of the speech had to do with the veterans' budget and how well things were going. He talked a little bit about the Gulf War and how we were going to look at the problems

veterans might have and all that sort of thing. This was great. He read it all, the flow of it, he was doing great, when all of a sudden, he starts off on this impassioned explanation of why it would be necessary for us to give foreign aid—he used the term the way it's understood—to the new Russia, and what the stability of Europe would mean, and how foreign aid would be positive. And the veterans just sat on their hands, naturally.

So the first half of the speech you could feel the momentum for him. The second half of the speech, he lost them all. Then he finished. He got polite applause. He left, and I was back in my room about an hour later and got a phone call from Sam Skinner, who said, "What the hell went wrong there? What the hell happened?" He said, "The audience, they just sat there." I said, "Sam, fire your damn speechwriter. Whoever wrote that speech extolling foreign aid to Russia ought to get fired. Now that's a fine speech if you're talking to the foreign relations club of New York City, but it's a stupid speech for veterans, because all they want to hear is what are you going to do for me. In the first half of your speech you told them what you were doing for them. The second half of the speech, you told them what you were going to do for the new Russia. And they don't want you to do anything for Russia. They want you to do it for them. That's why you lost them."

Young: Did they fire the speechwriter?

Derwinski: Probably not. The VA is sort of semi-isolated from everything else in government because we have our own audience, our own people. We live in a totally different world than the Secretary of Treasury or the Secretaries of the other Departments. We have a little relationship, obviously, with DOD, which is normal, and I think ought to be stronger. Someday it might. But we had no problems with inter-agency difficulties except for the one issue when I had to hold off the Attorney General and Solicitor General on the issue of granting assumption of disability to veterans with certain forms of cancer, because it's the first part of the battle on the Agent Orange issue.

That was just a matter of, I thought, common sense at the time. If there's a preponderance of evidence, I thought we should rule on the side of the veteran, and we did. I had no trouble with it, but some people did. I had the battle with the Solicitor General, with [Richard] Thornburgh, and these were not difficult things. They were just saying, "It's our call, not yours." And I would say, "Fine, go public and overrule me," and of course they wouldn't, see? Finally it got down to where I'm quoting Sununu. They're telling me, "You shouldn't have done that. You're absolutely wrong. The Solicitor General is correct, the Attorney General is correct." Then he said, "but everybody likes your decision, so we won't change it."

Scott: Is there a certain amount of jockeying going on there that would be typical, for instance, as to which Cabinet person is taking the fall for something? I mean, part of the jockeying between yourself and Thornburgh.

Derwinski: No, not in this case. What happened in this case was, if you recall, there was this court decision and—

Riley: If I could interrupt, maybe to get you to go all the way back to your early days in office, because this must have been something that was percolating as you took office. Were you at some point briefed when you came in, or did you have some general knowledge?

Derwinski: In fact, I had very little knowledge, because the previous six years I had been at State. I had read the newspapers, and I knew there was an Agent Orange issue, and I knew there was a debate, and I knew it was still ongoing. But I didn't know any of the details of the studies.

Riley: And accordingly, when you assumed the position of Secretary, or earlier as the administrator, were there people in, say, the legal staff who came up and said, "This is going on behind the scenes. It promises to become a significant issue"?

Derwinski: No. Let me make one other explanation. We have a legal department at the VA, and the general counsel reports directly to the Secretary and is supposed to guide the Secretary on all legal matters. But VA attorneys do not practice in courts. The VA attorneys work on appeals cases, benefit appeals, and things of that nature. But whenever the VA is sued or the VA is party to a lawsuit, they are defended and represented by the Justice Department. So we didn't have any attorneys in the office, as far as I knew, who were very conversant with the precise legal battles that were going on.

Riley: Okay.

Derwinski: Now, where they did come at me was after the decision, the first day or two. They came in with guesstimates as to what it would cost in additional benefits if the VA granted the judge's point on the validity of the veterans' claims.

Scott: The presumption of service connection.

Derwinski: Yes, and frankly, when you look at the size of the federal government's budget and the size of our budget, we weren't talking about big dollars. I like to think it was my common sense that told me I could justify it budget-wise, the Congress wouldn't object, and that I could justify it from a matter of a decent administration to the veterans. It was good politics, too. Now, I don't put that first, last. But if it was bad politics, if that was my judgment, I'd have looked at this differently. But it wasn't. The number of veterans involved wasn't that great in the first go-round, so to speak.

Scott: About 33,000, I think, in the suit.

Derwinski: Right. We were already talking about a situation in some cases, 15, 18 years after the veteran may have been exposed to Agent Orange, and there were four precise cancer problems this addressed. I listened to that explanation and the budget, and I must say, no one said to me, "Don't do it because it costs too much" or anything. They just laid it out there. I looked at it. Then I had a press conference. In fact, I still remember to this day, because it was sort of semi-impromptu. The press came hustling around. We didn't have time to set up chairs or anything for them. I just stood out in one of the larger hallways there, and they all gathered

around, and I gave my position, which was basically that we would not appeal. That's when all hell broke loose everywhere else because my legal counsel got a call saying, "Who the hell does your boss think he is? We at Justice make this decision. He doesn't." Then my legal counsel came in and said, "The Solicitor General is upset about this. That's his decision."

I said, "Who is the Solicitor General?"

Young: Kenneth Starr?

Derwinski: No, it wasn't Starr. Starr had just left, I believe, or hadn't come aboard yet, I forget. But it wasn't Starr. It was some other gentleman. But I wasn't particularly impressed or knew what the Solicitor General did. I'd never run into one before. So I marched over to the Justice Department, had a meeting there. Thornburgh was out of town. There was an acting Solicitor General and about a dozen lawyers who, I guess, had been arguing the case. I sat there with my legal counsel, and they pounded away. And when it was over, I just said, "Sorry, the decision is made." "Well, we want you to change." "No, I don't change my decision. My decision is made. If you want me to change my decision, you have Mr. Thornburgh talk to the President, or you go to the White House. But I'm just telling you boys, it would be stupid politics for you to do that, and I'm not changing it. I won't change it. If you don't like it, you go to the White House."

And so it culminated in that little meeting I described, which was basically correct, but you had to know Sununu to know how he handled everything. Thornburgh himself was especially pleasant about it. He said, "You know, you really shouldn't do that." "Okay, Dick." It was the staff under him who were vociferous. But Thornburgh himself said, "Okay, you did it." Basically we wound up agreeing that I would never again make another legal decision.

Scott: I was wondering. You were the Congressman from Chicago when the initial Agent Orange story broke nationwide. Bill Curtis, I think, was the one from WDDM in Chicago who put together that documentary, maybe as far back as 1979. He had arranged for a showing of that documentary with the Illinois congressional delegation. Do you remember that, Ed?

Derwinski: No, I don't remember that at all. I remember the issue—

Scott: Because it was the Chicago VA where they were collecting the first—

Derwinski: But as I think I mentioned in passing early this morning, as a Congressman, my contacts with the VA were basically limited to individual cases I was working on for veterans. Since I wasn't on the committee, and since by that time I was ranking Republican on the Post Office, Civil Service and Foreign Affairs Committees, I understood the issue. I imagine I did receive some direct correspondence from veterans who claimed to have been affected, and I'm sure we referred them appropriately to the VA and whatever access had been developed, if any.

Scott: Your decision seems like such a straightforward, commonsensical— I'm wondering why it wasn't made before. I mean, the suit said, "We don't have scientific proof that there's a link between Agent Orange and any cancers, but the VA's own regulations say when there's a

doubt, the veteran gets the benefit of the doubt." What the judge said, "It looks to me that the VA, by demanding scientific proof, is violating its own guidelines." You looked at that, and you ruled, "Well, I'm not going to appeal that." It seems like that's a decision that could have been made a dozen years before very easily. I'm wondering, do you have any idea why that might not have been done before?

Derwinski: Well, I can only speculate that in the days before Cabinet status, and maybe because of the personalities, that the VA administrators may have been reluctant to assert themselves. The other is that they, after the first post-war VA administrator, who was General Bradley, Omar Bradley, after that, the appointments were not as prestigious as his was. Right there in the end there were a couple of more political than necessary kind of appointments, in fact. In the Reagan years, there were three administrators over an eight-year period. And General Turnage, who was my immediate predecessor, the next-to-last administrator, was part of what we politely used to call the California Mafia in the Reagan administration. You had the Georgia Mafia in the Carter, and the Massachusetts Mafia in the Kennedy days. General Turnage was a nice, easy, laid-back gentleman who I don't think went around looking for battles. I don't know who was giving him his advice, either. The decision came down, I didn't read the 48-page judge's decision. I read the summary and figured when in doubt, you rule in favor of the veteran.

They said it would cost so many millions and affect so many men, fine. That was not awesome. Those figures didn't upset me. At that point my innocence showed itself. I was not aware that it wasn't my decision to make.

Young: But if you had been, you would have made it anyway, I suspect.

Derwinski: Sure. Or if it wasn't my decision to make and I knew that, I'd have gone charging over to the White House and said, "You have to do this." But let me make one other comment that should be at the top when you're writing the report, and it's still an issue today. There is no training for Secretaries. And you can't train the Secretaries as a group, because they all walk into totally different offices, and because they all have totally different personalities. [redacted]

I was probably the least equipped in terms of knowledge of the office I was walking into. But I was also probably the most informal and relaxed Secretary. Nothing bothered me. I didn't ever worry. I made a decision, it was done. What's coming up tomorrow? I didn't worry about what I had just done. Mentally, I was prepared to strike out on my own. But in this particular case, it was really innocence. And yet, it worked out perfectly, because when it was all over, nobody

had ever argued the point with me. Let's put it this way: Nobody else wanted to come forward and say, "I believe so strongly in this that we're going to see that you're over-ruled."

When it was all over, Thornburgh and I never had a difficult time. And I can't remember—the Solicitor General at the time was acting, so I don't recall, and I don't believe he became the Solicitor. He was just filling in. I don't remember who he was.

Riley: Was there a fragmented constituency on—

Derwinski: Not that I was aware of.

Riley: You didn't have battles within the various service organizations over whether the money ought to be—

Derwinski: No. I think all the service organizations, as a matter of positioning, were in favor. You know, all the service organizations will go along with really anything that they think they can add to the flow of veteran benefits.

Riley: As long as it was an addition and not a diversion.

Derwinski: That's right. As long as you didn't say, "Okay, we'll reduce the benefits for veterans over 65."

Riley: That was the basis for my question. I would have assumed that there would have been some concern about there being some contest for money.

Derwinski: And the public was not interested, in general. The public attitude, I think, was ambivalent. Plus, the people who may have been vigorous critics of the Vietnam War were saying, "Now you have to do this because you were morally wrong to start with." And other people who were the gung-ho supporters of the military: "Well, if the Pentagon said it didn't cause a problem, you've got to believe the Pentagon."

Young: What about your appointment of Admiral [Elmo] Zumwalt?

Derwinski: I knew the Admiral well. I was in Congress when he was Chief of Naval Operations, and there were a couple of battles that specifically—He was having a tough time getting Congress to approve our using Diego Garcia and turning it into a U.S. military facility. So I led the fight in the House to get Diego Garcia for the Navy. So I knew the Admiral at that point. I knew him for years and had good personal relations with him. I knew about his son, naturally, and I knew his views, but I also knew that he was respected in the military field. He was respected in the media, and I thought he'd be a good man to use.

Scott: How about the advisory committee, the VA advisory committee on herbicides? Are there people in there whom you remember as—

Derwinski: I had one brief meeting with—the issue came up sort of unexpectedly because of this court decision, and so there I was *boom*! Okay, what does this mean? What does it mean legally? What does it mean cost-wise? Can we afford that? We'll make the proper presumption. Now, I got a little, I wouldn't say flack, but I got a little nervous inquiries from the Australian embassy, because they were having a similar debate in Australia over whether they should extend compensation to their veterans. And they had a reasonable contingent in Vietnam. I think what happened as a result of our decision, it tilted the scales in Australia eventually for a similar decision. But even that, I don't remember that being difficult.

Young: Who was against it?

Derwinski: Just the faceless bureaucrat types and the lawyers who had jurisdiction concerns.

Scott: President Carter established what was called the White House Agent Orange Working Group. Apparently that working group had meddled quite a bit in the studies that were going on at CDC [Centers for Disease Control] and elsewhere. I'm wondering, did anyone from this Agent Orange Working Group—say Dr. Bernard Hawk, or maybe Alvin Young—did any of those people contact you?

Derwinski: No. I imagine they were working with some of our doctors in the VA medical hierarchy. Remember, there is a tendency in a huge bureaucracy to keep as much information as possible from the Secretary. The more he knows, he could step on toes. So I couldn't wait for my Inspector General to give me information. I just went out and found it myself.

Scott: At the VA?

Derwinski: They're volunteers from the VA, and they're all in their own right musicians. They get together a couple of times a year for a practice session. The music they're going to play is sent out to them, so they practice, and then they have an annual concert on the Hill on Flag Day. And somewhere, in some city in the country, they have a full-blown concert on Veterans' Day. They had one at Carnegie Hall one Veterans' Day. A couple of years ago they had one in Chicago. Dr. Robie, who is a research doctor stationed in the D.C. hospital, is the director.

When he was starting this thing, I had just come in. I got a memo, I gather from the finance office, saying this thing is starting and obviously going to be costly, and there's no practical reason for it. The VA should not be involved in funding this kind of thing. So here again, I'm not particularly knowledgeable about music other than my ear tells me when it's good or bad I guess, but I looked at that, and I thought, *this could be a great public relations entity.* Sure, I know what they're saying. Dr. Wabie's telling me it doesn't cost anything. They're volunteers. Yes, but time away from work and all sorts of other factors, I'm sure. But they went on to tour Europe a couple of years ago. They played in St. Petersburg. You talk about the intangibles of public relations. I think they're a great asset to the VA.

So somebody wanted to put a stop to it, tell them that they could do this only after hours and it couldn't be on time off. So I just said, "Get off their back and let them go. Let them do their thing." Normally, I don't think a Secretary of a Department would know anything like that was

going on in the bowels of his entity. When I confronted something, I got this information on this hospital sitting on the fault line. It didn't take me more than a minute to decide.

Young: What was the acronym again of this White House group? This working with CDC?

Scott: Agent Orange Working Group, AOWG, White House Agent Orange Working Group.

Young: They never got in your way, and you never got in theirs?

Derwinski: No.

Scott: When you appointed Admiral Zumwalt as consultant to the VA committee, were you hoping he would pick it up and run with it or—

Derwinski: Of course I knew the old admiral enough to know that he never did things halfway. He was an intense man, and as I said, he and I had known each other for a long time. We had mutual respect for each other. I knew of his special interest in the Agent Orange issue, so there we were. I don't think I ran the VA like a dictator, but I think the people I dealt with understood that if I made up my mind and I made a decision, that that was that. I think they also knew that I had certain convictions that I would follow. Every so often, Tony Principi or Rich Pell, the chief of staff, would come in and probe a little, sound me out on something. I knew that somebody had talked to them. Somebody who didn't want to speak to me or was afraid to speak to me would use them. So I sent the message back that way.

But they pretty well knew that if the Secretary said this he meant it. Now that doesn't necessarily mean it was implemented up and down in the system. When I got on the smoking issue, I'd take an aide with me. Usually one of the things we did was—it wasn't a checklist, but it was close to it. He would wander into the cafeteria and look around at the cashier's area to see if they were selling cigarettes. I remember he went in, in: "Where can I get cigarettes?" And the clerk said, "Oh, we've got them down here. We don't keep them in the open because the Secretary said we can't sell them." So later that day when I was leaving the hospital, I said to the director, "By the way, get those damn cigarettes out of the cafeteria."

I remember meeting with Senator [Charles] Grassley. We went on a tour of the hospitals in Iowa. We were at the veterans meeting, and I threw it open to questions, and they pounded away. Mostly when you got a bunch of veterans together, they would get up and focus on their case that was mishandled somewhere. So I usually had a note-taker there, and I would just say, "I personally don't know the answer to your case. Miss Jones here has been taking notes. See her after the meeting, and she'll set you up with the right—" But, one thing led to another, and this gentleman got up in this meeting, must have been 400 veterans there, and he said, "I want to tell you why I smoke." And everybody clapped. And I said, "Yes, why do you smoke?" "Because the army made me smoke, and if it wasn't for the army, I wouldn't smoke. And, besides, this is a free country, and I fought for the right to smoke."

I looked at him, and I said, "You're about my age. You're a World War II veteran. You didn't fight for the right to smoke. You probably got drafted like I did because [Adolf] Hitler,

[Benito] Mussolini, and [Hideki] Tojo were running loose, and they had to be stopped. It had nothing to do with our damn smoking." I thought Chuck Grassley was going to die. Veterans are great guys individually, they're totally different than the people I had to fight in Washington.

I'd like to tell you a little bit about how Dr. Sullivan and I put together a would-be program. Actually he initiated it. He came to me one day. We were good pals because we were both lower-key members of the Cabinet. We both were running our ships, doing our jobs, and that was that. So he came in one day and said he wanted to see me. He came over and he said, "I'm having trouble with the Public Health Service. We're not equipped well. We have a lot of people we're taking care of, and we're really swamped." He said, "And the VA, you're under-utilized. Most of your hospitals have too many empty beds." He said, "Maybe we should—" and then he laid out his plan. I said, "Doctor, we could test this. We can't do it, but let's at least test it."

So we talked a while, and finally we decided that we would have three hospitals test it, each one with a different clientele. We were going to use Tuskegee, Alabama, which is a poor black town. We have a hospital there. Our VA hospital was less than half full, so we were going to use Tuskegee for poor blacks in the area. We were going to use Salem, Virginia, for Appalachia whites up in the hills who had very little up there and would come down to save money and utilize the VA. We were going to use a third, but we hadn't decided on the third. It was going to be a VA hospital near an Indian reservation, a major Indian reservation. So we would be reaching out to poor Indians, poor whites, and poor blacks. In each case, they would be funneled into us by the Public Health Service field people. They would be treated in the VA hospitals, and the Public Health Service would compensate us. We would negotiate a fee, and they would compensate us for serving their population.

Scott: You would become an HMO [Health Maintenance Organization] for them.

Derwinski: Would they?

Scott: No. I mean the VA would become sort of their HMO?

Derwinski: Sort of.

Masoud: It seems strange to me that you didn't think about testing this in an urban area.

Derwinski: I think what we were trying to do was to have it in isolated areas where we could control it better and see how it worked. Also, in all three hospitals, there would be substantial space. Usually in some of the urban areas—this is 12 years ago, 10 years ago—in a few of the hospitals, you were operating at 70-80% of capacity, although the average of the VA at the time was probably somewhere between 50 and 55% capacity. I thought we had a fair balance, and also a geographic balance. So that's how we approached it.

It was going to be a test. We were not going to plunge into it. Dr. Sullivan never got much heat. I got the heat, because the VSOs pounced on me, naturally. The first battle cry was, "I'm

going into the hospital. I'll be in a bed next to a draft dodger?" See, now if I'd only known Clinton was going to be elected President, I could have said, "Yes, you might have Bill Clinton next to you." I didn't have that answer ready at the time. But all hell broke loose.

Young: How did the hell break loose? You first heard from the VSOs?

Derwinski: Only through the VSOs.

Young: Nothing from Congress?

Derwinski: Congress got wound up later. The Congress got probably got mail from the veterans, fired them up. But all the editorials were positive. In fact, even the *Washington Post,* which is seldom pro-Republican, had a glowing editorial saying, "Secretary Derwinski is the bright star of the administration. He is going to do this and this." So God, with praise like that I didn't need other enemies. I had public support, but in the veterans' world, it was total chaos. I was public enemy number one because I was going to put non-veterans in veteran hospitals. That's all they looked at.

Now, ironically, at any given time—I've been told this by our VA doctors, I've never investigated it myself, but I've been told—about 10% of the people being treated in VA hospitals are non-veterans. The way that works, if we have a working relationship with a medical school, as a medical school hospital, if they get a patient, a civilian with some abnormality or problem where between the two hospitals the specialist is at the VA, they will, by mutual agreement, send that person to the VA. In the meantime, if a veteran comes in and the specialist is over at the medical school hospital, they'll admit the veteran, and they'll serve him there. This reciprocity goes on.

For a lot of their research, depending on the research grant, they usually want a wider, broader base of people than just veterans or just a certain age group, and we can't provide a broad enough base. All we have, for the most part, are aging males now. So if we're going to do some research, we have to include in that research non-veterans to meet the statistical needs of the particular grant. So they tell me in our research programs, of necessity, we reach out and get non-veterans. Now this is normal. I assume some of the VSO leaders know about it because it must come to their attention somehow. This is a way the VA qualifies for many grants. All the money we get doesn't come from government. Then this exchange between the medical school hospital and the VA, since World War II, has become the very basis of the VA's effectiveness.

There are 140 some medical schools in the country, and about 120 are affiliated with the VA. Our best hospitals are those that have a strong affiliation with a good medical school and, frankly, our poorest hospitals are those that have no affiliation. For example, I have used a urologist at Northwestern, the Dean of Urology at the Northwestern Medical School. He practices urology at the Northwestern Hospital, but he spends every Wednesday in the VA hospital across the street. So those veterans there—and we're getting a lot of veterans now with urology problems at that age—they're getting the best urologist in the city of Chicago. That kind of flow of talent is one of the great assets of the VA.

Now the problem that we're starting to have with medical schools is that the VA no longer has the total mix of patients to serve all of the needs of the medical school, because veterans are getting too old. Those have had their major injuries repaired, and the surgeons who were trained repairing wounded veterans don't have that kind of veteran any more. So to some degree, medical schools don't find us as practical as they used to, but the relationship is excellent.

I picked up an article in the paper one day saying one scandalous thing, that the VA had spent a million and a half dollars to put in machines and everything for an angioplasty treatment at the VA hospital in Iowa City, but the facility was there for over six months and had never been used because of a dispute over jurisdiction between doctors. I called in my top medical men and said, "How the hell could this happen?" "Well, you've got to understand. There's Dr. so and so, and he won't work with Doctor so and so." So I went out there about a week later. This time I told them I was coming. "When I come out there, I want to talk to the head of the medical school, and I want our hospital administrator to explain to me why the hell they're not using the unit." The article also said that when they had a veteran who needed the service, they would transport him to Chicago, to Hines Hospital, for angioplasty.

So I went out there, and sure enough, it was a matter of jurisdiction. The people at the medical school would not go over to work at the VA, whereas the VA plan had assumed they would have them. I said to our hospital director, "You either decide to run this for the benefit of the veterans, or you resign. I'm not going to have you sit here and let them tell you what you can and can't do in your hospital." Then I went across the street and went to the appropriate doctor. I was on my best behavior. I said, "You do understand, Doctor, that our priorities are veterans, and unless that unit is opened immediately with the cooperation of your appropriate staff people, we'll have to review everything we do with you, and we may terminate quite a few of the projects with you if you're not cooperative here. Thank you, sir, for your time." And I walked out. About two weeks later, they were in business.

Scott: By the way, that example of angioplasty is interesting because that would essentially be for non-service-connected care, right?

Derwinski: Yes. But again, we're serving—

Scott: Are you serving an indigent population there?

Derwinski: We're serving an awful lot of non-service connected types, and that's what we want to serve because there aren't enough service-connected veterans left who need service. Our current capacity, the average in the total VA system, is less than 50%. Of course, some of that has been caused by the expansion of outpatient clinics and the fact that nowadays, if you have a hernia, you go in in the morning, the doctor takes care of you in the outpatient clinic, and you go home that day. In the old days, you spent a week in the hospital. The real problem the VA is facing is the fact that the VA has followed medicine into the utilization of outpatient clinics. It means that the huge hospitals that were classic VA, 1000 patients or more, are obsolete.

Scott: I found your discussion of the politics of that really interesting and persuasive, and I'm wondering now: You can't close a hospital, for all the reasons you talked about. But can a hospital director take the budget for a hospital and reconfigure the hospital and reconfigure what it does?

Derwinski: Not really.

Scott: As an example, could a hospital director get rid of one-third of the beds and move that money over into outpatient? Do they have that kind of discretion?

Derwinski: No, not discretion. But if he makes such a proposal, as a general rule it will be approved. In other words, he'll come in and say. "Look, I'm too much of a general hospital. I've identified certain money, I want to put all of it into my cardiology service." Then we have what the VA calls "centers of excellence." That's an effort driven primarily by doctors, which would say, in effect, "Look, we will make a dozen VA hospitals as good as any in the country in cardiology," or prostate, or brain surgery, or whatever else. So instead of having a hundred VA hospitals perform mediocre brain operations, we'd concentrate our talent, invest in newest equipment and have maybe 20 hospitals that would do it. Now ironically, the first objection comes from the VSOs. "I live up here in Butte, Montana. I don't want to have to go to Denver to have an operation. I want an operation in the hospital in Billings."

We had a hospital that is really an outpatient clinic, although it's still listed as a hospital, in a town in eastern Montana. I was told when I went in that you couldn't close it because the Montana Congressman and the VSOs wouldn't allow it. So I went out there, and I saw this hospital. The building itself was constructed to serve about 50 patients. Their average workload at the time, and this was 12 years ago, was about 25 to 30. No medical school affiliation, in the middle of no place. And right across the street was a Catholic hospital, about 200-bed capacity. It was the area regional hospital, new equipment, all sorts of stuff. And we were sitting there with this little hospital. The veterans would come from all over Montana, eastern Montana. So I asked a couple of questions, why don't we just have an arrangement, in fact, lease beds across the street? If they want to come to this hospital, fine. On the western side of Montana they had VA hospitals that were larger and had more space for them.

Now, that would be, what would you get there? Supposing you went in there, and you were having an appendectomy. Maybe they did one or two a month. Would you as a patient want to submit yourself to a team of doctors who did one or two procedures a month? Wouldn't you rather go 500 miles at VA expense to a major hospital where they did five or six a day and knew what they were doing? That's really the issue of medicine.

Scott: There's got to be a difference in death rates between the two.

Derwinski: I suppose there would be, and the recovery rate would be slower and everything else. In hospitals, medicine has evolved into specialties. And in the VA, we have not been doing enough to pull our specialties together. That's where this term, "centers of excellence," comes in. That's a recognition that we have to have more concentration of talent.

Scott: Let me pose a hypothetical question then, using this proposal that you and Secretary Sullivan put together. You were kind of caught off guard by this ferocious reaction from the service organizations. But now that you know that almost any time you try to close something down or change something, you're likely to get such a reaction, as Secretary of the VA, would it be possible or advisable to have, say, a monthly meeting with the heads of those organizations and have sort of a sounding board, advisory board, a discussion, something so that they would trust you to close the hospital, or trust the VA to close a hospital, if they were part of a discussion or development or a plan? You see where I'm going with it?

Derwinski: First of all, we do have regular meetings.

Scott: With VSOs?

Derwinski: With all the VSOs. Not just the Secretary, but also the man assigned to it, and they have their complaints and all of it. We also have such meetings in the field. In every VA hospital, there are volunteer veterans to give advice to the patient coming in, that kind of thing. Then there are consultations with the veterans. The trouble is that, without exception, they say no to any change that they perceive to be a change in service. Now, it took a while for the veterans to start using outpatient clinics more effectively. For a while we had outpatient clinics that just were under-utilized. So they understand what has happened, and they're moving more and more toward utilizing those facilities. The other issue, of course, comes down to legitimate parochialism. I mean if you're a nice relaxed old veteran, and you're living in Kankakee, Illinois, you don't want to be told that if you suddenly develop a special health problem, the service has to be provided you at the Cleveland VA. You want to go to Danville, which is a small VA hospital nearby. That's a natural instinct.

Remember, the VA started back after the Civil War. But in practical terms, you had two waves of hospital construction, one right after World War I to take care of that batch of veterans, and the other right after World War II. It was after World War II that you added the medical school relationships. So a number of VA hospitals were build specifically to be adjacent to medical schools, or vice versa. In Chicago, Loyola University built its new hospital adjacent to Hines out in the west suburbs. The other two, the VA hospital was built next to Northwestern, to be next to it, and the University of Illinois, the hospital next to it is called West Side VA. That was built specifically to be affiliated with the Illinois Medical School. All that happened right after World War II.

But now—let's stay in Illinois for a moment—the peak number of veterans in Illinois probably came right as the draft ended and the draftees in the mid '70s came out, after we ended the draft, after the Vietnam War. At that time, Illinois probably had 1.4 million veterans. Today they're down to 900,000, and projections are by the year 2020 there will be 400,000. Then you throw in one other figure, which is that about 80% of the veterans never use the VA. If I could use those figures roughly, that means in 2020 you would have, at most, 60,000 veterans who might use the VA. Also, some are probably enrolled in private health plans, and they're not going to use the VA.

So, with that background, you have to ask yourself, should the VA have six hospitals in Illinois? And, if so, which of the six, in some order, do you want to keep? You have two downstate, which are under-utilized now—one is in eastern Illinois. For an extra 20-, 30-, 40-mile drive, they could use Indianapolis. Then there is one in southern Illinois, probably equidistant between St. Louis and Memphis, and they've both got larger VA hospitals. And politics gets into it somewhat. So we have four hospitals clustered around Chicago, two in the city, two in the suburbs, four different medical school affiliations to lose their access to VA patients, which may be valuable training ground for the their current students.

Young: Even though that's declining, probably.

Derwinski: Even though they're declining.

Scott: In your experience in trying to sit down with the VSO leaders and talk about things like this, it's not much of a dialogue, is that what you're saying?

Derwinski: No. They do not want to be publicly seen as participating in the downsizing of the VA. I've looked at the figures forever. I think the peak number of veterans at any one time, in the mid '70s, was about 31.5 million. We're down now to about 24 million, and we're having a sharp drop-off. I've heard Bob Dole's speech justifying the World War II memorial, and the basic thrust of the speech is we're dying so fast you've got to build that memorial before there's nobody left to see it go up. World War veterans are passing away at the rate of 500,000 a year.

Masoud: And only about three million use the VA hospitals?

Derwinski: That's right, that's all. I went out one day to a hospital on the north shore of Long Island on one of my tours, and it reminded me a lot of Hines Hospital in Chicago, which I know well. It was a classic, huge VA hospital. At one time it probably could handle 1,500 veterans. There were about five or six buildings at the hospital boarded up, no longer in use. The day I was there, the director was telling me they could still serve about 600, and they probably had 320 patients. The only area where there's a little growth is in some of the specialties. The VA has been expanding their services for blind veterans, but there's no way of gauging how many veterans you will have that will be blind. The other is the paralyzed veterans, spinal cord injury. They are new spinal cord injury units. But that's a unique thing and a special category.

Masoud: Do VA hospitals have emergency rooms? That's an avenue where a lot of people go and get their care.

Derwinski: As a general rule, a VA hospital does not have an emergency room. You go into any VA hospital, a normal VA hospital—I'm not talking about one with a drug or alcohol addiction unit or a spinal cord injury unit, where the patients are there seven days a week—you could roll a bowling ball down any aisle in the hospital and not hit anyone because they send as many patients as they can home on the weekend and say, "Come on back Monday." You have an absolutely skeleton nursing staff, skeleton doctors present.

Masoud: In one of the interviews you did, you talked about how VA hospitals are, in absolute terms, still more efficient than private hospitals, how the cost per patient per bed is about two-thirds of what it is in a private hospital. How is that?

Derwinski: The question of capacity and the use thereof, and the question of what constitutes an ideal patient flow, is debated forever in the medical field. I asked my doctors, and most of them will tell you, the busier they are, the better they are. If you're a doctor in a small VA hospital and you perform one appendectomy a month, you're not going to do as well handling that as the man in the New York City VA who's performing a half dozen a day. That just stands to reason. Then, as the entire shift in medicine has been to this outpatient type of service, you get a different mix of patients. Because things that people go into the hospital for, and be there anywhere from 10 to 12 days, that's all handled outpatient now.

Now that gets back to the theme I used to lecture, but never was able to sell it enough. If the VA specialized in geriatric medicine and prepared itself to take care of the old veterans as they came our way, we would perform a more effective public service.

The other is the women's angle. Right now, about five percent of the veterans are women, and it'll be nine or ten percent 20 years from now. When I went in, the VA wasn't equipped to do much for women. I was thinking, *By gosh, you better have enough beds and enough privacy set aside for your women patients, and you better get a few doctors here, get yourself a doctor who is a gynecologist and so on.* You have to do that. It's slowly coming, and it's better to be ahead of it than behind it.

What is the average veteran? He's a local man, or woman, mostly man, who goes down to the clubhouse to fraternize with the boys, has a few beers, pays his dues, comes out and marches in the fourth of July or Memorial Day or Veterans' Day parade. He volunteers to help run the bingo game on Wednesday night and things like that. His social life revolves around his veterans post. Now, he doesn't care who the state commander is, much less who the national commander is. He doesn't worry about the nearest VA hospital because he doesn't use it. He lives in a totally different world than the professional veteran who runs the Legion and VFW and feels that to justify their existence they have to continuously be pouring more budget money into the VA. Now, granted, I had my ups and downs with the veteran groups.

I was booed at the American Legion convention in '92, one of the reasons I was asked to resign. The man who organized the booing was Herschel Goldberg, who became deputy of the VA under Clinton. He politicized the issue. He was the state director for veterans in Arkansas. He was also active in the Legion. So he came to the Legion convention and organized a booing effort. And it worked. I understood. In fact, I marveled at the effectiveness of it.

Scott: Are we talking about resounding boos here?

Derwinski: Oh yes, real boos.

Young: What was the main reason?

Derwinski: My effort to open up the hospitals to nonveterans.

Young: Salem and Tuskegee.

Derwinski: Now the fact that I had made the decision on Agent Orange two years before that was universally greeted, that was old news. Now it was "What have you done for me lately?"

Riley: You were getting negative feedback from veteran organizations before this time. My recollection of the reading here is much stronger, that the administration overruled your decision, or you eventually—

Derwinski: It never got to the point of a decision. You see what happened is, Lou Sullivan and I mentioned this to Sununu, told him we were going to work on this.

Riley: This was at a Cabinet meeting or a special—

Derwinski: We went to his office and he said, "When you get things more precise, come in and talk to me, and we'll discuss it again." He left. We thought we came up with the perfect plan, three test cases, and we had a press conference. And, as I said, we got positive press editorials—

Riley: By that time had you reported back to the White House that you were going to have a press conference?

Derwinski: No, because we thought we had enough of a go-ahead from Sununu to where we could at least proceed with the test. We weren't going to ask Congress for any money; in fact, we were going to make money. That was another part of the plan that was good. We were going to make money—we, the VA. Plus it would justify retaining larger staff. In other words, if we were going to, say, get an extra 50 people in the Salem, Virginia, hospital, that meant the doctors, dentists, the cooking staff, down to the maintenance man, the cadre that would be needed to serve a patient load of 50 more people per day. And then we'd be compensated for all of that. No budget loss to the VA. But we ran into such a hostile environment—

Riley: After you held the press conference.

Derwinski: Right, after we had the press conference.

Riley: And then the veteran organizations—

Derwinski: They all attended.

Riley: But you had not vetted your plan with any of the veteran organizations? Do you remember?

Derwinski: I did with one or two individuals.

Riley: Can you tell us a little bit about those consultations?

Derwinski: They just basically listened, and they didn't say anything. They probably went back and huddled and decided this was a no-no. What was happening, when Dr. Sullivan finally came in, he was all set to go, and I think he pulled me along a little faster than I should have gone. It was his original concept. But I underestimated the lengths to which the VSOs would go to take after me. Then Mr. Goldberg came along very effectively and brought that up against me at the Legion convention.

Riley: The timing of that convention?

Derwinski: About the middle of September, the second week of September of '92.

Masoud: Was that in Chicago?

Derwinski: They all have these conventions in July, August, early September. The Legion comes last. The VFW usually has their convention over Labor Day, and the DAV a week or two before. Then the little ones, all the ex-POW, Purple Heart veterans, Catholic, Jewish veterans, all the different types—they have theirs scattered all through the period.

I'll throw this in because Goldberg was a classic case. He was a political veteran. He was also a political operative for then-candidate Clinton, and he was—not *was*, he still *is*—an intensely partisan man. So he went into this with a relish. The next time I ran into him was about a year later, again in Chicago. There was a special program to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the execution of General Mikhailovich by Tito. This had to do with a civil war between the monarchists and the communists in Yugoslavia, which was fought under the noses of the German occupiers of Yugoslavia.

For some reason Mr. Goldberg was invited. And I was invited. I was out of office. I was invited because when I was in Congress, I was the champion of the memory of General Mikhailovich, and I had gotten a tip and forced the DOD to acknowledge that President Truman had conferred the Legion of Merit, which is the highest honor our country gives a foreign military leader, on General Mikhailovich. But it was classified so that it wouldn't offend Marshall Tito and his government. Mikhailovich rescued 800 Allied airmen shot down as they were flying. They used to fly over Yugoslavia to bomb the Ploesti, Romania, oil fields, and either going over or coming back they might get shot down by German ack-ack. So if they fell into the hands of the Chetniks, who were Mikhailovich's people, he gathered up all 800, and he cleared an airport, and our planes flew in and took them out.

Anyway, as a result of that, he is the holder of the Legion of Merit, classified. I managed to force it out into the open, so I became a hero of all Serbian-Americans. I had very few in my district, but I was a hero anyway. So they had this anniversary, and they had me as the featured speaker. Mr. Goldberg was there to give greetings, I guess, from the administration.

Riley: Did he arrange to have you booed at this event also?

Derwinski: No, he didn't do that, but he came in and looked at the program and told the people running the program that he insisted that he be the last speaker, that he follow me. Well, I knew what he was doing. He wanted to hear what I would say. He assumed that I would be partisan, that I'd be blasting the Clinton administration and all that sort of thing. I gave my speech and, quite frankly, I almost cried at the end of it. I was saluting the memory of General Mikhailovich, and I talked about what it had meant, what he had done, the airmen he had saved and how wonderful this was that we were at least remembering the old boy. That was the gist of my speech. Now Goldberg got up, and I found out later he had to throw his speech away. He had this speech comparing the Clinton administration record as being much better than the Bush record in handling the VA, even though the audience was 95 percent Serbian-American. But because I was going to be involved, his mental processes led him to assume that it would be a clash.

Young: Let's take a short break—five minutes or so.

Derwinski: I'll let you in on a terrible little secret. The Senate Veterans Affairs Committee meets once a year. Believe it or not. They have one formal meeting a year, at which they have the heads of the various veteran organizations appear and give them their opinion of the state of the veterans world and the budget. And that's the only time they gather as a committee. When they want to pass some bill, if the House authorization committee sends a bill over, they'll meet in the hallway, and their staffs will work out an agreement. They'll meet and say, "We had a meeting, we agree."

The Senate Veterans Affairs Committee was an afterthought. The House had a committee for years before that. The Senate didn't, and some Senators thought, *Gee whiz. That's good politics to be on the Veterans Affairs Committee.* So they formed a committee. The House Authorization Committee on Veteran Affairs, because of the way the budget is now handled, could pass dozens of bills authorizing the spending of some money. But unless the money is appropriated, their action is useless, because they authorize, but they can't actually provide the money.

The Senate killed it on the floor last year, and one of the ironic things was that the Legion had been in town for their annual

spring conference a week before. They presented an award for patriotic service over and above the call of duty to Senator Bob Byrd of West Virginia, presumably because he, among other things, was supporting their flag-burning bill. The bill came on the floor the next week, and he voted against it, which was as visible a slap in the face as I've seen any Senator ever give to a constituency. But his reason for it, he also has a couple of basic principles, and one of his principles is that you shouldn't be overextending, by legal means, certain prohibitions against free speech. Then the other factor, of course, is that he's a wise enough man to know that the issue has lost its relevance to the general public.

But there really is not a major role that the Congress plays. The House committee gets over-involved in VA matters, while the Senate committee is basically inactive. The power lies in the appropriators. When I was at the VA, the chairman of the Senate appropriations committee was Barbara Mikulski of Maryland. The Vice Chairman, the ranking minority member, was Senator Kit [Christopher S.] Bond from Missouri. A pattern developed in the House whereby a bunch of members got amendments in the House committee mandating our setting up new outpatient clinics and three or four new hospitals, coming out of the appropriations committee. So I went to Barbara, whom I served with in the House. I won't say we were friendly, because we used to refer to each other as being Poles apart [laughter].

I sat her down and went through the list. On that list that she had—she had her own list—was an outpatient clinic in Cumberland, Maryland. "Barbara," I said, "I'll make a deal with you. I'm not dealing from strength, you are, but I'll make a deal with you. Without needing a line item in the bill, we'll put an outpatient clinic in Cumberland, Maryland, [redacted] We'll build them as we need them, where we need them, how we need them and when we need them, but you will get your outpatient clinic in Cumberland."

Then I went to Kit Bond and said, "Now Kit, you have a shopping list from Republican Senators." I went through the same line. "Now, if you've got an outpatient clinic in Missouri that you want somewhere, I'll put it there for you. [redacted]

And the House—I used to get a weekly letter from Sonny Montgomery [redacted]

He looked at me, and he didn't know what the hell I was doing or saying. He didn't know what I wanted. He said, "The committee will adjourn for five minutes." The staff director came over and said, "What's this?" I said, "I told him three or four months ago I wasn't paying attention to those requests. I'm not going to do it, and if he wants to argue the merits of every one of them, you better be sure he knows what he's talking about because I'm ready. We're not going to be wasting taxpayers' money when the veterans in that area have the service. I'm not going to let you get away with it, and I'm ready to fight right here." I did have a reputation when I was in the House as being a pretty good debater and also being sarcastic when I had to be.

Young: So the committee re adjourned.

Derwinski: I guess what I'm really trying to tell you is that the committees serve a good purpose for individual members, and they provide the VSOs an outlet to tell their stories. But not in terms of impact on the legislative process.

Riley: You mentioned that the VSO organizational headquarters were in places like Kansas City. Is that subsequently reflected in the congressional delegation from those areas?

Derwinski: A little bit. But you see, they all have the two biggies, Legion and VFW. They have Washington offices, fully staffed by a couple dozen people. The DAV has their offices here, but they have two offices, and they have their official office here. They have their mailing headquarters just outside Cincinnati, on the river. That's where they do their mass mailings from. That's their business office. In Washington they have their official office. If you're familiar with Washington, they're down on Main Street, near all the fish restaurants, on Main Street near the Potomac.

Riley: Do they do a good job of working the delegations?

Derwinski: What they do well, and they all do it, even the real tiny ones—Jewish War Veterans do it, Catholic War Veterans, AMVETS still do it—they have a couple of days in the spring when they come to Washington, starting late January, running into early March. Then by tradition, the Legion is the last of them. They come to town, they have speakers, they have a banquet. VFW has its contest for youngsters, their American democracy speech, that good program that they have. Then they put on their veteran caps, and they march on the Hill, and they call on the Congressmen from their state. Or if it's a big state, a populated state like Texas or California, Illinois, or New York, they'll have a little reception and invite the delegation.

Now, I might as well lapse into my attitude toward veteran organizations a little bit, I belong to enough of them. Early on, I was very active, voluntarily, as a young veteran just home from the war. I was very active in the local VFW and the Polish American Veterans. I was a dues-paying but perfunctory member of the Legion and AMVETS and Catholic War Veterans. Then I was a commander, after a few years, of my local Polish American post, and rather quickly I moved up the ladder in the organization. I had just become state vice commander when I got into my first political campaign, so I backed away from the veteran organizations, not to be accused of using my position in the veteran group for politics.

So I had a fair look at the operations. I was also active in my VFW post because unbeknownst to me, when I was still over in Japan, they formed a new post in the community in Chicago I lived in, and my dad signed me up before I even knew about it. I had to come home to find out he signed me up in this new veterans post. I knew most of the fellows. My dad then passed away unexpectedly, and I took over running his savings and loan. The boys from the VFW came in looking for a mortgage, so naturally they got it from me. I helped them with their fund-raising. I was their finance chairman and a couple of things. So I had a good smattering of local VFW experience.

There isn't anything finer than good old Joe who's a legion commander in Pokon Valley, born and raised in the community, the organizer of the annual Fourth of July parade, and all those things that veterans do locally. The veteran who's sitting in Washington or Indianapolis or Kansas City is making a living off of the organizations. The little ones like the Jewish and Catholic War Veterans, ex-POWs, those kind of fellows, their national effort is almost like the home-town effort, because they have a select reason for joining, either religious, ethnic, or the unique background of having been a POW or something like that. The Purple Heart Veterans are another good group. They're good people, all of them, from top to bottom.

But the big three, their basic goal is to hold their membership. If they don't hold their membership, their economic condition gets weaker. They've got an overhead, they've got a superstructure to support, and the advertising in their publications depends on the volume. The membership drops, the volume drops, the advertising revenue drops. As a result, they have all decided—they use the standard approach—the sky is falling. "Without us the VA will be wiped out, the VA will never keep its promises," etc, etc. It's a scare tactic.

When I took over the VA, the Legion claimed 3,200,000. They now admit to 2,800,000. The VFW lost about five percent of their membership, just like that, when they refused to endorse Bush in '92, and they never got it back. In the meantime, their numbers are still slipping. They used to claim 2,300,000, and now they'll acknowledge they're under two million.

Let me just give you the numbers again. You have the Legion at a little under three, the VFW a little under two, the DAV at one million. You add that all up, and you've got almost six million. But the chances are the DAV member belongs to both the Legion and VFW, and most Legionnaires and VFW belong to both like I do. So the first revolt against the World War I old guard was waged by young vets who said, "Hell, we'll have AMVETS." AMVETS was started precisely for veterans of World War II, and they got a lot of young men who were either very feisty or understood that if they waited to move up into the senior organization, they'd have to wait 10 or 15 years until the old boys let go.

Scott: Sounds exactly like Vietnam Veterans of America.

Young: I was in that generation. They were liberal, they were radical, and they appealed to us.

Derwinski: These boys went to AMVETS in part because they were rebelling against the other two, which they never joined, to this day. In the meantime, the AMVETS never got enough grassroots strength. They never built enough clubhouses, never had enough presence in the

community to really rival the big two. Then they found by limiting themselves to World War II veterans there were only so many whom they could get to join. Soon they saw that they had peaked and were starting to slide. Then they belatedly opened up their gates to the Korean War veterans who had figured out by that time, "What the hell." When they came in, if they came in, they were told by the original AMVETS, "Hey, wait a minute, I'm in charge here. Don't get any ideas about taking over." So the whole scenario was repeated.

In the meantime, the other factor is that all a typical local veteran wants out of the veterans world is to have a clubhouse to go to to escape from the wife once in a while, to march with the boys in the Fourth of July parade, to have a picnic for the kids, maybe sponsor the local Legion baseball team, which is one of the nicest things the Legion does.

So what you've got is two different worlds. And I would do anything I could, and tried to do as Secretary, to help that little guy. But I was not about to knuckle under to the cliques running each of those groups. As I look back, I think I'd do it differently. But I did it, and I paid the price.

I left about as gracefully as one could under awkward circumstances. In fact, so much so that very few people in the media understood it. The White House sent out a release saying the President has asked Secretary Derwinski to move to the campaign to handle the Eastern European ethnic vote, etc, etc. Well, I was doing that anyway in my spare time.

Masoud: Doesn't the Hatch Act prevent you from doing that?

Derwinski: The Hatch Act never applied. There was a split level. The Hatch Act basically applied to civil servants.

Scott: Got ya.

Young: Not to Presidential appointees.

Derwinski: It applied to political people more in tradition than fact. And I was a political appointee.

Masoud: Right. You often do hear the political appointees saying they were "Hatched," so they couldn't—

Derwinski: Well, that's like saying, "I gave at the office." That's the same psychology.

Masoud: Okay.

Derwinski: In fact, the federal employees didn't mind being Hatched, most of them. Because of the orchestrated attack of me—and I understood that the White House was hearing from a well-organized barrage of mail—I didn't even try to explain it to the President. The poor guy was besieged with campaign headaches. The man running that campaign was Fred Malek, who was an old crony and reputable businessman, but politically innocent.

So I realized that if they didn't want to push me out, I'd go, and that was as perfect an excuse as I had. But the actual reason I left was that the VFW went to see Jim Baker, who by that time had replaced Skinner. They said, "We can't endorse the President for re-election unless you get rid of Derwinski." I understood that, [redacted]

Masoud: There was no attempt to secure the endorsement, at least?

Derwinski: The VFW is the only veteran organization that endorses. That's why it was so important. So Baker's understanding of the deal was that if I go, Bush gets endorsed. So I went, but Bush didn't get endorsed.

Masoud: So was Baker double-crossed? Baker is no fool, but he seems to have been—

Derwinski: No, Baker's too smart. He was double-crossed. They lied to him. Then, of course, I did go to the campaign, by the way. I went over there for the last five weeks, campaigned, tried to rally my ethnic army, but we were sliding downhill. I gave Fred Malek a memo early in October after I was there a couple of weeks. What the campaign has to do is drop all your anti-Clinton charges, forget the draft-dodger issue, and just talk about the accomplishments of the Bush administration. You're incumbents. You have nothing to be ashamed of, and you should just run on your record.

I mentioned earlier how just after the Persian Gulf War the President's rating was so high, the White House staff were ridiculously naïve about it and cocky, and they didn't think they could lose.

Young: Was Sununu included?

Derwinski: No, not the top staff. Of course Sununu had to leave before the slump was visible. The slump started shortly after Skinner got there, and Skinner was overwhelmed. [redacted] Psychologically, poor Sam couldn't handle it.

Young: You knew him a bit. He was Secretary of Transportation. Did he have those problems running the organization, making decisions in transportation?

Derwinski: No, but Secretary of Transportation wasn't that difficult for him. He understood mass transit. He had a background in administration and mass transit. At least he understood transportation enough. And transportation, if you look at, the Secretary really doesn't have total authority in that field. You have the FAA, the CAB running airlines. You have Amtrak as independent, and you have all sorts of people who aren't under him.

Basically, the Secretary of Transportation's big program is really subsidizing urban mass transportation. That's the biggest thing they have, and that's a field he knew. Of course they have the Coast Guard, but the Coast Guard is not a difficult entity to administer. Even though

it's a military entity, 90 percent of their work was civilians, rescuing fishermen from a boat on Lake Winnebago in Wisconsin or something like that.

Young: You don't see the slide starting with the budget deal and the—

Derwinski: The beginning of the slide was Darman's budget and the President being perceived to have walked away from his "Read my lips no taxes." Yes, that was a factor. But in my judgment, what brought the defeat about was the inability of the campaign team to understand that when you run an incumbent you should run positive. It's the challenger who should be negative. The incumbent under normal circumstances could run and win with a positive list of accomplishments.

Now I had mentioned to you earlier, just in passing, that when I started as a very young Congressman, I was instinctively conservative. In fact, I was too conservative. Over time I got to realize that. But in my first term, I was really a knee-jerk conservative. I got my lesson, though. But it was self-imposed, and it wasn't damaging. I got in my first re-election campaign. I'd been elected in '58 by a 7,000-vote margin, 51 percent. So I should have been worried in the second campaign, which I was. I sat down and decided that I had to put together a campaign plan that stressed nothing but positives. Then I reviewed my own voting record, and I didn't have many positive things. Eventually I managed to find a dozen or so things I'd been for rather than against. I remember a line I had there: "Voted for Alaskan statehood. Voted for Hawaiian statehood." Because there wasn't much else I'd been for. "Voted for" —I think I played a little game with the language, and instead of saying "Voted against increase of the debt ceiling," I said, "Voted to reduce the national debt." I had to struggle to get enough positive things out. But I came home, and I ran positive.

When my opponent would lash out at me, I'd just turn the language around. No, I was for this, I was for that, I was for this. That's fundamental politics, whether you're running for alderman somewhere in some little town, or whether you're running for President of the United States. But the Bush campaign didn't do it.

Masoud: When you look, though, at who was running the Bush campaign—you had Baker running it.

Derwinski: Baker was in the White House. But he also had his finger in the campaign,

Masoud: Right, of course. I assume that's why he was brought into the White House, essentially to make sure that the campaign went well.

Young: Is that right?

Derwinski: Partially. He was also brought in to straighten out the White House. The White House was malfunctioning. [redacted]

Young: Why do you suppose he took the job?

Derwinski: Well, you don't say no to a President. And maybe, looking at it from a distance, he didn't anticipate the headaches. He saw it as a Cabinet officer, but you don't see that much of the White House as a Cabinet officer. You come to meetings and you leave, and you go back to your own domain.

Masoud: The reason I brought up Baker was your point about running on accomplishments. That's exactly what he did when running the Ford campaign. It's not very negative. It's about accomplishments. So it just seems confusing to me that with that history and that experience, that's not what happened.

Derwinski: But again, you have to understand what's happening. Baker didn't pay much attention to the rest of government when he was Secretary of State. He got wrapped up in his job, as Secretaries of State do. Remember Sununu left, if my recollection is right, very early in '92, maybe February, and Skinner came in. Then Baker came in. He took over after the Republican convention in Houston. [redacted]

Masoud: Called him the invisible man.

Derwinski: [redacted]

Masoud: So why is he invisible in the '92 campaign?

Derwinski: Because he was functioning under the title of White House staff director, whatever that title was—

Young: Chief of Staff.

Masoud: But if Barbara Bush was upset with him for not running the campaign, obviously—

Derwinski: No, no. We're talking about two different things. This is what I've read, political gossip. I don't know this from Barbara. She supposedly was upset that he did not bring order to the White House, and he did not assert himself in the campaign. He sort of semi-vegetated in those last two months. Now, meantime Fred Malek is an excellent businessman, West Point graduate. He was an early rising star in the Marriott Corporation, [redacted] He's since been successful in every business venture he's tried. He wanted to run the Bush campaign in '92. I think he wanted to get back—he was the man who got into trouble in the early Nixon years. He was a junior staffer at the White House, and Nixon ordered him to make a list of all the Jewish Americans in the administration. [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] But that campaign never caught fire. It had no vibrancy. Then it got negative. They got convinced—even President Bush was convinced that the public would never vote for a draft-dodger.

Young: So Bush himself went into a negative campaign.

Derwinski: Somebody convinced him that a man with Clinton's record, evading the draft, would not be electable. So they hammered away at it.

Young: Also, Lee Atwater was not around either. Wasn't Lee a pretty key figure in the earlier campaign?

Derwinski: Yes, but remember, Lee was the—who is this character the Democrats trot out?

Masoud: [James] Carville.

Derwinski: Yes. He was a Carville of the Republicans of his generation. He was a hatchet man. There's a reason why Lee Atwater was the negative factor that he was. A little bit of the history related to how the Republicans suddenly appeared in the south. There were a lot of conservatives down there who really should have been Republicans 10, 20, 30, 40 years earlier, but it wasn't sociable, or fashionable, or proper, to be a Republican in the old south 40 or 50 years ago. It started to become acceptable with Goldwater. I think Ike was a help in a small way. Then it gradually increased, and after Goldwater, it was like a tidal wave for a few years until the Democrats regrouped and held it back. I've noticed this with Tom DeLay in Texas—he has the same mentality, as do a number of the other southern Republicans. They were second-class citizens for so long, politically, were badly defeated each election for years, that they developed a real chip on their shoulder, and they have to go negative to claw their way into politics.

When you're down and out, that's your only approach. You can't get enough attention, you can't tell people what you've done, because you haven't been in position to do anything. You can't tell them what you're going to do, because you don't know enough about the government that you hope you inherit. And as a result of that, and because of that, if you feel you've been unfairly pushed around, you fight back. This was the Atwater, and that's the Carville, style.

Masoud: So you're saying that negative campaigning is a very southern style.

Derwinski: No, it's the campaigning of frustration.

Masoud: Well Carville's a Democrat, presumably.

Derwinski: Yes, but right now the south is more Republican than Democrat. The south elected Bush.

Young: Bush himself, when he ran in Congress, didn't run a negative campaign. He came from a very different background than Tom DeLay.

Derwinski: Well, that's right. The two Bushes are different in this sense: President Bush, whom I served under, did have the background of a New England aristocrat, which he inherited from his father. Although he picked up enough in Texas to be much more, maybe "human," than the typical New Englander aristocrat, his son is pure Texas. And there's a difference. You can see it in how they're administering government. Politics goes through cycles. In a practical way, though, if you're the incumbent, you've got to win on your record. That's what the Bush people didn't do in '92.

Riley: I've been reflecting on Bush's initial campaign for President. That campaign was also significantly negative against [Michael] Dukakis. And it worked.

Scott: Willie Horton and stuff.

Riley: That and the ACLU view and all that stuff. I wonder if the lesson didn't take at that point.

Derwinski: [redacted] The other thing we forget, in '92, was the [Ross] Perot vote. Remember Perot charged at one time that Bush was going to interfere with his daughter's wedding, some nonsense like that.

Young: Right.

Derwinski: If the Perot vote hadn't been there, more than half of that easily would have gone to Bush. But, you know, it's easy to criticize the losing campaign. I've never known the losing campaign that didn't have chinks in. But from the vantage point I had, I think the White House didn't seize the momentum when it had it.

Riley: Let me ask you about the Perot factor. Was Perot much of a factor in the ethnic communities that you were charged with working with?

Derwinski: No, no. In fact, the ethnic campaign in '92 was hard to generate. The ethnic campaign was more visible and logical in '88 because of Dukakis being a bona fide Greek American. Actually this helped the Republicans, because Dukakis was a nominal Orthodox when most of the other ethnics were Catholic. So Dukakis was not that formidable. Then in '88 we still had the Iron Curtain. The thing that united the Bulgarians, Poles, Lithuanians, Romanians, was anti-Communism. That was gone by '92.

Riley: I would think that carrying the record of the previous four years when the Iron Curtain was crumbling would have been a compelling argument for ethnic communities, Poles, Hungarians.

Derwinski: But by then they had forgotten. I have one other personal view of issues and politics. I think that the issues that win or lose campaigns are those that reach a key point in the month of September. I think by the time you get into October, people start making up their minds, and hell could freeze and it wouldn't change their vote by the time they get to election day. You see that in polling. The number of undecided start to drop dramatically as people get closer to the election. The issues that make or break the campaign are the performances at the conventions and the issues that they roll out after that. It's the first impact of issues that moves people one way or the other.

Now we're talking about that element of the electorate that isn't overly interested in politics or government, doesn't give a lot of thought to issues, but yet still becomes a key vote. Because if you are a bona fide liberal or conservative intellectual, there's nothing that's going to change your position. [redacted] The Republicans got a third of the Hispanic vote. I think they could increase it a little, and they ought to as time goes on. But, on the other hand, you go the other way and you talk to, say, Cuban Americans, they're 95 percent Republican, even though the Mexican-Americans are 70 percent Democrat. Those are certain things that are built in already.

The victory in the Gulf War was old news. [redacted]

Riley: It just wasn't an important—

Derwinski: It's the "What have you done for me lately?" psychology.

Riley: You mentioned the convention. Were you at all involved? Did you go to the convention?

Derwinski: I went to the convention in Houston, yes.

Riley: And what kind of reading did you get of that convention?

Derwinski: Well, a convention is a very artificial thing. A convention is like going to a football pep rally. Everybody there agrees with you. Everybody is rah rah rah, sis boom bah. You paint over the differences between the various factions of the party or the personalities, and you come away with a sense of euphoria because rah rah rah. Now, that happens in both parties. I was involved in the Dole campaign, running the ethnic thing for Bob Dole. We came back from that convention, everybody happy, blah, blah. By election time it had all unraveled. Kemp was supposedly going to be a powerful force. The Dole people thought that in his debate with Gore, he had sort of laid down and was taking care of Jack Kemp, not Bob Dole. There was a split, literally, between the Kemp part of the campaign team and the Dole part after that.

Masoud: If I could bring it back for a minute, though, to your role after you leave veterans affairs, and if you could try to help us understand what exactly is an ethnic campaign. What are you trying to do? Are you trying to articulate themes for specific ethnic groups?

Derwinski: You start with the understanding that we have a tremendously complex society, a tremendously diverse group of people. There are a certain number of people, depending on when they or their parents or their grandparents migrated from the old country. You don't have a Scottish or a Welsh campaign team, because your Scots and Welsh have been here for 200 or 300 years. They're Americans. But you do have, let's say, a Polish, or a Czech, or a Slovak or Bulgarian or others, Italian. You have an Italian because they're very visible. There are so many Italians. There's no issue with the Italians, by the way. They're a good ally, there are no communists running their government. The Italians and the Irish are very typical ethnic groups to work with, and they're the two largest.

But the common message to the Poles and the others, the old country is in the hands of the communists. Franklin Roosevelt did it, and remember, he's a Democrat, and you go on from there. Now, how did this wash? The old people who came over from the old country are the most receptive, because in part they still get their information from foreign language radio stations or newspapers. That's why you have to budget some money for that. Their children are still conscious, depending on their relation with their parents, but their grandchildren, much less so. If it wasn't for the uniqueness of ethnic names, you wouldn't know the difference.

Now we're going for the same thing with the Asians. The Asian group that's assimilating the quickest, and Americanizing the quickest, is the Koreans. The Chinese and Japanese less so, but the Koreans are becoming very Americanized. You talk to a Korean about we've got to defend the 38th parallel. Young Korean boy is not interested. When are we going to solve the urban sprawl in Nordon County? or something, see. With Hispanics, it's a little difficult because at home they still keep more of their own culture, and you have to communicate in that language.

The point is, that's a group of people, and they vary, who expect to be communicated with in their language through their structures, whether it be the churches or patriotic groups or fraternal insurance societies, whatever other factor they have. Now, quite frankly, 20 years from now we won't be doing that, because the old generation will have gone on, and their youngsters—

Scott: Are they Democrats?

Derwinski: But the point I'm making is that my grandchildren are as American as apple pie, and they're too young to have grandpa brainwash them. So they won't be reachable by this kind of thing.

Young: So the message is different for different ethnic groups perhaps. But is the point that they're being noticed by the campaign rather than what they're being promised?

Derwinski: That's right, and the other thing, it varies. Some groups are still terribly alert, like the Armenians. Every Armenian, even 90 years later, remembers the genocide perpetrated by the Turks. It's the first thing they want to talk about. And now you've got the Turks and free Armenia having a mini border dispute, so the Turks are not allowing trade from Armenia to flow across the border. So you have certain groups whose issues are still current. They're relatively small, in comparison, but I would say there's enough of a target for this campaign and maybe the next two to still have an ethnic operation.

Young: The Jewish vote may last beyond that.

Derwinski: Now the Jewish vote is unique, of course. You have to be careful these days, because anything you say could be politically incorrect. But I find it very interesting because I know there are two types of Jews in the United States. There is a religious Jew, and then there's the—I don't want to call it the ethnic Jew—but the Jew who knows he is Jewish even though he isn't that religious anymore. Therefore, when push comes to shove, he rallies to the cause.

Masoud: The cause being mainly Israel.

Derwinski: Israel and any slight against the Jewish-American community. The other factor, of course, is, for reasons I don't completely understand, the tendency of the Jews to be instinctively liberal. They're like the Irish. They're really locked into the old Democratic machine. In fact, they're more loyal to the Democrats than the Irish are these days.

Interesting shift with the Irish. The Republicans are getting almost 50 percent of the Irish vote. Grandpa and grandma wouldn't dare vote Republican, but their children and grandchildren do now.

Masoud: Which may just be a signal that they're just becoming more American.

Derwinski: Well, in the case of the Irish, remember, they had the advantage of being English-speaking when they migrated, so their adjustment was almost instantaneous. The Irish situation was that they came to the big cities where they fell under the leadership of the big city political bosses and the unions. So grandpa was a dockworker, but his grandson is now a brain surgeon, and he votes like a brain surgeon. He votes more Republican. [redacted]

Masoud: The Arabs were pretty important in this election, at least in Michigan, I think. Did you talk to the them in the '92 campaign?

Derwinski: The Arab vote is going through a major change. Twenty years ago when I did ethnic campaigning, most of the Arabs in the country at that time were Maronites from Lebanon. There are some Malachites. They were Christians. Christian Arabs predominated 20 years ago. Now Islamic Arabs dominate in our population. That will be a factor, and that will be a change. The interesting thing there will be again the adjustment of the youngsters, the next generation.

I live in a big condo. We've got a lot of Arab-Americans living there, and I watch them carefully. You shut your eyes and listen to some of the teenagers chat on the elevator, you wouldn't know what they were. They speak perfect English. [redacted] How they will change, I would imagine, would be much slower, if at all. But I think the youngsters will be a lot like the Koreans. Once they break away from mama and papa, if they do, they'll be diverse.

Masoud: My question was a historical one about '92. Because you have the Gulf War there, does that make it more difficult for you in, say, a key state like Michigan, to rally the Arab vote that would tend to be conservative because of their beliefs?

Derwinski: No. It didn't, for two reasons. First, because we were perceived, even in some number of Arab circles, to have whipped the bad boy, Saddam. He was a threat to too many other countries. We were not perceived as being anti-Arab. It was anti-Saddam Hussein. The other is, it was such a relatively short war, and it was a benign war in the sense that—a terrible word to use—but the bombing raids over Iraq were very carefully aimed at military or government targets. There was far less collateral damage to civilians than was the process in Serbia and Kosovo. And as a result of that, and especially the brevity, in my campaigning in '92 with Arabs, they were more interested in being recognized and being catered to, so to speak, than they were in the Gulf War.

Masoud: Did you lose any support among any Jewish quarters because of the loan guarantee thing with Israel?'

Derwinski: No. They say this last time the polls showed that 89 percent of the Jews voted for Gore. Now, given the intelligence of most Jews, the fact that they couldn't see that an America under a Republican—I'm giving you a Republican pitch now—would be a stronger America, therefore better equipped to defend Israel in time of need, that a Republican administration would be more effective in running the economy. Those things are out there for them to see. In some cases I can understand, tied in to the New York City machine or what's left of it, the Chicago machine or what's left of it. [redacted]

Young: Well, there was Joe Lieberman.

Derwinski: Yes, there was Joe. [redacted] It would be interesting to see. I think he'll make a run for the Presidency in 2004, and I think he'll get slapped down so hard in the primary he won't know what hit him.

It used to be that you could at least kid around, but now everything is sensitive, super-sensitive. My forte in early politics was always humor, and I used to tell jokes. One of my favorite jokes, I used to tell this, if I was at a Knights of Columbus meeting where most of the members were Irish. I would tell the story about the bartender in the Irish neighborhood in Boston who was working his trade one day and a customer came in whom he didn't recognize. The customer sat at the bar, ordered a drink, and the bartender, being a very talkative Irishman for openers, said to him, "Hi fellow, good to have you here. Good to see you. By the way, what's your religion?" The customer said, "I'm Jewish." With that the bartender leaped over the bar, grabbed the customer, belted him, and laid him out. The poor customer struggled to his feet, said, "What the hell did you hit me for?" "Your people crucified Christ." The Jewish customer said, "What are you upset about? That was 2000 years ago." The Irishman said, "Was it? I just heard about it last night." I can't tell that now.

Young: I grant you that.

[BREAK]

Derwinski: Why don't we cover your questions first, make sure that no one leave without getting their question answered, and whatever time is left I'll throw in some things.

Young: Okay. One of the things is talking about your departure, and how Bush treated this, and what he had to do with it. You were in a sense an old acquaintance of his, not one of his Texas brothers, or his Connecticut brothers, but an old acquaintance of his. It looks like you were dropped pretty fast from the Cabinet on a complaint that had nothing to do with your performance.

Derwinski: Well, maybe to explain it properly, I should go back to the first call I had from the President. He called and said he'd like to have me be Secretary of the VA. He did add, "It's a tough job." Well that's an understatement, again getting back to my opinions of the VSOs.

[redacted]

Then Togo West came in with excellent credentials. He was Secretary of the Army, veteran, met all their qualifications. In fact, Jessie Brown was a disabled veteran, and yet he couldn't produce enough in their eyes. They were criticizing him and wanted his scalp, and then the same thing with Togo West. Togo admittedly tried to run the VA the way a general would run an army, bark a command and expect everybody to jump. That didn't rest well with some of the bureaucrats. But the fact is that he did well for the VA, and yet they were calling for his scalp. I told Tony Principi, my deputy, and now Secretary, when I saw him in the inaugural period, I said, "Tony, enjoy this while it lasts. You're going to have a short honeymoon." And Tony, I have to describe it to you, is a classical Italian-American. He's very sensitive. He wants to please everyone, and he's hurt when he is misunderstood and verbally abused. He's going to have a rough time. I figure about two years from now they're going to be battering Tony.

The reason they'll do it, and I'll come to this when I finally lay things out, is that in practical terms, the power of the veterans lobby is on the wane. And they're going to be more desperate as time goes on. [redacted]

Because I've been in politics for so long, I've seen all sorts of people rise and fall. I was not surprised nor really particularly upset that it was happening to me. I knew the problems were out there. I knew that my relations with the VSOs were bad because of the way I reacted to them, and I didn't back down when they ripped into me. I ripped back. I also had a feeling the campaign was going down the tubes—this was the middle of July. That was, by the way, when the first effort was made. The early approach of the VSOs came about that time.

Young: The approach?

Derwinski: The approach to the White House to get rid of me.

Young: I see.

Derwinski: The VFW approach. As far as I know, it was kicked around at a level just below Sam Skinner. I don't know if Sam ever looked into it. But nothing happened. Then, it finally did come apart because they went into the White House and laid out their ultimatum: Derwinski stays, no endorsement. Derwinski goes, you get an endorsement. By that time other people were aware the campaign was slipping, so they were looking for cures. [redacted]

At the same Legion convention where they booed me, early on in that convention I marched in their parade down Michigan Avenue in Chicago. A couple of veterans from one of the suburban posts came up to me, and one of them said, "You know, we're supposed to be mad at you, but I don't remember why." Which told me more—but I knew anyway—that at the rank and file level they weren't concerned. It was the professional group that I had tangled with.

I had made up my mind very early when I saw the thing developing that I would not go to George Bush and say, "I've got to stay." My feeling was that he had more than enough problems with the White House after Sununu left. He had campaign concerns, I hoped, and he was on the campaign trail, and I think starting to tire personally. I just wasn't going to add to the burden.

Young: But still. I understand where you were coming from when this trouble arose, but the VFW, you said, probably in July went to the White House. They didn't go to Malek and the campaign people.

Derwinski: No, I wasn't at the campaign.

Young: But they didn't complain through Malek to the White House.

Derwinski: No because they were dealing with power.

Young: So the campaign staff as such was not involved in this.

Derwinski: No, no. And then, of course, if you were a normal working journalist, but you didn't bother with the VA, you were not aware of the problem I had had. You got a release saying Secretary Derwinski is leaving the VA to run the ethnic part of the campaign, you would say, "Well, gee whiz. About time." I'm one of the few Polish names visible in the Republican party, and I was a Congressman. When I was in Congress, for example, members used to come to me and ask me questions. What's the difference between a Czech and a Slovak? or Why don't Serbians and Croatians get along? I was Mr. Eastern Europe for their needs, and I'd coach them on what to say if they were going to such-and-such a church or patriotic group at home with some ethnic background. Everyone in the political circle knew that I was their Eastern European in-house expert.

Young: For the public face. I'm trying to get the inside story.

Derwinski: Except, I have to add, for most journalists. The switch was made literally without fanfare. There were a couple of editorials, one of them in the *Washington Post* saying, "It's too bad they let Mr. Derwinski go. He had done a good job at the VA." Nice, pleasant bye-bye, for which I received, as you can imagine, all sorts of smart remarks from my colleagues—"Always knew you were a closet lefty." "The *Post* likes you, you've got to be bad." Things like that. But what I think you want me to tell you is that I made no effort, direct or indirect, to get to George Bush. As I said, I didn't want to be a burden.

Now, I knew [Brent] Scowcroft must have been in the loop, at least on information, because the day after the switch I got a telephone call from Scowcroft saying, "Ed, I want you to know you did a great job, and thanks for going over the campaign for us. See you soon." I thought it was enough of an acknowledgment for me that he understood. And if he understood, I assumed the President did. Same thing. I had a couple of Cabinet officers call, my old friends from Congress—Manny Luhan and Lynn Martin, and a couple of others called and said, "Sorry you're leaving us, we understand."

Young: They understood the politics of it.

Derwinski: Yes, they understood.

Young: Did the President call you?

Derwinski: No, and I didn't want him to call. Again, it gets back to my feeling that the poor man at that time had enough of a load on his shoulders. I did see him at one campaign rally in Illinois, ironically, the Taste of Polonia, for lack of a better term, a weekend outdoor picnic featuring food by the restaurants that serve Polish cuisine. We got the President to come there, and Mrs. Bush gave me a kiss and said, "Thank you for everything." I didn't want any more.

Young: Well, who did the dirty work? Was it Sam Skinner?

Derwinski: [redacted]

Young: One was more God-like than the other.

Derwinski: [redacted]

Young: So the complaint about you, or the threat to withhold endorsement, came up while Sam Skinner was there in July, probably.

Derwinski: [redacted]

Young: But then when Jim Baker came on later—

Derwinski: [redacted]

[redacted].

Masoud: Which hasn't been successful, apparently.

Derwinski: [redacted]

Young: Okay, but still, the only threat apparently, about endorsement at least, came from VFW.

Derwinski: Yes.

Young: It sounds like anybody who is really politically wise about these things would have known that that didn't make a difference to keeping somebody in the Cabinet. It's a relatively minor threat. Were they panicked so that any little—

Derwinski: Yes, they were panicked, but more than that. The real root of the problem was the lack of understanding of what the veterans' world is like. The ability of the leadership to communicate with and lead their members along like the Pied Piper is nonexistent. Most veterans belong to one of their organizations because of their local ties, their friends in the local post. In small town America, they all have Legion posts or VFW posts. So if you're a veteran, that's your point of association.

And if you look at it in a broad sense, most of the men who are in the ranks of the veteran organizations, the overwhelming majority, were non-coms in their military days. For most veterans, the greatest thing they ever did in their life was serve in the armed forces, especially the World War II group. That was a unique group of men, sixteen and a half million of them.

I'll tell you, when I reported to the draft board, my only fear was that I might be rejected. That would have been a disgrace. You had to go, and you had to serve. Then when you came home—and you came home as soon as you could—as time went on, if you listened to the boys after a few beers at the bar, you'd wonder why we didn't win the war in 60 days. I don't say this critically. This is the psychology of it all.

Young: And you were welcomed back, unlike the Vietnam veterans.

Derwinski: Yes, that's right. You were welcomed back. And then your life, if you were an active veteran, using that term, your life revolved around your post. They had to drag you to

get you to be the county chairman, much less the state commander. When you got to that rank, you got to be what I call a professional veteran.

Young: So it sounds like anybody familiar with politics and the real world out there, outside the beltway, would understand that this was kind of an empty threat by a small group. It sounds like the people in the campaign didn't have much touch with the common folk outside.

Derwinski: But neither does the Congress nor most of Washington. I'll tell you why. The veterans lobby, if I can use that term, has the best of all worlds. They deserve, by virtue of having been in the service, a little extra respect, and there is no anti-veterans lobby. I mean, when the NRA [National Rifle Association] goes into battle on the gun issue, they have opponents, and when the pro-lifers and pro-choicers go at it, you've got two powerful forces. But there's no anti-veterans lobby, and there shouldn't be. [redacted] Factor that into the psychology of what happens. A Congressman, for example, comes home, Fourth of July parade, the veterans are there leading the parade. They shake his hand, say, "Thanks for helping us, Congressman." They don't know what he may or may not have done, but he says, "Boy, these are my boys." So you see, it's all a totally positive one-way street in terms of imagery and impact and so on.

The reason that I say this leadership in this oligarchy—or whatever term you want to use for them—doesn't deliver the troops, in most elections, the exit polls show that the veterans' vote is literally identical to the vote of the general public. There is no swing, good or bad, for a party from the veterans' vote. Put it this way: That same veteran, for example, if he's Catholic, might be a member of the Knights of Columbus, so he's getting pro-life literature. Or if he's in the local Audubon Society he's getting literature from environmentalists, and other forces are tugging at him. His veterans relationship is untouched by battle. It's not a major priority with him. And unless he happens to be a patient in a VA hospital, and is scared to death by the claim that if the wrong man is elected they'll close the hospital—that kind of talk occasionally surfaces—he has no reason to be upset. He's satisfied with his VA treatment. If he has a mortgage or life insurance, that paperwork flows normally. He has no complaint there about the VA.

Riley: Let me bounce one idea off you in relation to this. Is it possible that, because of the earlier furor that had been created by Dan Quayle—maybe this is so far removed in time that it wouldn't be a factor any more, but was there still a bit of hypersensitivity about these organizations which, as I recall, had raised some serious questions about Quayle's service?

Derwinski: No, because the Quayle issue rubbed two ways. Quayle was one of hundreds of thousands of men who went into the reserves or National Guard and were never called up. So, every man out there in the field who did what Quayle did sympathized with Quayle. And so many years after the boys had all come home, the military were now all volunteer. It was the same thing we found when they raised that Clinton was in London escaping the draft. Well, people looked at that, said, "terrible," but it didn't bother them. It was 20 years ago. But let me get back to this point I keep making about the veterans and why they shouldn't be taken seriously as such. They should be taken seriously for what they did, but not organizationally. Now, for example, I'm a Catholic War Veteran. The last time I looked at the census figures,

the Catholics were the largest single denomination in the United States—if my memory is correct, something like 50 million.

Scott: That's about 25 percent of the population.

Derwinski: Yet the Catholic War Veterans have a membership of about 50 or 60,000. They're not even a blip in the Catholic circle. The same thing with the Jewish American Veterans. Five percent of the population is Jewish, so that's about 12 or 13 million. The Jewish War Veterans have about 50,000 members. They're a nice bunch of old guys from World War II. They don't reflect their people. The professional Polish-American leaders claim there are 10 million people in the country of Polish ancestry. The Polish-American Veterans maybe have 40,000 members. [redacted]

Scott: Maybe one reason that Mr. Young is pursuing the questioning like that is, what was the alternative? If the VFW didn't endorse President Bush, they weren't going to endorse Bill Clinton, were they?

Derwinski: They might have been tempted to. If Clinton could have gotten to them, or if Herschel Goldberg could have given them some pledge in gold ink saying, "You'll get an extra two billion the moment we're elected," they would have figured out a way to endorse—

Masoud: But I think also the other question that Professor Young is trying to get at is, if the endorsement isn't even that important, then why does the administration take it so seriously?

Derwinski: Because they didn't know the difference.

Masoud: But you're the guy to tell them the difference.

Derwinski: They weren't listening to me.

Young: An alternative would have been, theoretically, for somebody in response to remind the VFW delegation, or maybe the press, what you had done for veterans when you came in. Sort of sticking by you.

Derwinski: Nobody wanted to counterattack.

Young: Sounds like intimidation.

Derwinski: It was a form of intimidation. But I don't blame the VFW for trying to play their role. But the fact is, they could do this because of the total innocence of the people in politics as to what the veterans' lobby represents or doesn't represent. It does not represent the kind of controlled vote that you get with the Catholic Cardinal making some pronouncement, or Jerry Falwell. It doesn't bring with it any masses, because, as I say, all the voting records show that the veterans' vote is not much different from the general public.

Let me go back. I might as well weave in the point I was going to make to you anyway, about the veteran organizations. It was just that point. Because they have no contrary group, they appear invincible. But they shouldn't be. Nobody bothers to study the structure of the group. Nobody realizes their numbers are artificial. I feel sorry for the national commander. They strut around for a year, yet the whole operation is run by the career bureaucracy. The national commander comes and goes, and he's had his year of exhaustive travel. The posts are now merging because they don't have enough viable posts, so you have Post 2 in Paducah, Kentucky, merging with Post 7. Now instead of two, you have just one.

The other thing is, the Vietnam veterans have not in any real numbers joined the major organizations. The DAV got a little better percentage, because you had a very special reason for joining the DAV, you were disabled because of the war. But the American Legion and the VFW have fallen short of attracting the Vietnam-era veteran. The reason for that is, there's a generation gap. Is that veteran going to join the post where his father and grandfather are sitting at the bar sipping their beer? They'd rather be off with a different set of cronies. That's one of the reasons. The other reason is, we know they didn't come home to a big parade and hugs. They came home individually as they were discharged, and they came home to a national debate that was fierce. But now, it's even the same. The enlisted man from '76, '77 on, enlists primarily—unless he or she is going to make a career of the military—to get the benefits of veterans service, which means their education and things of that nature. What do they have in common with the man who fought in World War II? At the same time, they don't feel the urge to organize another outfit of their own.

Let me just conclude on this. Times have been changing in such a way that anything the veterans wanted to achieve—the Legion was organized, for example, in 1919—has more than been achieved. We have overbuilt the VA. Our benefits are excellent. Now, if the veterans have complaints, it's because of the cumbersome nature of the VA bureaucracy. But that's bureaucracy, that's the curse of the world. Homebuilders are frustrated with the bureaucracy at HUD [Housing and Urban Development]. Education people are upset with the bureaucracy at the Department of Education, so on.

No country in the world has done anywhere near what we do for veterans. And of course they haven't had to because their numbers are not like ours. Despite the defects of administration, the United States has more than kept whatever commitment, legal or theoretical, there is to veterans. And the veteran organizations and their national people are running out of things to scream about.

Young: Did the VFW endorse George Bush the first time around?

Derwinski: I don't believe they did, because Michael Dukakis, as I recall, was a veteran.

Young: Of course, Bush was too.

Derwinski: Well, George Bush was shot down as a pilot.

Young: Yes.

Derwinski: And their endorsement system, by the way came rather late. They didn't start endorsing till the mid '70s. I was a Congressman at the time, and I looked at that as a recognition that they were trying to make sure you knew they were there because they were being lost in the great shuffle of Washington.

Now, the other thing too, remember, in this complex world we were in, what were the issues this year? There were no veteran issues. There were no veteran issues in '92. The issue in '92 really was Bush being haunted by the "read my lips, no new taxes," and then Bush's visible—I don't want to say "disinterest," that's too strong a word—visible innocence about some of the domestic issues. He was all wrapped up in putting the diplomatic pieces of the Gulf War together. The Iron Curtain had collapsed, and of course he was loving every minute of that. But in the meantime, between Darman, Sununu's departure—I don't think Sununu's antics that led to his departure were politically damaging, but Washington was sensitive, and John suffered accordingly. [redacted]

Young: Well, some people have reflected on Bush as a person who expected loyalty up and gave loyalty down.

Derwinski: He's a very loyal man. He's really a wonderful man. For example, Lynn Martin came in the Cabinet because they had asked her to run for the U.S. Senate in 1990. She ran against Paul Simon, and lost. So Bush remembered that, and the first Cabinet opening, Lynn was placed in the Cabinet. He showed that kind of loyalty. I'm trying to think of who else we had in there. They asked Thornburgh to go back home and run for the Senate, and it didn't work. But he didn't want to come back. Dick was at the point where he had done about everything you could do—Governor, Cabinet officer. They didn't have to do anything for Dick.

Young: Were there any other Cabinet members you knew of who became disenchanted, some of their constituents?

Derwinski: Well, a couple. For example, Admiral [James] Watkins of Energy. He was always caught between the power interests and the environmentalists. The difficulties come with the job. Same thing with Manny Lujan. He had problems with environmentalists, that's natural for the Interior Secretary. Then of course, you've always got headaches with the military, the internal headaches that [Dick] Cheney had. [redacted]

Scott: [Lauro] Cavazos.

Young: Cavazos yes. That was not a constituency uprising.

Derwinski: That was an interesting case. Remember, he was brought into the Cabinet by Reagan, and he was retained by Bush. Thornburgh and Cavazos were retained. His problem was that he either had poor staff handling or he wasn't instructed properly. My recollection is that the big issue was that he was misusing travel funds to be sure his wife accompanied him everywhere he went. [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

Young: Did you hear about that from the White House?

Derwinski: [redacted]

Young: Bush said during the campaign that if re-elected, there would be some important changes. Who was on the list?

Derwinski: I would expect all of us were. He firmly believed that four years was enough for any Cabinet officer. I would argue that. I would say in a few cases that if a Cabinet officer really had gotten control of his assignment and was cleaning it up well, you could have made a good case for keeping him. [Lamar] Alexander could have stayed, and Lynn Martin. Mrs.

[Elizabeth] Dole, for example. Mrs. Dole is a tough yardstick to measure by, pretty good. The President also believed very firmly that political ambassadors should be rotated out and fresh ones put in.

Young: It was taken, whether rightly or wrongly, to indicate that clearly there would be some changes in White House staff.

Derwinski: I think there would have been.

Young: And that Darman would not be around.

Derwinski: Yes, I think Darman would go. I think maybe [Michael] Boskin was planning to go back to UCLA anyway.

Scott: Stanford, I think.

Derwinski: [redacted]

Young: Darman is a case of somebody who is very much in the public eye—or at least in the party eye—as the villain of the "Read my lips," and thus would look like much more of a liability than you were.

Derwinski: Yes, but trying to look at it again from a practical standpoint. If they had, say, dumped Darman in January of '92, it would have been an admission that their tax and monetary policy and strategy with Congress was wrong. So you keep a stiff upper lip, and you keep Darman.

Young: You can keep him a while, but when you're really into the campaign, that's all—

Derwinski: I understand. But Bush at least found his prognostications on the economy and so forth comforting. Darman would come into our Cabinet meeting every month and predict that [redacted]

Riley: Does that explain why he managed to weather all the criticism? You yourself admitted that you had helped to manage a smooth transition from one post to another such that only very, very attentive people would have recognized that there was anything going on behind the scenes. Was it impossible that the same kind of thing couldn't have worked for Darman?

Derwinski: Well, to be blunt about it, I would imagine that the difficulty would have been Darman's ego. I don't think it would have permitted him to find a graceful retreat. Now, everything I do I chalk up to my years of experience. You know, when you've been in politics 45 years, you've seen everything. My rule always when push comes to shove is we're there for

the President and the party. I'm a party loyalist. I'm a loyalist to the President. I had no personal agenda or crusade.

[redacted]

[redacted]

Riley: The image that Kemp likes to promote of himself is someone who is fluent in ethnic politics also. Evaluate that.

Derwinski: His knowledge, or his understanding, of how you orchestrate that is somewhat superficial. Jack really wanted to be President, and it slipped away early in '88. His campaign didn't go well. [redacted]

Now, in '96, just in passing, I did my ethnic thing again for the Dole campaign, quietly, and I hope with some degree of effectiveness, although the vote didn't show it. By the end of the campaign, the Dole and Kemp people were not on speaking terms. The Dole loyalists were convinced that Jack was on that ticket to set the stage to run in 2000. When it was obvious by early October that Dole wasn't going to win, Jack accelerated his personal performances and style. Then in his debate with Gore, the Dole people were convinced that Jack was there to sell Jack Kemp to the national audience, not to sell Bob Dole.

Young: As a seasoned politician, not just as a Cabinet member, looking on the Bush '92 campaign, when did you get worried, or when did you perceive that it wasn't going to go

anywhere? At what point? Even before the campaign began? Let me just throw in that some people thought the campaign was lost a year before.

Derwinski: I started to worry after the New Hampshire primary when [Patrick] Buchanan got 35 percent of the vote. My reading of that was that the type of voter that Buchanan appealed to would be a hard-nosed loser and would not vote for Bush in the fall. Buchanan drew that kind of a stubborn or overly committed issue-minded person. In this context, remember Perot. Perot started, you remember, dropped away, and then came charging back. Again, he drew more the frustrated independent, whereas Buchanan had drawn the hard-nosed far right. But even then, not to read too much into your question, you notice how badly he did in 2000. You have only a short cycle when you're a rebel like that to be credible. [redacted]

Young: How would you assess the defection from the [Newt] Gingrich wing—if you could call it that—of the Republican party after the budget deal? Did that have a lasting effect? Did it poison relations? Did it poison Bush's standing with his own party?

Derwinski: First, I should admit to you that I have strong opinions about Mr. Gingrich. I think that Newt turned out to be a sort of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Put it this way: Newt was good in opposition. He was ineffective when he had the majority. He functioned much better—as some of the boys say, he was a good guerilla fighter. But when we got control in '94 Bush should have had a solid, sober, responsible leader, not a bomb-thrower like Newt.

To use the term you just used, I don't believe there is a "Gingrich wing" of the party. That's the same group that Buchanan tried to appeal to, that years earlier Phil Crane tried to appeal to, and so on. There's that hard-core group of conservatives out there. They emerged in the Goldwater campaign. It's a political fact of life that if you go too far right you're not electable, just as if you go too far left you're not electable. The old adage to win the primaries a Democrat has to move to the left and a Republican to the right; fall campaign you come towards the center. That's absolutely true. Bush managed to position himself just about where he should, clearly right of center, but not extreme.

Young: Whether it's called the Gingrich wing or the conservative wing, there was a lot of bad-mouthing of George Bush within the Republican Party by the conservatives in Congress.

Derwinski: But having served with those people, I know that nobody is satisfied.

Young: You don't think that hurt him particularly?

Derwinski: No, not particularly. It comes with the turf. There are characters in Congress. We have one man, forever, Bob Dornan from California. We call him B-1 Bob.

Masoud: He's out now, right?

Derwinski: He thought he was still dive-bombing the enemy. B-1 Bob was an uncontrollable character. He came from one of those Orange County districts that are supposedly classically

far right, and he was well-intended. [redacted]

[redacted]

Young: Did he do it?

[redacted]

Young: One more thing on the campaign. Very little was said in the campaign and very little was shown about the Gulf War. There was a lot of very good footage capitalizing on the success of the campaign, the successful conclusion of the war, but very little of that was ever shown in the campaign. It's a puzzle why not, because to recall that moment might have been a positive thing.

Derwinski: My feeling is that the people at the top of the campaign, whoever the President was listening to in the White House, assumed that the public goodwill from the way the war was handled was still with them with all its force. They didn't realize, like all other things, it faded away with time. Then, they really developed this fixation that the key issue in the campaign was Clinton's avoidance of the draft. That became an obsession up and down the campaign ranks.

I think that Fred Malek should have been the party finance chairman, not the campaign manager. Then you had the exchanges at the White House, all those other factors, and it was an issue that would drop. I agree. I wish the last couple of weeks of the campaign and all their advertising footage had shown the troops rolling across the desert, the President greeting them when they came home, all that kind of thing. But they thought they had that sort of issue locked up.

Young: Even though the polls were not telling them that?

Derwinski: No. I think their pollsters were off on the wrong tangents.

Masoud: Who put Malek in charge?

Derwinski: Well, the President had to sign off, but I'm assuming early on that he came up through the ranks of the national committee, so to speak. They were looking for someone who was a known Republican, a good man, which he is, a capable man, which he is. He looked very good because he'd been on the Washington scene since the Nixon days. So he had all the credentials you would want: experience, Washington knowledge, successful career, West Point graduate, all sorts of good and nothing negative in Fred Malek's résumé. But his strength would have been, from his former Marriott post, in the fund-raising arena. He would have done a much better job there.

Riley: Bob Teeter was co-running the campaign.

Derwinski: Yes.

Riley: There was somebody else? Were there three?

Masoud: [Robert] Mosbacher.

Derwinski: Mosbacher was the finance. This is just a personal thing I'll throw in. I thought Mrs. Derwinski might do it yesterday, but she didn't. Bob Mosbacher is back in Houston. He's one of Bush's old cronies, [redacted]

Riley: I don't know how to follow that. Were you pretty much in control of your own schedule once you went over to the campaign or did you report to somebody?

Derwinski: I was in complete control. I was sort of like the 500-pound gorilla that was suddenly dumped into the place. They didn't know what to do with me. They knew why I had to come. The only debate I had with them was to try to get more money for the ethnic advertising I thought I needed. But I set my own schedule, and I hit the big cities of the Northeast and Midwest where the ethnics were. It was ground I'd covered on and off since 1960. I went to ethnic conventions and spent a little time in Detroit trying to pull together the forces there. [redacted]

Riley: By that time, given either what you had picked up before you got on the campaign trail or after you got out, did you sense that this was a lost cause or were you optimistic?

Derwinski: No, I was never optimistic. I was scared after Buchanan's show in New Hampshire. I felt, after attending the convention in Houston, that we didn't get the lift out of it that we should have. And by early September, notwithstanding my own issues at the VA, I was convinced that we were in trouble. In fact, every opportunity I had I would run into Fred. I would say, "Fred, damn it, be positive." I realized much later I was talking to the wall. But between the pollsters and the PR people, they were going their course. By early October, I realized that everything was literally set. The advertising and everything was rolling, and they had decided on their line of attack. So I just did my thing.

Tony Principi was Acting Secretary after I left. We had talked. Should I go down to headquarters election night? I said sure. So I met him. We had a sandwich about 6:30 and went into the election headquarters. I said, "Let's wait here a few minutes until the first results come in." They did, and I said Tony, "It's over. Unless you want to stand there and cry, why don't we just go out?" So we left and went to Duke Zieberts and commiserated.

[redacted]
came to Wisconsin on a swing, Tommy Thompson was Governor way back then, and he said, "Mr. President, we're in trouble." And the President said, "No we're not. When the American public goes into the voting booth and that curtain closes behind them, they're not going to vote for a man who dodged the draft." The President was absolutely convinced of that. Now, who convinced him I don't know.

I have a feeling Barbara knew better. When I saw her a couple of times on the campaign trail, Barbara was being a good soldier, but you could see she wasn't relishing each meeting. It was hard, hard work. That's the feeling you have when you're trying to go uphill when you should be at the top of the mountain.

Riley: You did not campaign with the President at all? Did your paths cross or did you—

Derwinski: I crossed paths with him once, in Chicago, at this ethnic event. No, I spent my time with different ethnic groups. Then there was a little diplomacy involved. For example, if I was having a meeting, I was too careful. I would never meet with a Serbian group and have a Croatian group there. People would come in and say, "Oh, there's this Russian community, leave them alone." My message is, "We beat the Soviets. We tore down the Iron Curtain. We tore down the Berlin Wall. We did all of this, rah, rah, vote for Bush again."

Riley: You had suggested yesterday that this message wasn't really resonating terribly well, that people had basically already gotten past that?

Derwinski: That's true of politics in general. The people have a short attention span, very short, and the media doesn't help it because, look, one month ago big headlines were "Albanians are…", "Guerillas invade Macedonia." You don't find anything in the paper today. [Muammar] Gaddafi surfaces a few days ago for a few days, he disappears. The media is flitting from point to point. There's one other thing. Remember, you've got two kinds of people: You've got the super activists who live with their cause 365 days a year. Whether it's the far left or the far right, they really behave the same. But the great mass of people don't, [redacted]

I would have a national primary day in the middle of September, and six weeks later have the general election. I'd do what the British do: Set a kick-off day for the campaign another six weeks before the primary, and condense the whole campaign activity into three months. You have far less chance of boring the public. By mid summer, everybody who reads the papers has read everything there is to know about a campaign. It's incredibly dull after a while, and why? Because our campaigns are marathon races. They're not fast dashes for the tape. I think you'd have a higher percentage of voters turning out if you gave them a much shorter time span to focus.

Riley: You mentioned a couple of times that there was a concentration on Clinton as a draft-dodger in some high places within the campaign. Is it your general sense that the campaign underestimated Clinton himself and the Clinton campaign effort?

Derwinski: They underestimated Clinton because they didn't read him accurately. All of his personal failings were known. Remember, the Gennifer Flowers case was already in the media. They didn't think he could shrug that off as easily as he did. Clinton is one of those people who, among politicians, the more you know them, the less regard you have for them. So Clinton was not highly regarded by his fellow Governors. They considered him an opportunist and out of step with the sort of seriousness that a lot of them brought to their positions.

Then, you remember, all the heavies in the Democratic Party got out of the way. Clinton wasn't handed the nomination, but if he'd been up against Jay Rockefeller or Governor Cuomo, or one or two others, he probably wouldn't have been nominated. All of those factor in. For example, Jay Rockefeller's decision not to run was basically made after the polls showed George Bush with an 85 percent public approval shortly after the Gulf War. I know Jay Rockefeller well. He's on the VA subcommittee, and he's a thoughtful gentleman. But he

looked at it and decided that Bush was unbeatable. Cuomo decided Bush was unbeatable. A couple of other Senators were thinking of running but decided Bush was unbeatable.

So along comes the second string, Clinton. He was underestimated, he was disregarded for a while. The damage from the story about Gennifer Flowers to the draft, all of that was considered damaging, and yet he sailed right on. In the meantime, with Bush, little things went wrong.

Riley: Was he a natural campaigner? Did he like doing this?

Derwinski: Seemed to like it. I remember when he started in 1979, when he challenged Reagan. I had him out in my district for two days, four or five events. He was a good campaigner, good hand-shaker. Made a good enthusiastic speech, boned up on issues. I would say he was a much better than average campaigner. Better speaker than his sons. And Barbara was always an asset. He was a good campaigner, and they were a good campaign team. But it was natural. He loved foreign affairs. Remember he had his stint in China, he was at the CIA, he was at the UN. He loved that world scene.

Scott: Could we loop back to a couple of issues of the VA for a moment? After the Gulf War, when the first Gulf war illness claims came in, was there some sense within the VA of, say, handling these differently? I mean, having gone through the Agent Orange experience and then culminating in the decision that you made to extend the presumption of service connection after a 12-year period of wrangling? Was there a sense within the VA of "Let's look back at how we mishandled the Agent Orange thing and handle this case differently"?

Derwinski: Matter of fact, we did. Part of the reason was—I told you about this episode where I asked for the number of our beds, and 22,000 beds disappeared overnight in our count. So I kept hammering away at the fact that we were going to be dealing as subordinates to the Department of Defense in the area of casualties, we better be ready, and we better be good at it. "You develop the necessary liaison with DOD medicine." It so happened that Dr. Holsinger, who was the head of veterans health services, was an active reservist. He was a colonel in the army medical reserves, so he had good contacts. So our medical people and the military medical people were communicating well.

Then when the story started to break about possible exposure to gas or something, we talked to the White House and everybody agreed. First we set up four VA hospitals as regional centers, in about June of '92. We sent word out to the veteran organizations and the press, that any veteran who felt that he or she had a Gulf War-related malady should report to or contact one of these hospitals. I think one was the Dallas Medical Center. We had four—one on the east coast, mid-west, one in Texas, and, I think, our hospital adjacent to UCLA—and we were prepared to expand that further.

We had a system where if a veteran came into any VA hospital and said, "I've got this problem since I came home from the Gulf," those records were immediately sent. We started record keeping for purposes of getting statistics and data and figuring out the pattern in about June of '92. In the meantime, of course, the active military who stayed in had to go through their

own—We were dealing primarily with the national guardsmen and the reservist units who were called up and then dispatched back home as soon as practical. They came back to their normal civilian assignments.

Scott: Now, what did these hospitals report back to you?

Derwinski: There wasn't enough time. They were just starting to gather the information. Years later, to this day, they continue to share information and research with military medicine. There's better coordination than there ever was before.

Scott: It seems, though, that there are parallel problems here on this issue of toxic torts, as they're sometimes called. The slippery issue of service connection. It's easy to establish service connection when someone's legs are blown off, but what about service connection with these toxic torts kinds of things?

Derwinski: Well, I think when decisions have to be made, Tony Principi will err on the side of the veteran and will make the necessary service connection. That's one pattern I can honestly say I left as a good legacy at the VA: the decision I made after that court trial to permit any Secretary coming in now to say, "I presume"—using the presumption approach—"I will grant eligibility or service connected disability payment for this category of veteran." I think that's absolutely fair.

Scott: Yesterday when you were talking about the issue of what it is that our nation owes its veterans, you identified treatment and compensation for combat-related wounds, general medical care for indigent veterans, and then there was this other category, non service-connected stuff. What might be in there?

Derwinski: Right. Remember I had mentioned to you that when I took a first quick tour of the VA, I felt that where we ought to go—and we were not prepared to at that time—was in the area of geriatric medicine. And again, that's where history played a role. Immediately after World War II, there was this tremendous tie-in between medical schools and their universities and the VA. And wherever possible, they wound up adjacent to each other and so forth. That was good because they got the whole range of possible war injuries and treatment, and it was a great teaching route. Then about the time they should have whipped the problems, the Korean War came on, so they had a new batch. Then, of course, the Vietnam veteran started to flow through VA hospitals. I remember visiting Hines and talking to the surgeons there who were doing operations on boys who had been air-lifted out and then flown direct to Hines. That has been a great mutual benefit to the medical educational system of the country and to the VA.

But medicine has changed. Seventy-five percent or more of the VA patients are now outpatients. They're not in those hospitals. As a result, we're going to have to change those relations with the medical schools. We can't be the training ground as much as the utilization diminishes, except in the one area where we know we're going to have continued need, and that's caring for the senior veteran, geriatric care. I kept telling our doctors, why don't we become the preeminent experts in the country in geriatric medicine? At the time I took over at

the VA, there were still about 9.5 million World War II veterans living. Today there are less than five million.

Scott: When you talk about the VA being a leader in geriatric care, in your envisioning this, would it be providing nonservice connected care to old veterans?

Derwinski: I think so, when needed. Then again come the practical facts of life. Nine out of ten veterans won't use the VA anyway, so it's not like we were ever going to be swamped. It's the fact that most Americans bought long-term healthcare, or they're covered by their different health programs from work. In fact, last year Congress passed a bill to set up a long-term healthcare availability to federal civil servants. It will take another year or two to promulgate the rules, and they haven't decided whether they're going to have medical insurance companies bid in a "winner take all" kind of thing or whether they'll do it with federal health insurance. If you're a federal employee, you have an open season every year when you have a choice of about a dozen different insurance programs, and that may be what they'll do. So, if you have that coverage, for example, you won't be using the VA. But, certainly, to focus on it medically would be perfect because you would have the records of that patient from wartime on, over years and years, and we would have the expertise. You wouldn't be colliding with any other specialty in medicine.

Scott: Interesting. This question would be about the philosophy that goes with your statement that as a Republican, you believe that less government is better. Do we need a VA system? I mean, could a veteran be issued a card that he or she could take to any healthcare provider, to an HMO, to a PPO [Preferred Provider Organization]? In other words, is there an equivalent for veterans medicine to, say, the voucher system in education, something like that?

Derwinski: I think so. But then again you have to start looking at the reality. You've got a system with 170 something hospitals—

Scott: It's already bricks and mortar.

Derwinski: And how do you dismantle that? I think 20 years from now, when the federal government and the VA specifically have learned to get the maximum service out of technology and computerization, that's possible. In fact, one of the things we've talked about is to give the veteran a card, every veteran, which would show every program he's in. He has a mortgage, or he has a life insurance policy, and what his medical record is. So he's easily identifiable. You could quickly transfer that, then, to a voucher or a system where that card would be accepted at a civilian hospital. I've got a Blue Cross/Blue Shield card, as a retired federal employee, that's accepted in everywhere. This is excellent coverage. It's the one I selected from that list of 12 or 14 or so that they have. Something like this could be available to all veterans.

For example, I think the VA ought to expand the number of hospices we have. I think we should have more, and we should stay in the area of drug and alcohol addiction.

Scott: How about nursing homes?

Derwinski: Nursing home care, well that would be the senior citizen end of it. That would become automatic. Nursing home care, hospice service. And then, for the few veterans who come in and require surgery and so forth, they could use this other concept I mentioned that we called the quality of service care concept where you concentrate your efficiencies.

In fact, the Washington, D.C., hospital is one of the better units to treat AIDS. They have Alzheimer's units. They have the spinal cord injury units, which are very special. Three or four of the hospitals have the special facilities and programs to train blind people in everything from how to use their dog and how to move around with the cane to how they could actually live alone in an apartment and know where the stove is, know where the refrigerator is, know how they can reach the bedroom, things like that. Very, very fine program, and it's well used. So they have a lot of these specialties that might be unique sometimes to veterans' use. Then, naturally, the psychiatric view. That field is special.

Scott: For instance, in Oklahoma City, the VA has the capability of doing heart surgery and stents and angioplasties, and things of that sort. Once that's in place, that's the kind of thing that's likely to be service connected for very many veterans. Once the program like that is in place, is it more cost efficient to go ahead and extend the same service on a non service-connected basis but not a high priority basis?

Derwinski: Very doable. Because again, you're dealing with a declining number of veterans, and even when your veterans are a declining number—we have 24 million today, in 10 or 15 years they'll be down to 16 million—that's a lot of people. Except, for that 16 million, if you have the same percentage coming in to see you as you do now, you'll have a million patients a year in the entire system. You could absorb a lot of those individual needs. We keep referring to the VSOs and the Congress. [redacted] I haven't met a single one who was objective enough—that you have to close the medical hospital in his state or district. Nope, you can't.

[redacted]

[redacted]

Young: We're getting into the home stretch now, and you wanted to say something more about congressional involvement.

Derwinski: The Congressman is a parochial figure. If you ever meet a Congressman, even the world's most renowned United States Senator, if he tells you he's a world statesman, he is wrong. The fact is, by the very nature of politics, you relate to your electorate. Senators have a little easier time because they're statewide, and they only run every six years. But the average Congressman relates to his district, and if there's a VA hospital there, by God, hell could freeze and he won't let it be closed. And that's natural. So knowing that he's naturally going to be an obstacle, the only solution is not to allow interference from the Congress.

Young: How are you going to keep them—

Derwinski: Well, that's the big challenge of human nature. You've got to sit down someday with a strong President, and even then somebody in the White House will be whispering, "Don't upset the VA lobby. Don't upset the veterans." So what do you do in New York? You've got nine hospitals in the state of New York, and all the figures show how they're steadily declining. Let me just take this as an example. In New York, the veteran population is 1,300,000, and they'll be down to half of that by 2020. Probably the only hospital that is fully used is the Manhattan Hospital because you've got a lot of drug and alcohol addicts there and so forth. But the other eight hospitals are under-utilized.

To get back to what I suffered from, the attack when I wanted to open up the doors. You could open up the doors of the VA to nonveterans in a practical way to serve both efficient delivery of medicine and to keep the VA practitioners sharp. I think I mentioned to you this hospital in Marlin, Texas, where the dentist acknowledged to me that he averaged one patient a day. Well, how do you keep your skills sharp with that minimum utilization? What about the surgeon there? Would I want the surgeon who does one appendectomy a month to operate on me? That's what you have.

Young: Are you saying at some point in time the VA is going to die a natural death?

Derwinski: No. I don't think it will die a natural death because one of the enticements to enlistment in the military is the post-military service, which comes from the VA. So you'll always have the mortgage program, you'll always have the educational benefits, you'll have the life insurance coverage. All those things will be there. And you'll have the medical system. Now, I think we'll see the day when VA and military medicine will amalgamate, and I could see that being mutually beneficial. The earlier it's done, the better. But that will come logically.

Young: How would the politics of that work? Can you foresee what the VSOs would have to say about—

Derwinski: We've had enough experiments. For example, there's a wing of the army hospital in the Philippines that's a VA wing, and we negotiated that when I was Secretary. They didn't want a VA hospital. The army had a wing that was empty.

Young: But that was in nobody's constituency.

Derwinski: Yes, Senator [Daniel] Inouye, Senator [Masayuki "Spark"] Matsunaga—that'd been fine with them. In fact, the VA wing of that hospital—it's a big one in Hawaii—I think it's a pink or bright-colored hospital on the side of the hill—they have a wing there now that's called the Sparky Matsunago VA Center.

Young: Maybe you can do that in Salem.

Derwinski: Salem has a lot of room.

Young: Put somebody's name on it.

Derwinski: Yes, but—

Masoud: Is your name on anything?

Derwinski: My name is on a few plaques of buildings I dedicated in my four years. I don't think they've erased it yet. They weren't that tough.

Young: So you think that necessity will drive some serious thought to amalgamating medical and veterans medicine?

Derwinski: Yes, because if you look at the figures, the numbers just stare at you. For example, the great state of Virginia, as of a year ago, had 750,000 veterans. Remember Virginia is heavily impacted with military establishments, yet they expect regular declines over the period. I don't have the Virginia total, but the total projection is that there will be about a 40 percent decline in veterans between now and 2020, and that's allowing for the steady flow of the current enlistees coming in. So you want something for them.

The World War I veterans are gone, the World War II veterans will be gone by 2020, the Korean War veterans will be fading rapidly, and 20 years from now, the average Vietnam veteran will be 75. That goes back to the veteran organizations. The young man or woman who joins the military today, will they feel that they have to have this kind of organization? Chances are they won't, because they have the package they enlisted for. The package includes the post-service medical care. It includes the educational benefit, which is the primary inducement.

Scott: It seems there would be two other things, though. The largest VSOs you've been talking about would be shells of their former selves, and there'd be almost nobody in Congress who's a veteran.

Derwinski: I think that's right. I think with Bush and Gore, we probably have the last two candidates for President who served in the military from now on. Used to be almost a rule. In fact, when I started in politics, if you weren't a veteran, unless you were an old pro, been there anyway, a long time, if you weren't a veteran, "Oh no, we've got to find a veteran. We have to run veterans." But that was 45 years ago.

Young: But the new group, with the new agenda, the enlistees now coming out, in effect redefine the future constituency and the future character of the VSOs. It has to give, one way or another.

Derwinski: To solve the problem of not just declining numbers, but declining involvement—that's why a tie-in with military medicine would be practical. You have the veterans more mindful of the obligation from the military, and also more mindful of the need to support the military budget for the active-duty people. There's total difference in what they consider priorities.

Remember, those young men and women who are joining the service now, their grandfathers were World War II. They're just worlds apart in terms of lifestyle, interest, and everything else. About the time of the Gulf War, I saw a cartoon, can't remember where, what paper, the funniest damn thing I'd seen in years. What it showed was the young soldier coming back from Desert Storm in his fatigues, a strapping vigorous young man in fatigues stepping up to this building with the sign "Veterans Post 874." And a hunched-over old man is standing there—the cartoonist made him look toothless and old—and he says, "What, you're a veteran of a war? What, it lasted four days?" [laughter] There's an awful lot of philosophy there. That old veteran, "Goddamn it. I spent four years in the Philippines. You can't join my post if you only served four days."

Masoud: Can I ask a quick clarifying question? I had gotten the impression that a lot of doctors in VA hospitals have joint appointments elsewhere. Is that right? And if so, does the point about performing one appendectomy a week not really apply since they're probably performing two a day at some other hospital?

Derwinski: No. If they are bona fide VA-employed doctors, they are working just for the VA hospital. The doctors who are working two places are the medical school faculty, who are like my own urologist I mentioned. He's the dean of the medical school, dean of urology at Northwestern Medical School. So he's a professor in that one sense, but he spends one day a week at the VA, which is just across the street, working his specialty there. That's the exception. That's another valuable part of the tie-in to the VA and medical schools. There was this famous heart specialist, Dr. [Michael E.] DeBakey, and he did work on and off at the VA hospital in Dallas. So here you are: You come in here, some poor little veteran, and you have a heart problem. You don't know it, but Dr. DeBakey is your surgeon, and that's because part of his role as a spin-off at the medical school is to serve at the VA also. Now, he may have had 20 students lined up watching him perform the surgery—that's another factor—but that's part of the process, and it works well.

The other thing is the kind of doctors you get in the VA. There's a pattern. If you work at the VA, you usually see two types of VA-employed doctors. You get the very young just out of medical school who wants to sharpen his skills working for three or four years or so, whatever time he allots to it, in the VA hospital. Then he goes out into private practice. Then you have the middle-aged-on doctor who's burned out or tired or bored with what he or she may be doing, so they go to the VA hospital and work where they don't have to worry about hiring a nurse, don't have to worry about overhead, don't have to worry about collecting bills. They

just perform their services. So usually you find that type, either the old veteran who's still keeping busy, doesn't want to retire yet, but the slower pace at the VA suits his or her purpose. And then you've got the young up-and-coming doctor who's sharpening his skills, and then he'll leave the VA, and go on to whatever pursuits of medicine he follows.

Young: You have any women doctors?

Derwinski: Sure.

Young: Lots?

Derwinski: The VA really has not been bad at any of the social issues. Women are welcome. There's no minority issue. In fact, the most interesting group of employees we have are our chaplains. I was a strong champion of the VA chaplains service. They've even got Buddhist and Muslim and one who practices witchcraft—

Masoud: Wiccan. That's what they are.

Derwinski: They've got them now. And the other thing, too, is, minorities are well covered. There are a lot of black clergymen in the VA. They're well balanced.

Masoud: One question I wanted to ask, and I had discussed this with Professor Young. Are you in a position to tell us that socialized medicine essentially works and it's a pretty good idea?

Derwinski: No, not at all. Because most of the medical school tie-in is with private industry, not socialized medicine.

Masoud: Forget the medical school tie-in. I'm just talking about the VA system in general. That's a socialized medical system.

Derwinski: Well, if you rephrase the question you're asking me, should the VA be privatized? I would say no. It can't be, because the public and the users wouldn't stand for a medical system that had to charge enough to be profitable. And if you can't be profitable, you can't be privatized. You won't be privatized if you can't make a profit. But then again, there's a longer-term question. Ever since the Civil War, there has been this obligation to serve the person who was wounded in the war. That was a tradition that really took hold after the Civil War. It could have died out, I suppose, except for World War I, and it would be dying now if it hadn't been for World War II. We all hope and pray there won't be any future wars of that kind. But the fact is, the obligation has now been met for 140 years, and, after all, the appropriation comes from Congress. Congress is always willing to appropriate for the VA.

Young: The medical profession has never identified it as a model for them anyway.

Derwinski: The tie-in with the medical profession is very interesting. A few medical schools debate who the creator was, but Northwestern University gets credit for being the first major

medical school to aggressively ask to serve the veteran population at the end of World War II. Then it spread. There are 147 medical schools in the country, and about 120 are affiliated with the VA. That means a steady flow of students through there. It means the type of expert I mentioned, my urology man at Northwestern who does his duty at the VA, that kind of thing. And it works that way across the country.

Young: The doctors, medical faculty, who practice one day a week in the veterans hospital—are they compensated?

Derwinski: They're compensated by their hospital.

Young: Not by—

Derwinski: That's part of the contract with the VA. The relationship is very legalistic.

Young: It doesn't cost you anything.

Derwinski: Not really, because we have offsets. I think I mentioned to you that there are times when you'll find veterans who are admitted to and serviced at a private hospital, while private hospital patients are sent to the VA depending if the particular specialty is available in one and not the other. That's not done in wholesale numbers, but that's a standard enough procedure. Therefore, you talk to most medical practitioners—probably 80 percent of them—some of their training in medical school was at a VA.

Young: Are we about finished, or do you have some more things?

Derwinski: I have a couple of things to lay out. Some of this will be repetition, we've been covering enough territory. But to get back one more time to the Congress, and maybe not sound so harsh about it. It's understandable from a short-term, parochial standpoint to say, "Oh, you can't touch this. This is mine, and I won't let you do anything with it." But we all know the problem is there, and it'll have to be faced, I think, in 10 or 15 years. I gave you a couple of examples of the battles I had with Congress over minute little numbers and things like that.

The other thing has been the veteran organizations. Now, take a couple in particular. For example, we have the ex-POWs. Basically they're World War II veterans. We had relatively few POWs in Korea, and we only had 750 airmen who were in the Hanoi Hilton, as they called it. I think we had four in Desert Storm who were momentarily held by the Iraqis for a week or so, something like that. So they qualify. That's an organization that will disappear from the scene in 15 years when the Korean War veterans hit their 80s.

We had started, by the way, with a number of contacts with the military. We were talking about putting a hospital in Orlando in conjunction with the Orlando Naval Base and having a joint Navy-VA Hospital. Well, just then the Navy base-closing wave started, and they closed the Orlando base. So that went out the window. I was called in often by Congressmen who were saying, "They're closing this base in my district, and I've got Camp so and so there, and they've got a hospital. I'd like to have the VA look at it and take it over." So as a courtesy, I would go.

I always took one of my medical men and my management types with me, and none of those base hospitals fit the VAD [Veterans Administration Domicillary]. They were usually very small, room for 30 to 40 patients, limited operating room space. You'd literally have to tear the building down. A minimum size for an ideal VA hospital is 150 beds. They've got a blueprint that they use. It turned out a lot of those styles in the '80s had the wings converging on the central core where all the services are available, that kind of thing. The last new hospital we built, I did the first spadefull of dirt, and in the Clinton administration it was finally finished, one in West Palm Beach, Florida.

I think I mentioned Tony Principi going to the Hill, and all they want to do is say, "Tony, help me get a new hospital, but it will have to be in my district." He doesn't need new hospitals. His problem is to convince Congressmen to let him scale down and maybe close others. So, understanding the limitations of the veteran groups, and understanding the statistical data, you can't argue about that. You just have to have a legitimate downsizing of the VA, baring a major war.

You could always mothball the real estate. We've got some excellent locations around the country, some practical locations. You could always mothball the hospital, and wait for the day when it might be needed. The other thing, too, the government that talks about trillions of dollars doesn't need much money, and the taxpayers are generous. But the VA has some awesome property. The hospital in San Francisco is sitting on some of the most expensive land in the country. Most of the hospitals are large, large real estate spreads, and they're fairly near urban areas. If you wanted to spin off that real estate, and let the money come back into the VA budget, you could make a good case for that.

Out west, most of them ought to be national historic sites because they are old army forts that were built to fight the Indians, and there are some beautiful locations. There's one in Walla Walla, Washington, that sits on a plateau overlooking hundreds of miles of beautiful countryside. And there's one in Prescott, Arizona. On these kinds of posts we have the old commander's residence and so on. When they closed Fort Sheridan in Chicago, they got a whole row of homes there that are historic sites. One of them, General [Philip Henry] Sheridan lived in after the Civil War. He was the commander at Fort Sheridan. General [George] Patton lived there. He played polo on the base polo team.

The VA just has a chunk of these historic sites all over. They're fascinating. So you've got value. Without interruption from well meaning but necessarily shortsighted political people—meaning congressmen—and without the interference of the veteran groups. And I think the

demand for "more, more" will die as the World War II and Korean veterans fade away, because the Vietnam veterans have shown a totally different approach. They've asked for specific services, and they've been getting them. They've shown less inclination to band into a group and be demanding more. There's a big difference, psychologically, between thinking of yourself as a veteran and thinking of yourself as an ex-serviceman.

One last thing I'd like to mention, too, though, in all of this there's the human element, there's a bureaucracy. What do you say to the VA employees? If you drastically start closing the VA, they're all entitled by law to lateral transfer to other units of government or early retirement. Now the federal government has programs for early retirement that are reasonable. Or on the medical end, how do you referee between the demands of different medical schools? But if you look at these statistics, it's just inevitable. I don't see that issue. But I think whoever is there by year 2010 will have them in spades.

Young: Do you know of any effort to do long-range planning for veterans?

Derwinski: The trouble with long-range planning, because government is unique in that way, is whenever you want to form a commission to study, every special interest gets its people on the commission. I decided I needed a commission to tell me about the long-term needs of the VA. By the time the Legion, VFW, and all the others demanded a role, I think we wound up with about 11 or 12 people, too many. And they all had vested interests. Basically, when their recommendation came down, other than the first or second paragraph, which said it's very difficult to predict the future of the VA.

Young: The one instance you cited of working with HHS was Sullivan's plan. What about the public health service, and, in particular, the U.S. Marine hospitals run by the public health service?

Derwinski: That was going to be part of Dr. Sullivan's and my long-term goal. This test we were going to make, if it had worked out, we would have then been ready to expand that across the country. You remember that we got shot down before we got a chance.

Young: Was Dr. Sullivan aware of an experience in shutting down the marine hospitals?

Derwinski: He probably was. You'd have to ask him when you get him here.

Young: Because a number of them were.

Derwinski: He's quite a gentleman, by the way. He's quite a man. You'll be impressed by him when you get him.

Scott: Before closing, is there a lesson or two to be learned from the base-closing commission about how to go about this?

Derwinski: Oh yes. But the base closing commission was able to be created and function because two forces were driving it. The military wanted it because they knew they were over-

based, and they told the Congress, "Yes, we want this." And the anti-military type of people thought, *A good way to cut that damn military down to size.* So you had an unusual marriage of forces. I never thought they'd give the first base-closing commission the authority they did. I didn't think they'd do it for the second and third, and I don't think they'd do it for the VA—not for 10 or 15 years. Then maybe sheer common sense will dictate it.

You know, for example, in Minnesota we used our hospital. I allowed an experiment, and they're still working at it. They have a procedure they use with drug and alcohol patients in what the Indians call a sweat lodge.

Scott: We had that at Oklahoma City also.

Derwinski: And the whole concept behind it is they use traditional Indian tribal methods to convince the younger men. If I understand correctly, they have some building that in effect resembles what would be their traditional living quarters, and they work on them in that environment. I was very intrigued by that—anything to get more positive achievements. Then, on all the so-called social issues, the VA's in pretty good shape. The hospital mix is what you'd expect of a veteran population. The type of employee in the Manhattan VA hospital would be totally different than an employee in the Sheridan, Wyoming, hospital. They reflect the local manpower pools. No medical staff problems of any social kind, and these are your students going through the medical education system. The patient load is what you'd expect of the veteran population. So, in all of those cases, the VA measures up well.

I made a passing reference that one of my pet goals was to make better use of the chaplain corps. I kept insisting that they use the chaplains, first of all, as morale builders, part of the process of the hospital work. But more important then, also, with the patient struggling with addiction problems, the role of the chaplain could be positive, depending on the person's own background. Some people don't come from a particularly religious background, it wouldn't make any difference. But some people who come out of the fundamentalist Baptist category, or old-fashioned Catholic, different groups like that, they would react positively to the role of the chaplain.

In fact, I even went so far, when we were getting ready for the Gulf War, and I was traveling around visiting medical centers, I'd always meet with the chaplains. I'd say, "Now you sharpen up, because remember, in the military the men are accustomed to the padre being around. If they come here as casualties, you're the padre, and you live up to that expectation." In fact, I remember telling one woman, a black woman clergyman in Philadelphia, "You know, Reverend, the only thing that bothers me is that, if we get the patients here, could you please have enough identification on your garb so they know who you are?" One of the shocks of my life was when I was wandering through the little hospital in New Hampshire. I went up there, and coming down the hall was this Franciscan monk. I'm an old-fashioned Catholic, so I immediately recognized him. I stopped him. "Father" I said, "do you always come in wearing your cassock like that?" He said, "Usually. I'm in the church up the street, and this is the way I work. This is my work habit, so I come down this way."

Well, frankly, I thought, very, very good. If I was the patient there, and he walked in with his Franciscan robe on, I'd feel I was getting closer to God through him than I would through the one who walked in and I couldn't tell by his garb what he was. I remember, when I went to give a lecture at St. John's University up in Brooklyn, and I had this one gentleman in the audience giving me a bad time. He had a scruffy beard and a sloppy sport jacket and everything else. I found out later he was the priest who was the moderator of that club. I thought, *you should have had your collar on. At least I'd have known how to handle you.*

Young: Is there anything more you'd like to wind up with, because we're about there.

Derwinski: Well, I think if you put your records together, I imagine you will have a pattern, and you'll follow with the next administration, you'll have to pick up Clinton's people. It will be interesting for you, those of you who stay with this, to see what, in my VA area, what Jesse Brown and Togo West would say. I think Jesse would have a hard time acknowledging that the day of veteran organizations will end some day. And Mr. Togo West, Secretary West, I think his concept of the VA was that they weren't as well disciplined and accustomed to top leadership as the army was. He wanted them to act like he was the army secretary barking commands, and that isn't the way the VA functions. But when you finally get Tony Principi 10 years from now, he hopefully, will see the start of what will be a necessary adjustment.

Young: You think it'll be 10 years?

Derwinski: Yes, if you go back and look at these figures. Ten years from now your World War II veterans will be too old to be active in—

Young: I was just thinking of Bush—

Derwinski: Well, Tony will only be there four years. I think George W. will have the same attitude his father had, that you have fresh faces come in. And frankly, four years in the VA is more than enough work for anybody. It's rewarding, but also you suffer from little cactus stabs continually. That comes with the turf.

If I had to look back, I often think what would happen if they hadn't elevated the VA. I think what would have happened is the service would be about the same, but the expectations of the veterans wouldn't have been as great. The VSOs assume that the Secretary is to be the cheerleader for them. It never dawned on them that the Secretary would have to make tough decisions on closing or downsizing facilities or things of that nature. No, he was to be rah rah and give me more money for my troops. That was their innocent concept of what elevation to Cabinet status—And Cabinet status, if it was valuable and necessary, should have been granted in 1946, when there were 16 million men coming back from the war, all at one time.

Young: But it can't be demoted again.

Derwinski: No, and it shouldn't be. But again, I keep looking at those figures every so often and the whole changing nature of the military. I hope we never have another world war kind of manpower need. It's a different world.

Young: Well, I want to thank you for being such a good educator and entertainer. This is a revelation to most people who don't study the VA or its special situation, and that's one of the things that a lot of my colleagues as academicians forget, not only the human element, but also the considerable differences in the situation of each Cabinet Department and their constituents. And yours was certainly almost unique. That's quite a story to tell.

Derwinski: Of course, for me, this has been a thrill to absorb the hallowed atmosphere of the University, all the extra, the sky and the air that are unique to the world. They're all here at the University of Virginia.

Young: By the way, I do want to say that we are undergoing construction of the main building of the Miller Center, which is why we are not having the interview at our home base. There's so much noise, there's an addition being made to the building so that it's really not feasible to do it there. We regret that, because then we'd really wow you if we were in our special room.

Derwinski: You've got a good program going. These are interesting. Hofstra University did a program on Bush a few years ago, and it was fascinating. I was sitting there on one panel, and John Sununu was there. This one—I would assume he was a militant pro-lifer—got up and said something to the effect of one of the worst things that the administration every did was appoint Judge [David H.] Souter to the Supreme Court.

Well Sununu was ready. He was in the audience, but he was getting up ready to fight. And I was sitting there innocently, and the moderator of the panel said, "Well, Secretary Derwinski, you were there at the time. What was your explanation of why Judge Souter was appointed?" I said, "Well, all you have to do is look at the big picture, and you have to conclude that you should never underestimate the power of the Governor from a small state who becomes the Chief of Staff of the President." I thought John Sununu was going to kill me. [laughter] He did dump Souter on us. Souter has veered off to the left, and none of the Democrats who were appointed have veered to the right. So we need a Democratic appointee who will start off here and head this way. We've got Souter who started theoretically here, and is now to the left of Judge [Ruth Bader] Ginsburg.

Young: What about Whizzer [Byron] White?

Derwinski: Yes.

Young: He moved right.

Derwinski: He moved far right, very interesting.

Young: And Warren Burger moved the other way.

Derwinski: Right.