

**Oral History Interview**  
**The Honorable Charles Abell**  
**Former Assistant Secretary of Defense**

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**Office of the Secretary of Defense Historical Office  
Oral History Interview**

**The Honorable Charles Abell**

**Interviewed by Thomas Christianson and Anthony Crain  
September 16, 2014**

**CHRISTIANSON:** We are interviewing Charlie Abell. The date today is 16 September 2014. The interview is being conducted in Washington, D.C.

Mr. Abell, could you briefly discuss your background, personal background before you came to the Pentagon.

**ABELL:** Okay. I served 26-1/2 years in the Army as an armor officer and a helicopter pilot. When I retired from the Army, I immediately, within days, went to work on the Senate Armed Services Committee [SASC] as the only guy for the Personnel Subcommittee of the Senate Armed Services Committee and had quite a broad portfolio there. The chairman at the time was Senator Nunn. When the Senate flipped in [19]95, [Senator] Strom Thurmond (R-SC) became the chair, and then later, John Warner of Virginia became the chair. I worked through all of those. I worked for the Armed Services Committee for about 11 years and then was nominated by the President to come to DoD.

**CHRISTIANSON:** What President?

**ABELL:** Bush 43, George W. Bush.

I came over as the Assistant Secretary for Force Management Policy, but part of the deal always was they were going to get rid of that and create a Principal Deputy Under for Personnel and Readiness.

**CHRISTIANSON:** You knew that coming in?

**ABELL:** Yes, yes. I knew that coming in, and so I went through the Senate confirmation to be the Assistant Secretary to come over, and then the National Defense Authorization Act, the next year, made that change, and so I had to go back through Senate confirmation to stay in the job as the Principal Deputy.

I served there from 2000 to 2006, and at that point, Senator [John] Warner (R-VA) asked me to come back to the Senate Armed Services Committee as the Staff Director, and so I talked to Secretary [Donald] Rumsfeld. I talked to Secretary [Stephen] Chu. They were most amenable to that, and so I went back to the Armed Services Committee as the Staff Director, and I served until the end of Warner's term. And then I went into the private sector.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Just backing up briefly, you mentioned a military career. You served overseas, obviously, during this career.

**ABELL:** Two tours, Vietnam; three tours, Germany; and then any number of assignments in the United States.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Okay, interesting.

**ABELL:** I started off as an enlisted man, went to OCS.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Which company, sir?

**ABELL:** In OCS?

**CHRISTIANSON:** Do you remember? 50th? 51st?

**ABELL:** Golly, I don't remember. I could look it up.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Okay. What year did you get your commission, sir?

**ABELL:** [19]67.

**CHRISTIANSON:** And you went to Vietnam right away?

**ABELL:** Immediately, yes.

And then I came back, went to flight school to become a helicopter pilot, and immediately went back again. Started off as an enlisted guy at OCS, graduated as a lieutenant colonel.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Okay. Tony?

**CRAIN:** Let's see. We'll start with the NSPS questions, if that's okay.

**ABELL:** Okay, sure.

**CRAIN:** Could you discuss the status of civilian management at the Department of Defense when you came to the Pentagon and what caused you to believe that a new personnel system was necessary?

**ABELL:** Well, the personnel system in place at the Pentagon was the standard civil service system, which had its strengths and weaknesses, but I think more weaknesses than strengths when it came to the Department of Defense. Again, I didn't come in cold. I had 11 years in the Senate Armed Services Committee. I had been working with the various officials at the Department of Defense and at OMB about changes to the personnel system, the civilian personnel system as well as the military personnel system.

We had done some incremental things to make the civilian service in the Pentagon or in the Department of Defense more efficient, but it was clear to me that we needed some flexibility. I used to say when I started this off that, "Check your watch. It's lunchtime in the Department of Defense. It doesn't matter what time your watch says it is. Somewhere in the Department of Defense, it's lunchtime." And very few other federal agencies have that kind of requirement. We have folks that we need to be able to send someplace, because it's not someplace most people would go voluntarily, and we need to be able to incentivize them to do that, and sometimes we need to be able to incentivize them to stay. The federal civil service system was designed for a bureaucracy that was pretty static.

So there were a lot of workarounds. When the first Gulf War came along, there were instances where we wanted to send some helicopter technicians. They were civilians. They were the real experts at the depot level of fixing helicopters, and we wanted to deploy them to Kuwait and Saudi. We had some union folks push back and say, "No, you can't do that. You can't send them."

So we solved the problem. We, Department of Defense, solved the problem. We hired contractors and sent them. My view was that was a sin. We had the best quality folks who were our employees, and for a variety of reasons, we couldn't deploy them, even though they may have been willing on an individual basis to go. So that was sort of the background I had when I came in, and then I didn't come in with an agenda to do that, but when Secretary Rumsfeld started talking about reorganizing and reenergizing and refocusing the Department of Defense, this seemed to fit in there. In our talks with him as he developed that, I put this in, in his transformation of the Department of Defense, and it seems to fit. So that's when we began to work on it in earnest, as that transformation effort developed, and we were just one piece of that much larger—

**CHRISTIANSON:** When you say "we," sir, are you talking about Rumsfeld, Chu, [Ginger] Groeber, this whole group of people?

**ABELL:** These discussions were Rumsfeld, Chu, me, and sometimes his personal staff. He had some folks that were doing transformation as his lead dogs. So that was the group.

And we began to think about what did we want and what could we get and all of that. Ms. Groeber at that time was not even in the—

**CHRISTIANSON:** Room.

**ABELL:** —the room. She was not even the Deputy Under Secretary at that point. She was over in CPMS [Civilian Personnel Management Service], in Rosslyn at that point. We didn't have an appointee in CPMS, Civilian Personnel Policy.

**CHRISTIANSON:** During the nascent portions of the discussions, basically.

**ABELL:** Right.

So when it became clear we were going to move ahead, I went to the Civilian Personnel staff, both in the Pentagon and the CPMS, the FOIA [Freedom of Information Act], in Rosslyn and said, "All right. Bring me your ideas. Out of the box, but bring me your ideas. Say what you want," because I knew didn't have all the answers. I probably didn't have half the answers.

So they brought me a fairly thick binder.

**CHRISTIANSON:** How long did you give them?

**ABELL:** This was probably a month, month and a half. But they brought me a fairly thick binder of regulatory kind of things of what they wanted, and my first reaction was, "No. I want to send to the Hill something akin to Eisenhower's order to enter the Continental Europe and destroy the enemy."

**CHRISTIANSON:** Right.

**ABELL:** So I wanted the Hill—I said, "Let's send the Hill a one-page proposal that says the Secretary of Defense can develop a personnel system, Civilian Personnel Management System, tailored to the needs, national security needs of the Department of Defense. I knew that there would be additions and corrections, and I also knew from many years on the Hill that the more we gave them, the more they would fool around with it. So I wanted to give them a very minimal proposal and us the maximum flexibility, and I knew from there that it would grow and get more technical and as it should.

So we went back to the drawing boards, and then we came up with this very small proposal, which we sent to the Hill.

**CRAIN:** I apologize. Around what date was this? Was it 2000?

**ABELL:** 2001.

**CHRISTIANSON:** [200]1, [200]2. Okay.

**ABELL:** I was going to get to that. We made a tactical error because we just weren't thinking. We sent it over on Good Friday, and, of course, the unions were going to oppose us because it basically neutered the unions, the 40-some unions in the Department of Defense.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Did you anticipate that, that you were going to get the big pushback then?

**ABELL:** Oh, yeah.

**CHRISTIANSON:** You knew that.

**ABELL:** From the unions, we knew that there would be a lot of negotiations about that and a lot of pushback, and I was mentally ready for that, the perception of dropping it on Good Friday

when they were on recess, and the staff was not really at their desks. It was perceived as we tried to slide it in—

**CHRISTIANSON:** Sneak it.

**ABELL:** —which was the farthest thing from the truth, but we lived with that perception for a long time. I was just colorblind to the date. It was Friday to me. It wasn't Good Friday. But, anyway, that was a mistake, and that hampered us for a while just to fight through the perceptions.

Once the Hill got it, then, of course, we immediately said we're available to talk, however you want, as much as you want, whenever you want, and we began. I and Ken—I'll think of his last name. He was one of Rumsfeld's personal staff guys that was helping the transformation.

We started scheduling meetings because, of course, we had four committees of jurisdiction. We had the armed services committees, but we also had the two committees in the Senate, the Government Affairs Committee—and I think it was called Government Reform at the time in the House, who had jurisdiction over Title 5 and Civilian Personnel Management.

We made it an effort to reach out to them and talk to them, both at the member level and at the staff level and said, "Okay. Here's our proposal. What are your questions? Let's just get the conversation going." I will tell you in retrospect that being proactive was of great benefit to us. It was totally transparent. We were totally transparent with them. If they wanted to know why something said it that way, we would be brutally honest, even if it wasn't what they wanted to hear, and we were also amenable, thanks to a great deal of latitude provided to me by Secretary Chu and Secretary Rumsfeld, to making changes and agreeing to changes. I didn't have to come back to the Pentagon and huddle and go back with an answer.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Did you meet with Chu often then on this or constantly?

**ABELL:** Daily.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Really?

**ABELL:** Yes. He and I talked daily about the whole range of things, and anytime there was something on this, I kept him apprised, of course, but he wasn't in the nits and noids on this. I had the expertise on the Hill.

**CHRISTIANSON:** He relied on you.

**ABELL:** Yeah. So I enjoyed the autonomy to be able to do this, but we talked to members and those on the Government Affairs Committee in the Senate and Government Reform in the House. They were a little territorial about, "Why are you divorcing from civil service? We have Homeland Security," which they have just given some unique authorities, "Why can't you just do the Homeland Security thing?" And my response was, "You did good work with Homeland Security. We just want to go the next step," so we tried to make it logical. I said, "Use the

Department of Defense as a laboratory. Let us try some of these things," and we earned over months of hearings and meetings and sessions, some degree of credibility where we could enjoy some confidence that it was going to move forward.

The unions had an ear in the Senate, especially on the Armed Services Committee. Senator [Carl] Levin (D–MI) was very friendly to the unions, and so I spent a lot of time with Peter Levine in the Senate, Senator Levin's counsel, who was responsible for this legislative proposal in that side of the Armed Services Committee, and answering all of his questions. And we even agreed to a series of meetings with the unions, which I would chair from the DoD side, but OPM would also be present. Almost biblically, it turned out to be 40 days of meetings that we had with the union reps, all of them.

Nobody was excluded. Everybody was included. Even at times, the unions who didn't have representation within the Department of Defense would come in, AFL-CIO and folks like that, big unions, would bring their negotiators in to try and help, especially on big issues. There was always an issue on both sides, whether you're a supporter or a detractor, of if we give this to the Department of Defense, what does that say for the rest of the federal civil service, and is it the first domino to fall, and will many follow after that? My response always was, "Gees, I hope so."

**CHRISTIANSON:** Were they digging in from the get-go, though?

**ABELL:** Oh, yes, absolutely. The first several meetings with the unions were, "We can't trust you. You lie," all of that, and I just kept saying, "Let's talk. I will earn your trust. I don't ask you for anything more. Just let me earn it." Over the time, we would talk through a lot of issues that were okay. Many of them were not really issues. It was, "Your legislation wouldn't let us do that," so could we find that in the legislation, where does it say that, those kinds of things. We had to deal with the myths and the realities, and then sometimes we got to points where I would just say, "Look, fellows, that's the way it is. We're never going to agree on this issue. I got it. Let's park it and move on to the next set of issues."

I would like to think—and I'm confident in saying—that the unions did grudgingly respect our point of view. Tactically, I was aided a bit by having a pit bull from OPM who every once in a while would go off, and then I could say, "Calm down. Let's talk about it."

**CHRISTIANSON:** Who was that pit bull?

**ABELL:** Ron—

**CRAIN:** Sanders?

**ABELL:** Ron Sanders, yeah.

In all candor, I would tell you that some of that was orchestrated; some of it was not. But he was on occasion very much the bad cop, and I tried to be the good cop and we moved forward.

In the middle of that 40 days, I had to take a week because I was going to the theater. We were in the war, and I had personnel business to do over there, and frankly, around the table with 40 union guys, they respected the fact that I, as the Principal Deputy Under Secretary, was actually going to go to the theater and deal with the issues on the ground, so that gained me a little bit more credibility with them.

I would tell you, at the end of the day, if whatever concessions we got were grudging—and I really wasn't looking for a lot of concessions. I wanted understanding, I wanted transparency, and more importantly, I wanted to be able to go back to the Hill and say we met with everybody that you wanted us to meet with, and we told them exactly what we're telling you. Of course, these people were running to their Hill friends daily, every afternoon, but the stories were the same. So we were not trying to hide anything from the Congress, and when it came time for the House Armed Services to vote on their mark-up, I was in the anteroom and members would come out and say, "Why should I vote for this? I'm being told a thousand reasons why I shouldn't. Tell me why I should." We would have those conversations and I would try to address their questions. That mark-up went way into the night and, at the end of the day, it was adopted.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Was it pretty much a party line?

**ABELL:** Pretty much, but not entirely, and we lost some Republicans who had depots that were heavily civilianized and were afraid that we were going to somehow disadvantage the depots in their districts, and we had Democrats who understood that jobs were here and this may be a way to get more jobs and to enhance the jobs, because we had pay scales in there that were not the federal pay scales. So there were some who saw it on both sides, but largely party line. And, of course, that, then, began to set the motion for the Senate Armed Services Committee who adopted it later in their mark-up, and then it just became something to work out in the conference.

**CRAIN:** Prior to that, the White House and the Office of Personnel Management grew somewhat frustrated. I should say the Office of Personnel Management felt shut out of the process. Was that the way that it was perceived at the time?

**ABELL:** Well, again, we were asking for the keys to the kingdom, literally, and, yes, [Director] Ms. [Kay] James was not a supporter initially, and there were a lot of meetings. One of the things we proposed was a radical change to veteran's preference, and, of course, that was a third rail to many people. We weren't eliminating it, but we were changing it a lot.

**CRAIN:** And how were you changing it?

**ABELL:** Well, as it is now, if there's a veteran who qualifies, they go to the top of the list and you have to figure out why you're not going to select them. That's the traditional civil service. What we said is, if there were veterans who qualified, they would join the group, but we were not constrained to pick the veteran. We could pick the best of the group, which gave them preference in that they got in the top group, without regard to their qualifications. But the hiring authority under NSPS was not constrained to hire the veteran if he or she wasn't the best group. That was seen as heresy among the veterans' groups and the traditional civil servants. So there

were many White House meetings to talk about singular issues like that, and then Clay Johnson, who was one of the President's counselors, convened a meeting in the OEOB, and we all sat in that room, and he invited some of the government affairs and government foreign staff to come. He bought sandwiches and said, "We're not leaving until—"

**CHRISTIANSON:** Who else besides yourself came from the Pentagon, to those types of meetings? What level?

**ABELL:** I had one lady with me, but then the rest of it were other people. It basically was mine to make. I did that for a couple of reasons. One is many of the people in the Pentagon who would have provided me advice and counsel were long-time civil servants and they were in that traditional mindset, and I wanted a different mindset, so I didn't want them talking. It just confused the issue. And then the other reason was I was going to be totally the owner. If this was going to go bad, I didn't want blood splattered all over the place. It was just going to be me, and that was fine with Secretary Chu and that was fine with Secretary Rumsfeld. If they just had one belly button to push, then they were fine about that, so that's what I did.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Did you get guidance from Chu and Rumsfeld before you went over?

**ABELL:** David Chu and I would talk strategy, in general. My conversations with Secretary Wolfowitz and Secretary Rumsfeld were, "How are you doing?" "What are you doing?" but not in the technical side of it at all. But I will tell you, in this meeting that Clay Johnson hosted, before I got back to the Pentagon, he called the Pentagon and said, "This was a great meeting. We made great strides. Your guy did well." So when I got back, Secretary [Paul] Wolfowitz wanted to see me, and he said, "Good job." And I thought, that never happens.

But, again, I was transparent, and if people had an objection, I said, "Well, let's talk about it. Here's what we're trying to do. Is there a better way to do it?" I never wanted to say, "We don't want to do that anymore," but, okay, and veteran's preference was a good one. We talked about veteran's preference for many times, and said, "Okay, here's what we're trying to do. Get the best-qualified person for the job. How can we preserve the appearance that we have been true to the veterans and still give some flexibility?"

So we worked those issues out, and we gave a little along the way. But, as I said in the beginning, I started out with broad authority. You can go do whatever you want, Mr. Secretary. So, as we were given away, in my heart I kept saying, well, we're not even back to where I thought we'd be at this point, so I'm still plus. So that was my strategy going into that. And, again, when we went to the unions, OPM came with us, and, again, another concession was changed, but it worked out fine because we had the dynamic of Ron and myself.

**CRAIN:** So this is well after the best practices review that Ms. Groeber—

**ABELL:** Oh, yeah. All that just fed the—those were things that were enablers. I would call them that. Again, the whole idea was we wanted maximum flexibility so that we could do things, and that included the ability to send somebody somewhere, the ability to incentivize somebody to do something they weren't doing today, whether that was to change a job or to deploy or whatever,

and to do that with compensation, and a performance-based compensation system that said you don't get paid for being present for duty. You get paid for doing what we want you to do, your job.

**CRAIN:** To be more competitive, also, with the private sector?

**ABELL:** Actually, I guess that was a byproduct.

**CHRISTIANSON:** You weren't necessarily thinking that way.

**ABELL:** No. The federal civil service system is pretty committed in the private sector, especially in those days. I mean, there weren't hiring gaps. There were people waiting to get into the federal civil service writ large, so that wasn't it. But getting guys who would go to Iraq, Afghanistan, Kuwait, Qatar, and working in unpleasant conditions, doing unpleasant things.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Stepping back, in fact, based upon what you just said, sir, the terrorist attacks of September 11th and then the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, was that part of the impetus of this new civil service system, or not necessarily?

**ABELL:** No. Not really. Again, this all started before that. Once that came along, sometimes it helped our argument to be able to say, "See, we need to be able to do this." But we had examples from the first Gulf War, of where we had to hire contractors because we couldn't deploy civil servants, that were just as powerful, and many times, on the Hill, the members would say, "Bring me specifics of things you can't do under this one," and we would get them, and sometimes that came out of the best practices thing. Sometimes we'd just go back out to the force and the fleet and say, "Okay, tell us when you couldn't do something, and be specific." We had a list of those, and sometimes we could tell a member in your district, Fort X or Base Y, here's what happened. Many times we could bring in a civil servant from that base. I would have liked to have been able to do that, but I could not. It's not that they were forcing me to do that. I can't do that.

**CRAIN:** And it was the unions, and was it also OPM rules?

**ABELL:** It mostly was just the federal civil service sort of rigid structure, but the unions watching that. And, of course, sometimes, in some installations, unions had way more sway than on others, just by the nature of the command of the installation or the type of work they did. On a depot that's almost 100 percent civilian, the union guys had a lot of sway in those things. If you went to Fort Hood, Texas, which is almost 100 percent military, the union guys, not so much. So you had those variants all over the place. But the unions were watching not so much of each as they were watching the big things, because they saw the end. They saw George W. Bush as the anti-union guy, across the board, and we were more than 50 percent of the Federal Government, and if we could do it, they saw it happening everywhere.

**CRAIN:** So the impetus was to free the department to manage civilians, to allow for the department to move civilians rather than contractors into critical areas, and also to free up, as Secretary Rumsfeld repeatedly stated, military personnel. He said, at one point, 320,000 civilian personnel positions were being filled by military.

**CHRISTIANSON:** And he couldn't do anything about it, basically.

**ABELL:** No, but local commanders would do it, too. If they couldn't get the civilian that they wanted, for whatever reason, then they would reach out and put a uniformed guy in there. I mean, they'd grab an infantryman and say, "You're going to run this backhoe for us because I can't get a backhoe guy in here at the time that I need." So one of the things we had, of course, that was the accelerated hiring rather than, again, the very strict, plodding, traditional civil service hiring, so that if you needed a backhoe operator two weeks from now, the local commander wouldn't have to make that decision.

So it wasn't all deployment, but it was the military guys, who are all can-do, and if they couldn't do it with civilians, they did it with military, and then that would rob the military guy of the training and the readiness that he needed. But sometimes commanders just got lazy, and they never did go back and make those civilian jobs what they wanted them to be.

So it wasn't one way or the other. It was, to your point, I guess, one force, one fight. Let's not have a group that doesn't go and a group that does go. Even within the military you have a side of the house. We were also balancing the—wait a minute. We've got 20 percent of the military that we're deploying and 80 percent that we're not, so let's figure out what they're doing and see how we get them in.

**CHRISTIANSON:** And Rumsfeld was saying this all the time, and you were present, hearing him talk about this.

**ABELL:** Yeah. I sat in on his weekly military deployment briefings, and he would look to me and I would say, "No, sir. We've got a unit in the National Guard in Iowa that's never moved, so why are we sending this active unit three times?" The Joint Staff didn't always love that, but those are the kinds of things that were going on, and we would say, "Okay, let's activate this Guard unit, send them, and leave this active duty unit that just got back home for a while." So it was across-the-board kind of stuff.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Changing gears a little bit, what changes in labor relations and employee appeals processes did the DoD leaders see as necessary for a better system?

**ABELL:** Well, NSPS lessened the influence of the unions on the management of people. When salary was negotiable, it was negotiable with the individual, not the union, which was a major step. They always got involved with OPM on adjusting the GS pay scales.

**CHRISTIANSON:** It was quicker?

**ABELL:** Oh, yes. It was quicker but also, again, it wasn't collective. It was individual. So I could come to you and say, "I'd like you to shift your job focus from this to this, and I'll give you \$3,000 more a year to do that," and if you said yes, then it was done. And the union would look at us and say, "Wait a minute. I want to protect those jobs. I don't want them to do these other things," because now, at some other base, somebody might make the same decision. So it

lessened their influence in compensation. It made compensation and management based on performance—which, of course, was something unions did not want, and did not trust us, in the Department of Defense, or management, as they saw it, to be able to do that, that we would use the performance evaluations in a fair, equitable, and transparent manner. I spent untold hours talking about the transparency.

Everybody would be able to see it. We're going to tell you what the standards are before the year starts. You're going to work to those standards, and that's how you'll be judged. You won't be judged on anything else. And we went through hours and hours and hours in how does the union keep me from paying my brother-in-law the full amount and the guy I don't like, next to nothing? Again, we had the transparency. We had the compensation of the manager based on the performance of his or her team and not something else, so if he gave a weaker person more money and the team didn't perform, then he didn't get a bonus. So we thought we had all the right incentives in there.

Once it was passed, the bigger challenge became implementing it. But in the negotiations, those were big deals with the unions, was what was their role. And, of course, when things are performance-based, the unions, even if they're in their room, representing their guy, there's not much they can say about it. If they guy didn't perform, well, he didn't perform. Or if he performed excellently, well, he did.

**CRAIN:** How closely were you working with Ms. Groeber on all of this? Was she reporting directly to you?

**ABELL:** Yes. When she moved over and took the position as Deputy Under Secretary for Personnel Management, then it was very close, daily.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Did she report to you?

**ABELL:** Yes, she did. She was in direct report to me. She had a wealth of knowledge that I'll never have about the civil service system.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Just based upon her longevity and experience?

**ABELL:** Yes, and she was an expert. That's what she did. That was her professional expertise, and she was very good at it. But again, I tried to be the face. As I referred to earlier, if there was going to be blood spilled, it was going to be mine. I didn't want anybody else to have to do that. But also, I will be honest with you—again, back to people talking in traditional speak—that's what Ginger knew and that's how she talked, and that's not the message I wanted to get across. When I wanted to talk to folks I wanted it to be open and transparent, in the new way, and in a very demonstrative approach, saying, this is the way it's going to be. It'll be open. It'll be transparent. Everybody will be able to see.

So, she would go with me to many meetings, especially on the Hill, and when they would ask the technical question, I would turn around and say, "What's the answer, Ginger?" But in the give-and-take with the staff, I usually led that, because I was the one who could say, "You know

what? We'll give on that. Let's just change it right now. You change your copy. I'll change my copy." And if I got back and Secretary Rumsfeld or Secretary Wolfowitz or Secretary Chu didn't like that, I was the only guy. Ginger was protected, or whomever else was there. So they were a very capable, very able staff. I relied on their judgments, I relied on their expertise, but I took most of the lead, because that's what I thought was the right thing to do.

**CHRISTIANSON:** You mentioned Homeland Security. The Homeland Security Act, obviously, was signed in November of 2002. Did that influence in the development of this whole system, or not necessarily?

**ABELL:** I looked at it. I talked to them, to their chief human capital officer, I think he was called, and my personal assessment was it was a step above traditional civil service but it was a mess. Homeland Security was a mess. As you may recall, they copped together a whole bunch of agencies and it wasn't ready for prime time, in my opinion. So my approach on the Hill always was, and at OPM, was yes, you have those authorities. Let's take the next step. We don't want to just catch up. That's not how things work. Let's just take the next step, and be out there and see if there are things that maybe can help Homeland get better. We'll take whatever lessons we can learn from Homeland, good and bad, and apply them, but let's take the next step. Again, on the Hill, especially in the Foreign Affairs Committee, that question was asked a thousand times—why don't we just give you Homeland Security? I said, "Because that's not what we want. We want this.

**CRAIN:** And part of the justification, too, was the fact that the Secretary already managed well over a million members of the armed forces, and, therefore, that authority would not be beyond what he was capable of.

**ABELL:** That argument resonated in the armed services committees. It did not resonate in the civil service committees. They understood it, but they were about other things. Secretary Rumsfeld wasn't beloved on the Hill, so giving Secretary Rumsfeld a blank check, there were some people that just weren't going to do that. And, you know, there were times when I would leave a meeting and say, "I don't think we're going to get this at all," but we didn't quit. We kept coming back and it turned out we did get it, and that was one of the successes of his transformation, and I'm proud to be a part of it.

**CRAIN:** During that period, you were talking to a lot of people on the hill, Democrats as well as Republicans. Were some of the Democrats privately interested in a change in the system?

**CHRISTIANSON:** Even though they couldn't publicly say it?

**ABELL:** Yes. We had many private conversations where they said, "We understand what you want. I came out of business. I know what you're trying to do. I appreciate what you're trying to do. Don't expect me to go out in front of the cameras, or sit in the committee room, and support you." And I asked them, "Okay, but then just don't attack us any more than you have to," because I had enough attackers as it was. Many of them lived up to that.

But I understood politics. I'd been on the Hill a long time, and I didn't take it personally. Again, another reason why I felt I should be in the lead was because this wasn't personal. It was political and it was business, and people said things that somebody who hadn't been on the Hill a long time would probably have taken on as personal, and it just wasn't that way. It was just politics. It's just the nature of the beast.

But, yeah, on both sides, and I had Republicans who thought this was the worst thing we'd ever done. And we talked to OPM heads past, Ms. James' predecessors as well. Some of them even thought, if I could have had this it would have been much better. But again, many of them looking forward in their political futures wouldn't say that out loud, but they would tell us privately, "Yeah, you did," or "You know what? I think you've gone a bridge too far here. You ought to think about giving up here and try something a little different," and that was good counsel. I appreciated all of it.

**CRAIN:** And, of course, there was a following passage of enabling legislation. There was an effort to implement the system quickly. I believe the entire DoD civilian population would be converted within two years, initially. Was that timeline set by Secretary Rumsfeld, or was it set at the P&R level?

**CHRISTIANSON:** Or was it Chu that talked to you?

**ABELL:** I don't recall Secretary Rumsfeld ever dealing in that level of detail. I think we all appreciated that Secretary Rumsfeld was not a sit-on-your-hindquarters kind of guy, so I don't think I needed guidance to move out, and we chose to move out as quickly as possible because (1) we thought it was the right thing to do, but also, (2) once we got out there and implemented, it would be harder to come back and try to take it apart, in a future Congress. So I recognized that, as well.

We probably went too fast. I mean, the lesson I learned was implementation was harder than I had anticipated it to be. Just writing the implementing regulations for the services to take, and then further amplify it for their specific services was more complex than I thought. I thought our civilian personnel management work force could do that relatively quickly, and they couldn't get it right relatively quickly.

I'll tell you what. When Secretary England was tasked to oversee this, boy, that was Sir Galahad riding to the rescue. He came in. He said, "Let's establish a workgroup," multiservice, which was a great idea, and, also, if he said it once he said it a thousand times, "The soft stuff is the hard stuff," and once we learned that, then we knew we had to focus on the soft things. It wasn't, "Get the pay grade out there." It was, "Get the performance management system right, and everything else would follow," kind of things, things that, even at that point, even I would tell you I was too close to the forest, and Secretary England brought that perspective in. He'd run a factory and he knew unions, he knew work force, and he just had the temperament to sometimes tap me on the shoulder and say, "Take a break," and sometimes kick me in the butt and say, "Get going on this." I really appreciated it.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Let me ask a question about this. It's very interesting, what you have to say, sir, is that he kind of came, at least for researchers, out of nowhere to take this over, basically.

**ABELL:** Oh, absolutely.

**CHRISTIANSON:** You're an outsider looking in. We have had a chance to talk to a number of different people, and apparently there was a meeting in Rumsfeld's office where he's finally asserting himself, and saying, "Look, I want to do it." Basically, Ginger Groeber was pushed aside and he took it, at that point. Were you part of that meeting?

**ABELL:** I wasn't in the meeting. I was aware that it was going to be.

**CHRISTIANSON:** And were you aware of what was going to happen?

**ABELL:** I knew that he was asserting himself, as the Secretary of the Navy.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Right, because he was Navy.

**ABELL:** Right. And I thought about it initially. My first, initial reaction was it shouldn't be a single service because the other services would rebel, but the more that I chatted with him—and, I mean, I don't mean they were in-depth, but we chatted a little bit before that meeting, and it was obvious to me that he had a perspective that would work. The other two service secretaries were not opposing it, and I said to myself—not that I had a vote—but I thought this would be okay.

**CHRISTIANSON:** So it was a fait accompli and they told you after it was over?

**ABELL:** Right. Again, it was fine with me. It was an angry sea. Anybody with a life raft was fine with me. You know, I don't want to be unkind to Ginger, but Ginger was very strident. She didn't compromise well, and she was hurting us when we went to implementation, so I supported that move entirely. As a matter of fact, I created the wall between Ginger and the NSP workgroup, and said, "Ginger, you go work on other day-to-day problems. They're going to handle NSPS. Say goodbye," because it was the right thing. She was her way or the highway, and it wasn't going to work.

**CRAIN:** And the union meeting, you said, had become very, very contentious. The Hyatt meeting in Rosslyn, I believe, in February of 2004—I've read the transcript.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Where there was screaming and yelling.

**ABELL:** Yeah, some of them were, and again, sometimes I had as much problems with my team as I did with the unions. But, no, you're right. It was a challenge on both sides. There were folks on our side that said don't give in an inch to these bastards; we'll just run them over. My assessment was that we couldn't. I mean, if I'd assessed that we could've, I might have been content to do that. I'm not a union guy, but my assessment was I couldn't, and, oh, by the way, I needed the Hill, and they had ears on the Hill, synthetic ears. And so if I punched them in the

mouth, I was going to go up to the Hill and I was going to get punched back. That's just the way it was. That's the politics of it.

**CRAIN:** And had it gone forward prior to Secretary England suggesting this strategic pause and comprehensive review, it probably would have been undone?

**ABELL:** It would have collapsed, then, I think. We weren't getting where we needed to go, and it wasn't working. As I said, implementation was much harder than getting the authority, and I had spent so much time and attention on getting the authorities that, in retrospect, I probably should have put a working group together and talked about implementation before we ever had it done.

**CHRISTIANSON:** And you had other things on your plate, too.

**ABELL:** I did, and I'm not making excuses but I freely admit to you that implementation wasn't going well, and I give Secretary England all the credit in the world for helping get us on the right track. And I thank him, too. He could have come in and said to me what I said to Ginger, "Sit down, Charlie. Go take care of other business. I've got this," but he didn't. He said, "It's still yours, but I'm going to be here, too," and it was a huge help.

**CHRISTIANSON:** And he'd been Secretary of Navy early on, then went to be Deputy Secretary at Homeland Security, had experience, as you were saying earlier, working with unions and also working with OPM. Was that one of the critical changes to the relations between the Department and OPM on NSPS?

**ABELL:** I think somewhere along the line OPM dropped its resistance. It happened before enactment. Ms. James learned more about it, got more familiar with us. She preferred to talk to Secretary Chu. She saw herself as a peer of his, not mine, which was fine with me. I talked to her deputy a lot, who had come out of the Senate Government Affairs Committee, and I talked to Ron Sanders a couple of times a day, and, of course, during the union meetings we were together all day, every day, and Ron is a friend.

So I think those guys, going back—and, again, I want to emphasize, I think the openness that we had—and that wasn't necessarily characteristics of the Rumsfeld department—but the openness that we had, people could see we're not hiding things and we're not trying to hit you over the head with a hammer. I'm willing to talk about anything there, and I will tell you when you've hit a hard spot and we're not going to talk about that anymore. The rest of it, I was willing to talk about. Again, I attribute that to 11 years on the Armed Services Committee, dealing with the Department of Defense, among others, saying, "Fellows, I know how this works." We had to give the Hill things.

**CRAIN:** One question that comes to my mind is Secretary [Gordon] England would eventually become Deputy Secretary. Before that, Paul Wolfowitz was Deputy Secretary. Was he involved, other than early on?

**ABELL:** He was aware but he didn't have the same role as the Deputy Secretary that Secretary England had.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Based on experience and interests?

**ABELL:** Yes. I mean, I guess so. I'm sure he did whatever Secretary Rumsfeld wanted him to do, but he more was focused on the war and things external, and the Deputy's Committee, with the White House and the National Security Agency, and things like that. It's not that he didn't know. I met with him regularly. Chu met with him regularly. We talked to him about it, but we weren't the thing that he got up in the morning, and that wasn't his first question. We may not have even been on his list of questions. So he was aware, but not directly involved.

My assessment is that when he left and Secretary England came in, he became more the Chief Management Officer, that you hear people talk about now. He focused on what's going on inside, Secretary Rumsfeld continued his external view, and both were very comfortable in that role. So they were different guys, different roles, and I assume both of them did exactly what Secretary Rumsfeld wanted them to do.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Was there a big change when it went from Chu to England?

**ABELL:** No. I don't think so. Well, England brought a level of credibility, an umbrella of credibility.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Based on experience.

**ABELL:** Based on experience, but also based on the fact that he'd been a service secretary and he'd been a deputy secretary, and now he was back being a deputy secretary. So if a service came in and said, "We're absolutely not going to do this," England, in his way, could throw an arm around their shoulder, walk down the hallway, and say, "Don't make me kill you." So they would come around, and he just had that way about him. He had an approach that I tried to learn from, I hope I learned, and, again, he told me a thousand times, the hard stuff is the soft stuff, and you go slow to go fast, and things like that. All of those sort of management tidbits that get thrown out there, that keep us focused and on track, and, okay, we're not reaching too far. We're going to get the foundation built before we worry about the roof, kind of stuff. Very helpful.

**CRAIN:** Once he took over, he changed the implementation process, turning it into more, like the Department does, acquisitions.

**ABELL:** Yeah, I guess that's right. What I would tell you he did is we formed this NSPS working group, and he brought in a trusted head from the Navy.

**CHRISTIANSON:** That he had known, obviously, before.

**ABELL:** That he had known and worked with before, yes. Basically, at that point, we would ask the services, rather than DoD dictating to the services, okay, we want to implement. What would

be your first ones, Air Force? What would be your first ones, Army and Navy? And we would look at that, and if we didn't have any reason to object, we'd say, "Okay, fine."

**CHRISTIANSON:** Did they vary?

**ABELL:** Yes. Each service had a different approach. So the phased implementation came largely based on those inputs, and we went to WHS and said, "Okay, within OSD, who would you like to go first?" Sometimes we would talk about, let's not take the hardest one first. Let's have success breed success. But they were all talked out, but they had input from the users, which, again, was a different approach and one that worked well for us.

You know, when you say "when Secretary England took over," Secretary England came in as an overseer but not a doer, necessarily, and I'm not saying that he didn't do, because sometimes he did do, but it wasn't his style to be the guy that says it's going to be this way, or this way, or this way. His style was to let me and the NSPS working group work, but guidance, you know, let's work with the services, let's ask them what they want to do. For an OSD staff to ask the services what would you like to do, they couldn't even get those words to come out of their mouths. But it worked.

You know, there's an interesting thing. I'll just tell you sort of a sidebar, but I wouldn't want it to be missed. The biggest objections from the work force, over performance-based management and performance-based competition, came from the highest-performing workers. You'd talk to a worker and they would be, "I hope this never comes to my office. I can't believe we're going to do this," and it was obviously the best person in the office, or on that team. And you'd say, "Why are you worried about it?" I think it was just the fact that the uncertainty, perhaps, but also I think they were the best and they didn't know if they could be the best in the new system.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Or wouldn't be recognized.

**ABELL:** Perhaps. But I was always amazed by that, that you look around and you say, "Okay, if I was going to fire the first guy in this room, it would be the guy in that chair." He's happy with it. It's fine with him. And the guy over here who's probably going to be the next boss is saying, "I don't know. This thing is not going to work, and I'm not happy with this." A really interesting dynamic, and Secretary England and I talked about it a number of times. The people with the least to worry about, and probably who stood to benefit the most from the flexible bonuses and all, were the ones who worried the most. They didn't block it. They just worried about it, and caused us to do some more talking and selling.

**CRAIN:** That's interesting. During this period, although the internal processes were improved, I believe, for the roll-out, if that's the right way of characterizing it, but the unions were also not staying idle. They were coalescing. What was Secretary England's and your strategy?

**CHRISTIANSON:** Were they very open in their criticism? Therefore, you had to address those criticisms, for example?

**ABELL:** Well, they weren't direct with us, but they were direct with others. They went to their patrons on the Hill, but also, in their conventions—and, again, that's where sometimes the AFGE would enlist AFL-CIO to bring the power of that union to bear, to protect our brothers in the federal civil service, that kind of stuff. And, you know, there would be interviews in newspapers, and speeches made, and sometimes allegations tossed out, and we'd have to address those. And, again, we met many times, over in the offices, with the head of the AFGE, and, of course, they switched once in there, in an internal union kind of coup, and so we had to start over again. That was a setback because, much like a political campaign, the new guy coming in had campaigned on this show not staying.

**CRAIN:** That was John Gage, I think.

**ABELL:** Yes. Secretary England met with him alone. Secretary England met with him with me. Whatever it took, but it didn't hurt my feelings if it was going to be Secretary England and Mr. Gage meeting alone. That was fine. Again, we tried to keep the focus on let's get NSPS up and running and successful, and whatever it takes.

**CHRISTIANSON:** The strategic pause occurs, and it's called by Secretary Rumsfeld. But he must have obviously had a whole lot of input from DoD.

**ABELL:** That was Secretary England's idea.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Okay. That's what I was going to say. That's who basically asked Secretary Rumsfeld for this strategic pause, was Secretary England.

**ABELL:** Right. When Secretary England took it over, he said, "Look, this ship is floundering. I need time." He wisely said he didn't have all the answers, either, "So let's do an assessment. Let's see where we are, and what's gone right and what's gone wrong," and that's what that was about. Again, I found it hugely helpful.

**CRAIN:** Now, he eventually is determined to create a program executive officer for some interim, I believe Pete Brown and then Mary Lacey—

**ABELL:** Mary Lacey, again, that was a Navy lady that he brought in.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Oh, that's the Navy lady. That's the one that you were talking about.

**ABELL:** Yes.

**CRAIN:** And the PEO then became the center of gravity for NSPS implementation. How closely did you coordinate with Mary Lacey?

**ABELL:** Daily.

**CRAIN:** And what were her strengths and concerns?

**ABELL:** She came out of a Navy depot, so she knew the federal civil work force but she also knew unions, because of her depot time, and she was the antithesis of Ginger. She was tough and firm but she was not abrasive, and she was thoughtful, and she listened, and she proposed, and was very open and transparent, and all the things that I'd hoped for. Again, a wise choice. I didn't know her beforehand. I couldn't have found her in a field of people, but Secretary England knew her from his time, both in government and out of government, and it was a wise choice.

**CRAIN:** Great. So the entire tenor of relations, then, with the services, were altered by Mary Lacey.

**ABELL:** She made her deputy the guy who had been Ginger's deputy, and when I saw that I said, "Well, I understand the tactical."

**CRAIN:** Bradley Bunn.

**ABELL:** Brad Bunn. Great guy. Brad changed his stripes and did a hell of a job, and I thought, wow, inspired. Not only was it a political and tactical thing to do, but Brad rose to the challenge and was just a wonderful help.

**CHRISTIANSON:** We're going to be interviewing him in the future.

**ABELL:** Good. If you said give me a list of folks who you should talk about NSPS, he'd be on it. He'd be on the short list.

**CRAIN:** Now, this overarching, integrated product team was created, and I believe you were a co-chair of the OIPT [Overarching, Integrated Product Team] with [Senior Advisor to the Director of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management] George Nesterchuk of OPM. Could you describe the mission of the OIPT?

**CHRISTIANSON:** And who was on it. How did you choose the members?

**ABELL:** The OIPT was, again, a way to reach out to OPM, to get them on the team, and have it be one team. So they picked their guys, we picked our guys. There were some from the services, some from OSD, and we looked at issues, and talked them out. George and I talked individually, usually before the meetings, and then we'd have a meeting, but, again, it wasn't dictatorial. It was, okay, what are the issues we're going to put before this group, and either side could identify some. Sometimes it was, "We heard you're doing this." "Really? Wow. Okay. Let's talk about that. I don't know where you got it, but let's figure out why and how we deal with that."

But its real role, if I can say that, despite what might have been written down on some organizing paper, was to have that become a partnership with OPM and DoD, and, again, the transparency, that we're not doing anything you can't see.

**CHRISTIANSON:** But it was a real working group?

**ABELL:** It was a working group, and it was to address issues of concern to either side, and most of them came from them. I think most of the issues came from them, because they, again, were watching where they worked for Ms. James, and they were watching the bigger Federal Government. But it was another mechanism to facilitate the conversation. Sometimes I needed to know from them things like, what should this band look like? You guys have got compensation experience. Should it be from here to here or here to here? They had that expertise and they were able to share that. So it was helpful.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Why was there a co-chair, George Nesterczuk?

**ABELL:** Well, again, it was nobody is bigger than the other guy.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Just to make sure it was evenly represented.

**ABELL:** Yes.

**CRAIN:** When the proposed regulations were rolled out in February of 2005, they changed drastically from the initial proposed regulations prior to the strategic pause. Did they resemble more closely, then, those of the Department of Homeland Security, in that OPM had now a greater say in the regulations?

**ABELL:** I would tell you that OPM had a greater say, which was inevitable, I thought.

**CHRISTIANSON:** But it was a compromise.

**ABELL:** Right, it was a compromise, but I never thought we looked like Homeland Security. Again, we saw some things on Homeland Security that were attractive, and, as they implemented, appeared to work, and so we tried to take those. We saw other things that were not attractive to us. Even if they were working in Homeland Security, they weren't attractive to us, so we wouldn't take those.

The first set of OPM regulations were more oppressive than we anticipated, than I anticipated, anyway, but then we had the OIPT. We got the openness going and we were able to give, again, some assurances that nobody was in there trying to steal anybody else's property. We were trying to move forward. But there was enough territorial sniffing going on in there. And there were some in DoD that thought any OPM regulation was oppressive, that we ought to just take the law and implement, but that's not how things work.

**CRAIN:** One subject we have not touched on yet is, what was the military leadership's attitude toward all of this?

**ABELL:** At the very highest levels, they were aware of it and ready for it. Once you stepped out of the Pentagon and get down, most of the military guys said, "Okay, great, help me," but they were in the war, fighting.

**CHRISTIANSON:** And they had other priorities at the time.

**ABELL:** Yeah. I think they were, anything that will help me, let's do it. They understood, conceptually, more flexibility, more business-like, less sort of restrictive, and any military guy will take that kind of authority and autonomy if he can get it, and I think that's really where they were. But I think it was, okay, when's my turn? Let me know what I need to do. Frankly, I think at the three-, two-, one-star level, maybe they were even reserving judgment until it became their time, and they then would focus on it, but before that, they had other things to do. That was my assessment. We talked to them but it wasn't high on their list. Even the chiefs were focused on another front.

**CHRISTIANSON:** When, or at what point, did you think that the redesign of NSPS was ready to proceed on, for implementation, and who made that decision? I mean, did Rumsfeld say, "Look, we've got to get this thing going"?

**ABELL:** No. I think after the strategic pause and we started the phased-in thing, I think that it was just a plan and we were executing the plan, and I think the plan always had enough flexibility in it that if we got three units up and it wasn't working, we were just going to hold there until we got it right, and then go on to the next one.

**CHRISTIANSON:** You didn't have a timeline?

**ABELL:** No cookie cutters out there, no timeline. Well, we had timelines but they weren't hard, because we had to see if it was going to work. That was all, again, Secretary England's let's-build-this-correctly approach to things. From day one, I was convinced that if we could get it in, it would be successful because it was much better than the federal civil service system, especially for the Department of Defense. Frankly, we never called it the DoD personnel act, personnel system, because I knew that was going to die. We named it National Security.

**CHRISTIANSON:** How did it get that name?

**ABELL:** We gave it to it. Again, it had to have a name. When you send it over, it had to have a title at the top of the page, and I said it's hard to vote against national security, and if we call it the Department of Defense, they're going to say it was Rumsfeld, and we're going to get nos. But it was a discussion. It wasn't a dictate, and I don't think there was a eureka in the room, this is my idea, and everybody went, "Ah." It was a discussion and we came up with the National Security Personnel System. But that's what it was.

As it began to get implemented and the work force found out that it wasn't terrible—and they'd heard all kinds of things, from the unions, from coworkers, from the *Military Times*. Everybody had written about it or talked about it. But once it got in and people started working with it, then I was confident that now it just became, let's touch that problem when the problem comes up and we'll fix it and move on to the next one. But this is going to go. It had an inertia to it.

**CRAIN:** The idea that eventually, even though those who had opposed it initially would want in.

**ABELL:** Well, I never was naïve enough to say that everybody was going to love it. I thought, geez, 75 percent of people saying this is good would be a huge victory, but I never expected much more than that. I guess maybe I'd tell you, maybe by the time it got repealed, it may have even been 80 percent. If you'd done a survey, you might have had 80 percent of people who were in favor of it. It never was going to be a universal thing, but nothing ever is.

**CRAIN:** Of course, this whole time there are demonstration projects that continued to operate their own personnel systems, and why was that, that they were not included in NSPS?

**ABELL:** Concessions to let us move forward. They had their protectors, so you said, "Okay, we'll get to you, but we won't get to you first." I know I had a conversation with Secretary England that someday it would be universal and we'd get them all, but why do we want to take on China Lake or this one right now, on day one? Let's let them be. Let's get the rest of the force on it, and when we're 80 percent, I always believed China Lake would look over and say, "Well, why can't I have that?" We said, "You can. Come on over. Come on board."

**CRAIN:** And those demonstration projects have been part of the success. Some of them have been part of the reason.

**ABELL:** They will be learned lessons to follow. Again, we had experience with them. We knew things worked and we knew things didn't work, and they all had their protectors, so there was no rush. Again, it was inevitable, eventually, but there was no reason to just go kick the dragon in the foot.

**CRAIN:** You returned to the Senate Armed Services Committee in 2006. Prior to the spirals being rolled out, what was the state of NSPS development?

**CHRISTIANSON:** Did you think it was inevitable?

**ABELL:** Well, I'll tell you a little secret. I thought it was in fine shape, and Mary Lacey was doing everything that needed to be done. Less and less needed for me to touch it. Less and less needed for Secretary England. So when I went back to the SASC, I met with the staff and I said, "Guess what's not going to change, fellows? NSPS." So, as the Staff Director of the SASC, I had a lot of say about what happens in the National Defense Authorization Act, so I just said, "We're not going to keep chipping away at this thing." So I was able to provide a couple of years of stability from repeal coming in.

Now, again, when Warner left and the Democrats took control of the Senate, and Senator Levin took over as the chairman, that was his first thing to the unions, we're going to get rid of NSPS, and he did.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Had you anticipated that?

**ABELL:** No, I didn't. I actually thought, and I said, again, in many private meetings as we went through this thing with members of the Hill and the Administration, I said, "You know, I think if

a Democratic president comes in after President Bush, he will say, 'I can't believe they did that,' but privately he will say, 'Thank you, because I couldn't ever do that.'"

**CHRISTIANSON:** You didn't anticipate that they'd put the brakes on immediately.

**ABELL:** Well, and the Administration didn't, but Senator Levin did, and Senator Levin was from Michigan, big unions, they got to him, and he did. I get it. That's America. Elections have consequences, but I think it was a mistake, and if you go back and look at President Obama's OPM guy, he listed out, about two or three months after he was in office, the authorities he'd like to see, and basically it was a litany of NSPS, and I said, you had it, buddy. You had it. If you guys had been more active over on the Hill, you probably could have asked Senator Levin to calm down, but they were busy doing other things and they didn't.

**CRAIN:** So the unions first got to the system through legal challenges in 2005, which delayed implementation.

**ABELL:** Yeah, a little bit.

**CRAIN:** So it didn't necessarily delay implementation. It was more internal?

**ABELL:** Again, I'm not going to speak for the general counsel of the Department of Defense, but we didn't ever think that the unions—there were no stays, so we weren't too worried about the unions' lawsuits. We were cognizant of them, but we didn't stop doing anything because there were no stays, and the Hill was content to let the courts work, at that point, so we were okay. It was the flipping of the Senate, that happens from time to time, and they got to Senator Levin, and that was almost predictable. I just thought Senator Levin might be a bit more moderate about it, because it was working, but that's politics.

**CHRISTIANSON:** So why did you go to your new position?

**ABELL:** Yeah, it is. I was at a hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee, testifying with the service chiefs, and during the hearing a staff assistant came around and put a little note on my thing, and as I was talking I flipped open a note and it was from the Chairman, and it said, "Can you stay after the hearing?" So I just looked at him and shook my head yes, and after the hearing I told the chiefs, "Go on back. I'll get another ride." I waited and finally he came around, and down into the chairs where the gallery sits, and said, "Look, I'd like you to come over and be the Staff Director of the Armed Services Committee," and my response was, "Hey, boss, you've got one." Her name was Judy Ansley, but she was being nominated to be the Deputy National Security Advisor and that wasn't released yet. He said, "Well, in a day or two you'll read a press release and you'll understand why I need a staff director."

When I left the Senate, people would ask me many times, "Would you go back?" and I'd say, "There's only one job I'd go back for." So when he made that offer, I came back and I talked to Secretary Chu immediately, and then went down and sat with Secretary Rumsfeld, and said, "You have my loyalty. I'm here for you." And Rumsfeld thought about it, and he said, "You

know, I think you can help us as much on the Hill as you can help us here, in a different role, so you have my blessing. Go."

And so I went back to the Senate, which I love. I went back as the Staff Director of the Senate Armed Services Committee, arguably one of the five or six most powerful positions on the Hill, and you can ask people. When I was there, I always took the position as a professional staff member, that I could do it until somebody told me I couldn't, and I had that reputation around town, that if they wanted something done, when they get to me I would probably do it, if I thought it was right. So I wasn't a meek staffer. That's how I referred to some of my colleagues, as too meek—stand up, take a position, and move out. In the Senate, I thought people looked for leaders and I try to be a leader.

So as I went back to the Senate Armed Services Committee, I had an opportunity to influence national security policy—that big, not that big—and I said, who wouldn't do that? And I did. I've been dispatched to see presidents and kings and prime ministers all around the world, and carry messages, and bring back messages, and all that kind of stuff, and it's just one of those things. I couldn't turn it down. I don't know how anybody could turn it down.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Great answer. Very interesting. Is there anything else about NSPS that we should know, that we didn't ask you? We do have some other questions. We'd love to ask you about not-NSPS.

**ABELL:** Sure. Well, look, if you guys came in and said what do you want to talk about, I would tell you that the biggest thing I did in the Department of Defense was the NSPS. It was part of Secretary Rumsfeld's transformation. It was one of the few parts that was ever enacted. I've talked to him about that and I've talked to Secretary England about that. It was enacted because we were so proactive about it and we were so transparent about it. Other things that were part of his transformation got to the Hill and died, but my colleagues on the OSD, and appointees, weren't over there, or they were over there with my way or the highway, and I knew that wouldn't work. So, we took a different approach and we were successful, and I was happy that history will record Secretary Rumsfeld got part of his transformation anyway, and that was his.

And I predict, much like you mentioned earlier, they'll come back to it. It's a good idea. It was not perfect but it's a good idea. Somebody will come around and pick it up, make some improvements, and it will be enacted again, and maybe this time it will stick a little longer. But, no, I'm proud of it. I'm proud to have a little piece in it, and I'm delighted that I got to know and work with Secretary England so closely, because I learned a lot from him.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Before we talk about military personnel, I'm just curious how you got involved in Wounded Warrior, sir.

**ABELL:** When I was on the Hill, this group was formed. I guess I was in DoD when it formed, in 2003. But along the way, a couple of times they approached me and said, "Would you sit on our board?" and I always had to say, "No, I cannot." I was in DoD, and then I was back on the Armed Services Committee and I couldn't do those kinds of things. When Senator Warner termed out and I left, I was in the private sector and I got a call one day, and it was from the

Wounded Warrior Project, who again said, "Would you please sit on our board?" There were people on the board with whom I'd worked before—Secretary [of Veterans Affairs Anthony] Principi, [Deputy] Secretary [of Veterans Affairs Gordon] Mansfield, Charlie Battaglia [?], and others who knew me, and I said I'd be proud to do it, and I did.

So I sat on the board for about seven years. Then they had an opening here for Executive Vice President for Policy, and the CEO came to me and said, "Are you interested in that job?" I said, "No, absolutely not." The job was this big, and, first of all, I can do more for WWP from the board, but also, I don't want to do a job that big. So he came back later and said, "I want to make the job this big. Are you interested?" and I said, "Now you're talking to me. I'm interested." When it's bigger it's got more moving parts, a little more influence. So I said, "Yeah, I'd be interested." We talked a couple of more times, and I talked to my wife and said, "This is going to be a pay cut, but it's the Wounded Warrior Project," and she said, "Go be happy." So that's how I got here.

**CHRISTIANSON:** And how long have you been here, sir?

**ABELL:** Two years on the staff.

**CHRISTIANSON:** We're going to move on to some other issues here, talking about military personnel, if you don't mind. We don't want to monopolize our time with you.

**CRAIN:** First, we touched on this earlier, your initial position that you took, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Force Management. You had taken that position with the understanding that it was going to turn into the Principal Under Secretary of Defense for P&R. Could you discuss how that position changed, and maybe the reasons for the change?

**ABELL:** Well, again, I was watching and managing and overseeing, whatever words you want, the Department of Defense from the Armed Services Committee, and, of course, on the Senate side, we did all the confirmations, so we created the positions that were to be confirmed and those that were not, and part of my portfolio was to manage the candidates as they went through the confirmation system. So I was up to here, and I knew everything about all the positions in DoD.

When the administration changed, and the transition committee started to meet, I was one that people came over to from President Bush's transition committee and said, "What do you think?" I said, "Look, this position is too small. P&R, if you're going to keep P&R, it's this big. One guy can't do it and this position is a waste of time." So we started talking about that.

Much to my surprise, I got a call that said, "We'd like you to interview with Secretary Rumsfeld to be the FM&P [Force Management and Personnel]," I said, "Fellows, first of all, yes, I'm going to go do that. Second of all, what are we going to do about FM&P?" They said, "Never mind. Don't worry. The fix is in. The President is going to propose changing it and we're going to make you the Principal Deputy." I said, "Good. I'm in." So I had my interview with Secretary Rumsfeld and I met with Mr. Hoffman, who was one of his unofficial right-hand men, and we talked about it as part of the interview, frankly.

So I got the nod from the President. I came in and I took over the job as the Assistant Secretary, and, I actually preceded Secretary Chu in there, so for a while I was the only guy. But when Secretary Chu came in, from his day one, I never acted as the Assistant Secretary. I always acted as the Principal Deputy. The portfolio was enlarged to include the military and community family, the civilian personnel guys, all of that, and I was his Principal Deputy, so the Reserve Affairs guy, I met with, and the Health Affairs guy, I met with, from day one.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Tony, let's move ahead to the military portion, just to make sure, because I think there are some interesting things there.

**CRAIN:** Absolutely. President George W. Bush, as we've discussed, gave Rumsfeld explicit guidance to make the Department of Defense lethal, light, and mobile. What role did the Office of Personnel and Readiness play in transforming the military to meet the demands of the 21st century?

**ABELL:** Well, when transformation was developing and we were asked for inputs and all of those things, first of all, NSPS was the first thing we put on the table and said, "Look, we want to change civilian personnel management system. That will do more to move this department where we want to move it than anything else in the world." But then we also looked at readiness, and we looked at use of the reserves, and we looked at Tricare. While those were more minor players and weren't big things in his system, we also looked at the compensation, but, of course, once a war starts, you can't really fool with compensation. You can only add to it. You can't perform it. So Admiral [Joseph] Prueher did a compensation review for us, and we had high hopes for that, but, again, once the war started that pretty much was out the window.

But we looked at the force and we looked at the readiness and training, and we did stuff with the training, from bringing in the simulations and mixing it with the actual hands-on training and more joint sort of stuff. I think those were the contributions we made. But they were bit players, compared to the NSPS.

**CHRISTIANSON:** It was during this time, too, that I think there was a recognition of some of the hardships that military families, especially those with servicemen deployed. Could you describe some of the efforts?

**ABELL:** Sure. The first thing I did was to recommend to Secretary Chu we bring in John Molino to be the Deputy Under Secretary for Military and Community Family. I've known John a long, long time, on active duty, and now with the Hill jobs, as well, so I thought he was exactly the right guy. He came in and Secretary Chu and he developed the social covenant, which was the manifestation of reaching out to families and (1) discovering their issues, and (2) addressing their issues. John was exactly the right guy to do that, and the work he did there was wonderful, I think, and it precipitated in the services. Once the services saw that, then they were more energized to do family things. We fought in the budget process for money for family services and for those things that families used, whether they were in our purview or not, things on bases like better housing, that kind of stuff, which really didn't fall under us.

So that was great. I personally spent a lot of time with the DoD schools. I chaired all of their meetings, personally, and they were shocked that a deputy under secretary would even come to the meetings. At the time, every major command and all services were represented, and after the second meeting I said to the DoD schools guy, I said, "Give me the names of the guys that weren't here," and I sent them a handwritten note. I said, "I missed you. I'm sorry. We're talking about important issues to people in your commands. I hope to see you at the next one." And at the next one I had twinkle, twinkle, little stars all around the table, because, of course, they had talked to one another, but that was what I wanted to do. I said, "Wait a minute. I'm going to come. I'm going to devote my time. You come and you devote your time," and we talked about issues.

But those were examples of things we did. I could have turned that over to the head of the DoD schools, but it would have been, then, some lieutenant colonels and an SES sitting in a room, and that's not what we wanted. And John Molino had the social covenant, and John Van Alstyne, lieutenant general in the Army, came in and was the force management and personnel guy. I had known him and worked for him on active duty. He was a colonel and I was a lieutenant colonel. He had the right personality to deal with the military issues. We met with the services and were not as amenable to listening to the services on military issues as we were on NSPS.

I had a Monday afternoon meeting at 1:30 every week. The first one, the Navy guy sitting right here, and the Assistant Secretary of the Navy said, "How are we going to decide issues? Are we going to vote?" I said, "Hey, you don't know me. Yes, we'll vote, and then I'm going to tell you what we're going to do." He said, "Well, that's not the way it's been," and I said, "Well, there's a new sheriff in town." But we got to know one another, and it also caused—the three assistant secretaries of the services decided that they had to meet for lunch before the 1:30 meeting, to make sure that they had a unified approach, and my staff said, "Does that bother you?" I said, "No. I love it. That's great. They're going to think about issues. They're going to bring them up. We're going to talk about them." So that's what we did.

But on the military side, it was much more directive and focused on families and readiness. I was worried about things like promotion boards and all that, that they be done right, but there weren't huge scandals in that area.

**CRAIN:** Secretary Rumsfeld and Dr. Chu both emphasized the need for encouraging joint war-fighting capabilities. What efforts did you undertake to encourage that jointness?

**ABELL:** Almost all of the training and readiness stuff that we did was joint. I can't think of any that we didn't do that weren't joint in some way, and that included, again, using the simulation and the actual on-the-ground. We might have two ships at sea and everything else was virtual, but there were always Navy, Air Force, Marine, and Army guys participating. We may be using the 82nd Airborne, maybe, in the field at Fort Bragg, two ships off the coast of Japan, and the Air Force simulator, but those were the kinds of things we did. Paul Mayberry was our Deputy Under for that and did a great job. He focused on that and he focused on providing training that allowed them to be able to do those kinds of joint virtual exercises, where we couldn't necessarily have ever gotten the forces all together and do it.

No, I thought it was a great deal, and then the other part we did was very un-Republican. We charged Paul to take care of the environment in our training areas, and we found out that that was possible. We could still train without knocking down every tree in Fort Bragg, that kind of stuff. I recall one day, Secretary Chu telling Paul, "Get me an award from an enviro group." We were good stewards, and there were countless things where the water running off our bases was more pure than off the neighboring farms and cities, and all those things. So all Paul had to do was get the stats out in front of the enviro groups, and he started going to conventions where he got the glass thing for being steward of the environment, which was strange. People would have thought of that from a Republican administration.

**CHRISTIANSON:** You don't necessarily associate the military with that.

**ABELL:** But it helped us. It allowed us, then, to do more, because we didn't have picketers and all that kind of stuff out there.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Another priority that Dr. Chu had was to make sure that reasonable costs were associated with military effectiveness, obviously. How did P&R associate itself with this philosophy, and what were your main concerns, as far as personnel?

**ABELL:** Well, Dr. Chu was an economist, is an economist, and even falling back to his days in PA&E, always was concerned that we know the real costs and that they were associated correctly. So when he started to talk about that, I was not shocked. I am not an economist, by any stretch. Sometimes I had to listen real carefully and figure out what we were really talking about there. But that was mostly, again, an accounting drill, and I don't mean that in the pejorative sense, but it was to make sure that we knew the costs, and that we had captured all the costs.

Let me go back to improving military housing. We would take some of those costs, attribute them to military personnel because it had an effect. We were trying to do things on the personnel side, that that improved and enhanced, so we would take some of those costs and attribute them to the military personnel accounts. On the other hand, sometimes we would take personnel accounts and, when we go back to the example that you used, where we take the military guy and we put him in the bucket loaded because we didn't get a civilian in there, we'd say, "Wait a minute. Let's make sure that cost is attributed off to the public works guys, or whomever he's working for." So sort of the truth in lending kind of thing. Again, not so much in my personal view of that, other than to make sure that we've done what he wanted, but I appreciated what he was doing, and left to my own devices I probably would have never thought of them, because that's not who I am.

**CRAIN:** The state of military language training, were you involved with encouraging changes after the global war on terror?

**ABELL:** Yeah. Once the first units went into Afghanistan, we recognized what we probably should have known, or maybe even did recognize at some levels all along, Pashto and Urdu, we didn't have anybody. We had relatively nobody that knew that. So we started looking into it, how do we get better, and on many fronts. One is, I'll bet we have military people out there that do speak Pashto and Urdu, but their job is an engineer or an MP or something, and they just

happened to come from that family, or have an education that does that. So, how do we find them? It took some creative mining of the personnel records to try and find those guys. And then, how do we recruit guys that already know how to speak those things, and can we trust them if we recruit them? Those issues all had to go be vetted, and, again, [Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Plans] Gail McGinn had the lead on that.

And then we went to the folks who taught language out at Monterey, but also the State Department guys here locally, and to Rosetta Stone, and folks like that, and said, "How do we get some guys who might have an aptitude or a desire? How do we get them up so that they can speak all of the language we suddenly need to speak?" We had Air Force guys on the ground in the stands. How do we talk to them? And how do we get our intel guys to have the guys that can listen and really know what the Arabic is saying, not the literal translation but what is he really saying, kind of thing?

There were classified things going on, as well, where we were looking for folks that could get ears on. So, yeah, Gail McGinn took that, and it was very frustrating. We knew that there was a big Iraqi community in Detroit, and so we went to Detroit and tried to say to the leaders there, who's willing to come, and all that. Of course, they had their cultural issues and then they had their, "My family is in Iraq. If I'm identified then that's going to be—," and we understood all that. So it was very difficult to do, but I thought necessary. I wouldn't tell you we made huge strides there, but we took steps, as many as we could, and I give Gail McGinn every credit for that. She was the energy behind that.

**CHRISTIANSON:** During the Iraq conflict, obviously, there was a tremendous mobilization of reserve components. How was that accomplished?

**ABELL:** Secretary Rumsfeld said, "I don't want to send anybody twice until everybody has been once," basically, and the Joint Staff brought to him, every week, the deployment lists. The first months, we had no role in that. He would be in his staff meetings and keep talking about why people weren't listening to him, and why were we sending guys three and four times, and those kinds of things, and the answer would be, "Well, that's all the units we have." Intuitively, he knew better than that, so Secretary Chu and I, depending on who was at the meetings, said, "We can help."

Finally he said, "Okay, you're in every deployment meeting and you're my fact-checker on the units." So the Joint Staff would come in and say, "Okay, we're going to move the 45th Transportation Company, long-haul trucks, out of Fort Hood, Texas. They've been back 14 months." Secretary Rumsfeld would look and we'd say, "Sir, we have 12 long-haul truck companies in the Guard and Reserve, in various places, who haven't deployed in their lifetime." He'd say, "Okay. Pick one." The Joint Staff learned quickly, and we started being invited to—

**CHRISTIANSON:** Did their jaws drop?

**ABELL:** Oh, they hated it. They hated it, and I would have, too, if I'd have been them. But what we got was I started meeting every week with the Director of the Joint Staff because he—bless his heart. It was [General] George Casey, initially, and then [General Norton] Norty Schwartz,

and just kept going. They said, "I don't want to get in it with Rumsfeld and have you reverse our plans because we didn't talk to you, so let's talk." I got invited to the sourcing conference, where they bring in all the MACOMs [Army Major Commands]. I was the only civilian in the room, and the Director of the Joint Staff said, "You're sitting in the front row, beside me," and I did, and we talked.

The back commands hated him because they'd say, "Okay, I need this truck company and this is the one I want." He'd say, "No. That truck company has been once. They've only been back X number of months. They're not eligible to go." And then we'd look at the rest of the force and find one. Sometimes we'd have to take two reserve companies and bring them together to make sure we had a whole company, but that was Secretary Rumsfeld saying, "I don't want to make people go twice unless everybody has been once."

And it really wasn't the combat forces that were the problem. It was all the logistic forces that were the bigger problem, and most of these are in the Guard and Reserve. So our part was, we would meet before the weekly meetings, and we would look at their deployment lists, both the unclassified and the classified, and we'd say, "Okay, why this unit? Why not this unit?" And if there was a reason—sometimes when Secretary Rumsfeld would look around, I'd say, "Boss, that unit has been back 15 months, but that's the right unit," and he'd have to make the call. But at that point, his call was send the unit or don't, not find another unit. So that was our contribution. We knew, we scrubbed the Guard and Reserve, even the active duty sometimes, to say, "Okay, there's a unit at Fort Lewis, Washington, and that's never gone anywhere. Why not?"

**CRAIN:** How early was that in the war?

**ABELL:** We were probably six months in before we got directly involved, because they went to this learning thing. It was a uniform thing. Deploying forces is a Joint Staff function. But because he wanted to be sure we were being fair to the families and to the troops, he had to have an honest broker in the room, and we became that one. I will tell you the other contribution we made to that is sometimes we'd be in the room and there would be a unit in theater, or in the waters next to the theater, and they'd say, "Okay, their time is up in January. We're not going to bring them out in January. We're going to keep them until March." My role in that meeting would be to say, "Wait a minute. We told their families they'd be home on the 21st of January. Mr. Secretary, if you're going to keep them, your call, but now we, me and the uniformed guys, have to go do something with those families."

That more happened with aircraft carriers and naval battle groups than others, and sometimes, for operational reasons, he'd say, "Okay, we're going to extend them," but now there would be a contingent of leadership going down to those to those families before the announcement was made. Okay, that's an expectation of management, but I kept saying, "Look, it's an old adage but reenlistment decisions are made at the kitchen table."

**CRAIN:** Secretary Rumsfeld, at these meetings—and you were at a lot of the meetings with Secretary Rumsfeld and top-level military officers—what was that like? I guess, for historians, I might not be able to gather from the documents. What was a meeting with Secretary Rumsfeld like?

**CHRISTIANSON:** Was he standing up?

**ABELL:** Not usually. He would sit at his conference table. Usually sitting right beside him was the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and [Special Assistant to the Secretary of Defense] Larry di Rita, was usually in the room, and the Director of the Joint Staff was usually in the room, and then there were colonels, and sometimes they shuttled in and out, depending on the classification levels, and usually I was in the room. Sometimes Secretary Wolfowitz was there. Sometimes he wasn't, depending on what else he was doing.

And they were, I want to say tense, but that may not be the right word. They were never relaxed—let me put it that way. They were always very serious and very focused, and sometimes they just ended because it would be, "You didn't listen to what I said. Get me the answer that complies with my guidance," and we're all out of the room with the requisite ass-chewing.

That's about as much description as I'm going to give you. I've been asked that question many times and my answer has been, people in the room won't tell you what happened in the room, and the people that tell you what happened in the room, weren't in the room, and that's the way it is.

**CRAIN:** And the good thing is, some of this stuff won't appear until we publish our volume on Secretary Rumsfeld, which will be—

**CHRISTIANSON:** 15 and 20 years from now.

**CRAIN:** And you were there from the beginning, at the initial mobilization?

**ABELL:** Yeah, and again, usually Secretary Chu had me to go to those meetings. I had a military background, I talked to the Reserve and the Guard guys, and if I was in town, I went.

**CHRISTIANSON:** As a former military officer myself, I'm always interested in the transition from a divisional structure down to the brigade structure. Could you explain some of that?

**ABELL:** Well, that was an Army initiative, basically, but the Army just decided that it was more effective, I guess, to deploy brigade combat teams. As you know, they never fought as a brigade—they always fought as a combat team—so why not deploy them as such. And I think that was happening in the Army, sort of serendipitously to the outbreak of the war, and they—

**CHRISTIANSON:** A more agile force.

**ABELL:** A more agile force, and, again, I'll give the Marines credit. The Army looked at the Marines and said, "That's what they do. They send regiments, not brigades and all that." It just worked out that way, and then we began to count things in that way, and, again, to was sort of inertia. Once the Joint Staff begins to count brigade combat teams, then that's what you begin to look at, and you didn't care about the division structure, so much. But, also, Iraq was such a partitioned force, a partitioned place, I likened it to Vietnam. The guys in the north of Iraq and

the guys in the south of Iraq could have talked about the war, and you'd say, "You weren't in the same country."

That's the way Vietnam was. The guys in the mountains and central highlands, and the guys in the north, and the guys in the delta, they all talked about different wars. It was all the same war, but none of them saw what the other guys saw, and Iraq was a little bit like that. The guys in Fallujah and out that way fought a totally different war than the guys up in Tikrit did, or the guys farther south, in Baghdad did, and the guys in Baghdad, they were combat in cities.

**CRAIN:** We've already discussed this, to some extent, but was there a sense that the stress on the force grew worse and worse, especially around 2005-2006?

**ABELL:** There was a lot of talk about that. It wasn't measurable. It was perceived. I mentioned, in these meetings with Secretary Rumsfeld and the various chairmen, over time, "Quit talking about it. If you tell a soldier he's tired, he's tired. If you tell him he's stressed, he's stressed. If you don't tell him that, then he doesn't figure it out. He doesn't know he's stressed, so quit telling him he's stressed. He might not even be stressed."

I learned that as a captain. If I told my troops, "God, I know you're tired," then I could just feel them all go, "Oh, I'm tired." But if I came in there and said, "No, we're going to wash all the tanks before we home, guys, because that's what tankers do," then they'd say, "Okay. Well, we'll wash all the tanks before we go home."

Yes, there was stress on the force, but if you talk to the individual soldiers—and I went to the theater a lot—they were worried about all the things you'd want them to be worried about. They were worried about their families. They were worried about their buddies. They were worried about stepping on an IED. But they didn't think that they were put upon. Many of them, who were in their second and third tours, were there because they raised their hands. One of Rumsfeld's dictates was, "We didn't send him back involuntarily." So, yes, there was a stress, but it wasn't the stress of deployment, necessarily, I didn't think. But there was a lot of talk about it. There was a buzz, a hum, if you will. And, again, I thought it was disingenuous to the families, because, again, if they heard it, then they got it, too. So it was a tough issue. It was always there.

Secretary Rumsfeld, from the beginning, said, "I don't want to send a guy unless everybody else is gone," involuntarily, so there were lot of guys that cross-stepped, voluntarily. But, yeah, there was stress on the force, but I don't think it was any more. I mean, I'll be honest with you, and I've said this many times in the course of my time at DoD, I think the guy that didn't deploy was under more stress than the guy that did. The guys that stayed back worked horrible hours, because they were the few. I don't mean they were shirkers, but they stayed back for whatever reason. And their son and daughter didn't understand why their dad or mom wasn't at the school play or at the football game or at the band concert, but they understood why the guy who was in Iraq wasn't at the band concert. I thought those guys were probably more stressed from those kinds of pushes and pulls than the deployed guys were. That's just my view. But one of the things I kept saying to the leadership is, "Quit talking about this."

**CHRISTIANSON:** The other question I have, there were a lot of efforts to improve housing and also health care for families.

**ABELL:** Again, that was back to the social covenant, taking care of the families.

**CHRISTIANSON:** There was a famous trip, wasn't it, when Rumsfeld went and saw housing.

**ABELL:** Yeah, and I'll be candid with you. Much of that started in the Clinton administration. Naples was changed because Secretary [John] Dalton, the Secretary of the Navy, went to Naples and said, "Oh, my God." So it was starting, but when the war started, we had more money, so things like that could be done. Privatization had come along, and that was a way to get housing done quick and less expensive to the Federal Government. All of those things, but they were all done in an attempt to help the families, and to make the deployed soldier more comfortable with it, and then to my point of reenlistment decisions are made at the kitchen table.

So when we talk to soldiers, "I'll be happy to go, sir, as long as I know my family is okay," and okay meant if my son, daughter, mother, father, whatever it is gets sick, that somebody is going to take care of them and it's going to be quality health care. They didn't worry about what was going to happen to them in theater. I guess they assumed that was going to be good health care. But if the kid fell and broke his arm, that emergency room was open and took care of him and fixed his arm, and they could Skype back and forth talk about it, or what a cute cast, or whatever, and no, "Oh, my God, is he going to be deformed forever?"

So that's why we did all that stuff, was to take care of the families, because we were imposing on the uniformed guys.

**CRAIN:** You're working at Wounded Warriors currently, and during the Iraq and Afghanistan war, a lot of the wounds have, in the past, been fatal, but because of advancements in medical care. What were your experiences?

**ABELL:** Well, I went to the hospitals in theater and at Landstuhl and at Walter Reed regularly. Whenever I was in theater, I always visited the hospitals. I would tell myself I'm going there to cheer up the troops and it always worked the other way around. But I'll tell you what I learned first off. Very early in the war, I was in Landstuhl. There was a Special Forces guy in there that had lost his arm, and he was a handful. The staff and the hospital commander said, "Can you help us with him?" I went in and sat with him, and said, "What's the deal?" He said, "They won't let me go back to my unit. They're going to kick me out." I said, "Well, that sucks."

So we came back and one of the personnel issues we took up was, why are we routinely kicking these guys out? If we can rehabilitate them, and they want to serve, why don't we keep them? And personnel systems in the three services changed. Maybe he couldn't be the infantryman that he was, but he didn't have to get out. Sometimes we were able to give him the right prosthetic and he could be the infantryman he was, even with a hand missing or a below-the-knee amputation or something. There are guys all over the theater now that have those kinds of things. But I told them, we've got a chief of staff in the Army that doesn't have half his foot. He's a chief

of staff in the Army. Why are we going to throw him out today. We used those kinds of examples.

But this sergeant first class, a special operator, I told him, when I was in the hospital, I said, "Look, we're not going to throw you out." I walked out of the room and my military assistant said, "How the hell are you going to do that?" and he said, "I don't know, but we're going to go home and do it." That's just the way it was, and he was a better patient from that point on, but it was the right thing to do.

But we had the medicine. I also talked to the docs in theater. I can remember I was in Baghdad Hospital and I was talking to a neurosurgeon. He wanted to talk about compensation, and I said, "Okay, let's talk about it. How much money do you make?" You know, the docs have the big bonuses, \$60,000- or \$80,000-a-year bonuses, plus their pay and all that. He said, "I can make more money in a weekend than you can pay me in my tour here." Docs were there 90 days at a time. I said, "I'm sure. I can't tell you. I won't even begin to tell you that I can compete with that. So what do you want me to do about it?" He said, "Convince me to stay. I want to stay."

So we did all that. We talked to docs, and we had resiliency programs and things like that, that basically said we appreciate what you do, and we still do those things today. So it was that kind of stuff that we tried to do, to get them, and this neurosurgeon, he stayed. He went back to Fort Lewis, Washington, and then he went back to Baghdad again, and he did miraculous stuff when he was in Baghdad, and then he was bored to tears when he was at Fort Lewis. That's just the way it goes. But there were nurses that didn't have that kind of flexibility, but, again, when people would say, "Good job. Way to go. You saved that guy's life," they'd light up and say, "That's it. Thank you. I'm back in it."

After the airplane hit the Pentagon, we did a lot of resiliency work for the mortuary people over at Dover, because we were talking about all the things that were going on at the Pentagon, and, to his credit, John Molino said, "You know, those mortuary guys, they never see anything but the dregs." I said, "Well, let's go talk to them," so we went over. We started making sure that there were resiliency programs and respite for those guys, as well, because we needed them every day.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Final question. Where were you on 9/11?

**ABELL:** If you remember, September 10th, Secretary Rumsfeld gave his transformation speech. For me, that was on September 11th, because I was in Japan, and I watched it at the Navy base in Japan. I watched it broadcast, and I looked around at the people with me and I said, "Life is going to change in the Pentagon." At that point, there were three typhoons lined up to come to Japan, and all the military guys, the commanders that we had scheduled to visit, said, "We're going to be full up in self-protection," getting families housed, getting people in safe havens, and all that kind of stuff. "Please, sir, we don't need you here."

Fair enough, so I got on an airplane, and on September 11th—September 12th, at that point—I flew to Guam, and we were in the air between Japan and Guam when it happened. When we landed in Guam, the Customs and Immigration guys saw the official passport, and the guy held it up and said, "Sir, I need to talk to you. You need to see my supervisor." I said, "Wait a minute.

This is the United States. I don't have a problem getting into the United States." So I went over to the supervisor, and he took my passport and was holding it up, and he said, "Sir, do you know what's going on?" I'm thinking, right here, right now, no.

He said, "We are at war." And I'm thinking, I'm in Guam. I said, "Who's at war?" He said, "We've been attacked." I said, "Who's been attacked?" Is this the Grand Duchy of Guam, or what? Then he said, "No, sir. They attacked the World Trade Center. They attacked the Pentagon," and he said they attacked the White House. And I said, "Okay. Are you detaining me?" He said, "No." I said, "Okay. Give me my passport."

We walked out to the front of the terminal there in Guam and there was a lieutenant commander standing out there, and I tapped him on the shoulder and I said, "Commander, I need some help." He said, "No, sir. I'm sorry. I'm here. I'm looking for some DoD official. I can't do anything until I find him." And I said, "It's your lucky day, buddy." We went straight to the Navy base and went into the op center. I talked to Rumsfeld on the CVITS, and then I began working my way back across the Pacific on military aircraft until I could get home.

**CHRISTIANSON:** We've had a lot of interviews, obviously, but for people like yourself, in positions, were any of the people that you worked with injured? I think it hit in a different area.

**ABELL:** My personal office, no, but I work very closely with the personnel guys, of all the services, and, of course, the Army lost its personnel chief, and a number of those people, some of whom had worked for me. I worked once in the Army Personnel, the Army DSPER's office, so some of those civilians had worked for me when I was there. My wife was working in the Assistant Secretary of the Army Office for Manpower's office, so she was unscathed, luckily, but I didn't know that at the time.

The more we learned, as we got into Guam and started getting word, the more we realized the scope of the tragedy, and we also were informed, of course, that the White House had not been hit, so we thought, great. But our job was to get back and then do our function, helping Secretary Rumsfeld.

**CHRISTIANSON:** That pretty much concludes our interview. It's three o'clock. Is there anything else that you think we should know?

**ABELL:** Sometimes you talk about the post-9/11 attacks, the family support center that we set up.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Would you be willing to sit down and talk to us about that.

**ABELL:** Sure, that we set up in Crystal City, and how that evolved. Again, there was no decision. It evolved, but it's a lesson that I think and hope will be learned if, God forbid, we ever have to do it again.

**CHRISTIANSON:** That would be a good one for us to have a history of, I think.

**CRAIN:** Absolutely.

**CHRISTIANSON:** If you're willing to do that, we would set up an appointment.

**ABELL:** Yeah, and I would also tell you to talk to John Van Alstyne, a retired lieutenant general. He worked for me, but I made him the head of that thing.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Do you have anything, Tony?

**CRAIN:** And, of course, we'd be very interested in any discussions you had with Secretary Rumsfeld or any further discussions that you can remember, for the historical record, and this could even be a separate recording where we could have a separate agreement.

**CHRISTIANSON:** We're doing a very, very long—and Secretary Rumsfeld knows that—study, because he's so influential, obviously, not only in the second term but also in his early term. He told us, the last time we were in his office, and he gave us a grand tour, that his next book is going to be about his early years as Secretary of Defense. Do you ever talk to him, I mean, in the last six months or year?

**ABELL:** No. The last time I did was, I think, when his last book came out.

**CHRISTIANSON:** A book-signing?

**ABELL:** No. It wasn't a book-signing. One of his personal staff organized a little get-together at his house for the old staff, to sort of get back together. That's probably been a couple of years now, I guess. I've seen him, socially, at Secretary Principi's house, over on the Eastern Shore, because he had a house just down the street and he would come over if we were there for dinner, or something. But I don't see him very much. I guess maybe I could, but I don't.

**CHRISTIANSON:** He's in New Mexico, occasionally.

**ABELL:** Oh, yeah. He and I talked about that several times.

**CHRISTIANSON:** Tony, do you have anything else?

**CRAIN:** This has been a great interview, and thank you very much.

**CHRISTIANSON:** This is our release form. You can either take a look at it now and sign it, or else you can hang on to it and sign it. It's pretty standard. It is an audio recording, obviously. None of this is going to be released to the public until, as Tony mentioned—[audio break].