Matloff: This is an oral history interview with Gen. John W. Vessey held in Washington, D.C., on March 21, 1990, at 2:30 p.m. The interview is being recorded on tape and a copy of the transcript will be sent to Gen. Vessey for his review. Representing the OSD Historical Office are Drs. Alfred Goldberg and Maurice Matloff.

Gen. Vessey, we shall focus in this interview particularly on your service as Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1982-85. But we should first like to direct your attention to certain factors in your earlier background and experience relevant to the history of OSD and national security policy in the post-World War II era. What were your reactions to the movement for unification of the services after World War II? How familiar were you with the developments in those earlier years with the National Security Act of 1947 and the subsequent legislation affecting the organization of the Department of Defense, in the decade before Vietnam?

Vessey: You have to understand that I was a fairly low ranking man in those days. On the other hand, I liked to think of myself as a reasonably forward-looking individual, too, interested in improving the defense establishment from the lessons of World War II. The whole issue of the Defense Reorganization Act of 1947 and the integration of the forces

seemed like the right move forward to me. Certainly, my World War II experience had little to do with the Navy or the Air Force, except for some amphibious operations with the Navy and from time to time getting some air support, and a few times being dangerously close to being hit by our own air. So I was interested in seeing that what seemed to me to be inadequacies in the stakes involved in all those events be corrected.

Matloff: I imagine that in your attendance in the schools in the decades after World War II you were asked to discuss those.

Vessey: Lively topics in those days, yes. Particularly in the years immediately after the war, because we had the benefit of the people who had then been in positions of more authority. I was a company grade officer for a long time after the war, but we had a lot of lieutenant colonels and colonels with whom I was associated.

Matloff: How about your contacts with OSD, before Vietnam and during your service in Vietnam? Did you have any?

Vessey: Not really.

Matloff: Did you come away from your service in Vietnam, where you had considerable operational experience, with conclusions about operations of unified commands in the

theater and the kind of warfare for which the United States would have to be prepared, and the role of the Army in it?

Vessey: I came away from Vietnam--the whole war in Southeast Asia, because the first part of my experience was Vietnam, the second part was Laos--with the general view that the Defense establishment was under-trooped and over-headquartered.

Goldberg: Still is, isn't it?

Vessey: That we were burdened with far too many headquarters for the numbers of men out there to shoot at the enemy.

Goldberg: Not enough hindquarters.

Vessey: Right, and that the opportunity for closer integration of the services at task level was tremendous.

Matloff: Did you believe in the domino theory, during the Vietnam War days?

Vessey: I'm not smart enough to know. The domino theory was something I read about that came from somebody else. I didn't deduce the domino theory independently on my own, I guess it's fair to say. I was very disappointed when we went to Vietnam. I remember the day that Secretary McNamara announced that we were sending regular forces rather than advisors. I had great personal disappointment. I was one of those who believed that involving the United States in a

land war on the Asian peninsula was something we should work to avoid, from a strategic perspective. But, once I learned a bit more about Southeast Asia, I could see that there was some substance to the domino theory--the possibility of the whole of the Southeast Asian Peninsula falling to Communism was more real than we will probably now give it credit for; that is to say, insurgencies inside Thailand, both in the north and the south. Whether the danger was as great as the exponents of the domino theory say it was, I'm not sure.

Matloff: Between 1970 and 1979, you held a number of important command and staff positions with assignments in Germany, Thailand, Laos, Korea, and the U.S. In those positions and capacities, did you have dealings with the Secretaries of Defense and OSD?

Vessey: Yes. My first personal dealings were with Secretary Laird, when I was in Thailand. I had a couple of personal brushes with him. The first came about when I took command of the Army forces in Thailand and was given orders to reduce them substantially. I went out and looked at what we were doing in Thailand and it seemed to me that we could reduce them far more than I had been told to reduce them. I had been told to cut them about in half and after reviewing the situation with a couple of good staff men, I came up with a plan to cut them to about a quarter of what they

were. I suggested that we do that, save money, and still get the job done. This did not sit well with all of my superiors. Some people are happier to see forces cut than others. So I got in a little trouble with my immediate bosses, but Secretary Laird was delighted to see that, when he came out some time later. The first time I really talked to a Secretary of Defense was with Secretary Laird. I came away impressed with how great our nation's system was that we got people with great political acumen, knowledge and ability to grasp broader events, and even get down to the details on the ground, men like Secretary Laird. My next brush with him was when I was supposed to be running the war on Laos and it was clear that the war would come to an end sometime in the next eight or nine months. I wanted to implement a strategic plan that would leave the Laotian government in the best possible position when the cease-fire was signed. The goal was to get as much of the rice growing land and the population under the control of the free Laotian government as we could. We didn't have many forces and I wanted to build and train some new Laotian forces quickly. So I devised a plan. The only way I thought I could get sufficient help was to call on the special forces in Thailand to bring some trainers over to train them. The special forces in Laos had a particular significance in the

historical context of the United States. The word got back to Secretary Laird that I had special forces in Laos and I got a message from Dick Stilwell, who was then the DCSOPS of the Army. We had arranged a special communications channel through the NSA station in northern Thailand, where he could send me a message, but not necessarily through diplomatic channels.

Goldberg: Is that a back channel?

Vessey: Right. I got a message that Dick Stilwell said that Secretary Laird had said in the morning JCS meeting that Vessey was to get those special forces out of Laos immediately and if he ever heard of my having special forces in Laos again, he'd have my ass.

Goldberg: That's better than your head.

Vessey: So those were my two immediate brushes with the Secretary of Defense during that period. I understood it and I found another way to get the job done.

Matloff: How about when you were in Korea?

Vessey: I was there during the last push at reducing the forces in Korea. Harold Brown was the Secretary of Defense, another very good one. He was a man of whom I always said that, in an administration that I thought had poor defense policies, he was a superb Secretary of Defense. He was a man of great personal integrity, intelligence, and wisdom,

and I had a lot of interaction, difficult interaction, with Secretary Brown over that issue of the reduction of forces in Korea--both in its effect on the Koreans and when I objected to Brown about the administration's plan. He immediately got me an audience with the President. I had long and serious interaction with him. When it came time to leave there, Secretary Brown told me I was being proposed to be Chief of Staff of the Army. I came back from my interviews and saw the Secretary, who told me it was a foregone conclusion and I only had to see the President. The President and I had had some differences about the Korean security situation and I told the Secretary that I didn't believe that it was a foregone conclusion. So I went to see the President and failed my orals. The President decided to choose somebody else, which was certainly his right, and I had no quarrel with that. I went back to Korea immediately after my interview with the President. The Secretary called me when I got back and urged me to stay on, that he wanted me to do other jobs in the armed services.

Matloff: What repercussions were there from your testimony before Congress against President Carter's proposed withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea?

Vessey: It was a three-year acrimonious debate. I think in the long run things came out all right, because we made a

few very nominal force reductions and in the long run this country understood the issue far better than it did beforehand--in the places that had pressed for withdrawal of forces, in Congress in particular. Every year in the Congress the debate had been about how many we should withdraw. It was debated for a long time after that.

Matloff: The administration itself backed off from its phased withdrawal proposal.

Goldberg: Did Brown support you?

Vessey: In the end he did, yes. Of course, he supported the President to begin with. He was a new Secretary, and the President had chosen to do that, and he rightfully supported the President.

Matloff: To go to the position of Vice Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, 1979-82, and the circumstances of that appointment--you've already indicated that there was the possibility of becoming Chief of Staff.

Vessey: Bernie Rogers had made me sign for the silverware already.

Matloff: What were the circumstances of your appointment as Vice Chief? Who recommended you, and what was the background?

Vessey: The President chose General Shy Meyer, who had been my deputy when I was DCSOPS of the Army. Both Gen. Rogers

and Gen. Meyer called me and asked me to take that job. Then Secretary Brown asked me to take it, too.

Goldberg: Did you have any doubts about doing it? You weren't inclined to quit?

Vessey: No. I thought about quitting, but then I thought that Shy Meyer was a very capable officer, and he and I had worked together very well when he was my deputy. I didn't see any reason why we couldn't reverse roles and do the same thing. I had already been told that some others had said they would not do it; somebody had to do it.

Goldberg: So you kept on leap-frogging each other.

Vessey: Right.

Matloff: You indicated that you had met Sec/Def Harold Brown. How well did you know the Chairman, JCS, Gen. David Jones?

Vessey: I had known his predecessor, George Brown, very well. In the jobs I had had, in Laos, and here as Director of Operations in the Army Staff, and then DCSOPS, I knew the Chairmen reasonably well, both Adm. Moorer and Gen. Brown. Gen. Brown had been a close associate of Gen. Abrams, who was sort of a guiding light of mine. So my association with Gen. Brown was very good. I didn't know David Jones as well, but I had met him and had some association with him.

Matloff: What was the division of labor between yourself as Vice Chief of Staff and Gen. Meyer as Chief of Staff?

Vessey: A short answer is that Gen. Meyer was the outside man and I was the inside man. He looked to me to run the staff and do the intra-Army business--for example, put the Army budget together; get the big items of new equipment through the Congress and get those into production; get the recruiting system working so that we could raise the quality of the soldiers. Gen. Meyer took on the tasks of dealing with the Congress on the overall budget and dealing with the JCS, although I went to JCS when he wasn't present. On the matters of division commander selection, Gen. Meyer ,listened to my recommendations but made the final decision on those. Gen. Meyer looked on the presentation of the office of the chief to the Army as his duty. I called it the Hertz-Avis School. Number two did what number one didn't want to do, and that's the way it ought to work.

Matloff: Did you and Gen. Meyer feel that the Army was receiving its fair share of the Defense budget?

Vessey: No, and we fought to get it increased. We had three major problems, people, equipment, and training, that we tried to address in the Army. When I came back from Korea, we had a mal-norm test in the recruiting office and we thought we were getting 55 percent category three and

above. It turned out that we were only getting about 45 percent, half high school graduates, and were in a bad way, in terms of people. We were losing the best young officers and NCOs because they could see better opportunities elsewhere, and we were keeping inadequate ones. We were woefully behind in our equipment. We needed a new tank, a new armored personnel carrier, new artillery pieces, new helicopters, new air defense systems. We had all of them underway, and we needed to get them into production.

Goldberg: You were in agreement, then, that it was a hollow army at that time?

Vessey: It was so hollow that you could hear the echo if you bounced on the outside of it.

Goldberg: Would you say that you were worse off than both the Navy and the Air Force?

Vessey: Yes. They were all bad off at that time, but we were the worst. The Navy was in poor shape, also. The Navy had had a hemorrhage of petty officers. I heard Jim Holloway tell the Secretary of Defense that he could not sail some of his ships for lack of petty officers. They were in a bad way, but I think the Army was scraping the bottom of the barrel for personnel.

Matloff: Did this change when Caspar Weinberger became Secretary of Defense?

Vessey: We began to change it a bit earlier. The things that made the Army healthy were things that Gen. Abrams had set in motion; i.e., the better integration of the active and reserve components; building 16 divisions out of a 770,000 end strength instead of 10 divisions, which we were headed for; we had 13. On the equipment modernization--we had those programs in research and development and we had to get them into production. We made significant strides in the last year of the Carter administration, and we got a tremendous boost from the increases in the Reagan defense budget.

Goldberg: To what do you ascribe the bad personnel situation in the late '70s--the lack of all of these people?

Vessey: It was a combination of things. We were down to 4.9 percent of GNP for defense and we were trying to maintain a force that probably couldn't be maintained in a healthy fashion for any less than 6 percent of the GNP. Actually, in the Reagan years we didn't increase the size of the force at all-- maybe a few thousand, a tenth of one percent. What we did was modernize it. We raised the pay and fixed the leaky barracks and motor pools, where soldiers were lying in puddles of water to maintain vehicles. When I went to Europe as the Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, I found many barracks with sheets of plastic over the roofs to

keep them from leaking. It was like that when I went to Korea. I went up to the DMZ and started inspecting the troops from the front on back. I went to the forwardmost American battalion. Mind you, we'd been in Korea for 26 years of peace, and I went to the first battalion and they were in old Quonset huts. The doors didn't seal; they had coal-fired space heaters in them. It was the new volunteer Army, so the Army said to put curtains on the windows and issue every soldier a writing table and lamp. I told one to plug in the lamp, and he said, "The only thing that comes out of that socket is water, when it rains." I went outside and found soldiers standing on the corner with towels over their arms. I asked them what they were doing. They said, "Waiting for the shower truck." They went to a camp 15 miles away to get a shower. This was a quarter of a century after the armistice and we've got men traveling 15 miles to get a shower. We had soldiers living in huts with no thermostats. I looked into it and found that there had not been a winter that we had not had American soldiers burned to death in barracks fires because of those space heaters. That's why we were losing people. We weren't taking care of the problem.

Matloff: Did you have many dealings with people in OSD, such as Brown, Caspar Weinberger, and the Deputies, as Vice Chief, or did Gen. Meyer carry the ball on that one?

Vessey: I dealt with them on specific issues; for example, with the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs on recruiting. I was always fighting for the recruiting budget--I was the budget fighter. Shy Meyer would take the final product to the meetings, but fighting the issues was done by me and the staff. Then he wrapped it all together for the major meetings with the Secretary.

Matloff: How about before Congress and the White House, did you have any dealings with them?

Vessey: During the Carter administration, dealings with the White House by the Joint Chiefs were minimal. They went once a year to hear the bad news on the budget. One year they had a fifteen-minute meeting, as I recall. No, I didn't have any dealings with the White House, but with Congress, yes, I testified on the major items of equipment.

Matloff: How about in terms of strategic planning? How influential was the Army during this period when you were Vice Chief of Staff? Did it have any impact on strategic planning, directly or indirectly?

Vessey: That's a hard question to answer. From my point of view as Vice Chief of Staff I might first have a tendency to

say we didn't have much influence on strategic planning. On the other hand, we preserved the minimum force structure that we thought the Army needed and got the necessary budget support for at least a reasonable chunk of it. The arms control issues were some of the major issues during the Carter administration, and I think the Army's voice was heard. The Army didn't have any force structure axe to grind in the nuclear arms control negotiations.

Goldberg: In terms of structure, what lessons did you derive from the Vietnam War? It's been alleged that you were prepared for a big war in Europe and remained prepared for it all during the Vietnam War, and yet you didn't fight that kind of war.

Vessey: I think that's right, and that is the legacy of America for our efforts for the last half century. We did prepare for the big war, and it was the right sort of preparations. What we see happening in Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union today is happening because we did prepare for a big war and were adequately prepared for it. It also means that if your strategy is deterrence, and you build a force to deter against what you think is the most dangerous threat, something else is going to happen. The great lesson of Vietnam, the simplified one, is that all security problems aren't lesser included defenses, as the

lawyers would say, of the major one that you face. You have to have some flexibility in your force. And we have built that in the force since that time. We started doing it in 1979.

Matloff: When Weinberger came into office, and you were still Vice Chief of Staff, during that period did he turn down any proposals for weapons systems that the Army had requested?

Vessey: I'd have to do a little research to find that answer. None pops into my mind. On the other hand, I would say that the charge that the Reagan administration bought everything that the services wanted and that Secretary Weinberger never saw a weapons system he didn't like is a fallacious charge. Caspar Weinberger was a very fine public servant. If everybody had the same concern for the taxpayer's dollar that Cap Weinberger had, we'd be in great shape. But he knew that the Army's weaponry was woefully inadequate, when he came into office, and set about helping to improve that. But during the time I was either Vice Chief or Chairman, he certainly disapproved of some; for example, the air defense system, while I was Chairman

Matloff: He did at one point turn down the Sergeant York gun.

Vessey: That's one I am talking about.

Goldberg: Did you feel then, or in retrospect, that maybe it was too much, too fast; that perhaps better results might have been gotten had it been phased in at a somewhat slower and lesser rate?

Vessey: I would say that you might have done the individual jobs with a little more efficiency, but you would not have served the nation's strategic purposes more effectively. What we see happening today bears that out. We have a tendency to give Mr. Gorbachev credit for what's happening as though he has had a blinding light on the road to Damascus, which has revealed that the past ways of the Communists were sinful and should be changed. That's a lot of hooey. We forget that as late as the mid-'80s the Soviets were still trying to upset the German election process; they were still blatantly engaged in nuclear blackmail; they were still building their forces, both conventional and nuclear, at an ever-accelerating rate. I think one thing that you historians have to get into, although we are probably not going to be close enough to it in our time, is that the West came very close to losing it in the '70s. I think we came closer than we will ever realize. At least, I believe, the Soviets thought they were far closer to victory than we are now giving them credit for. In answer to that question, you could have made each

of those programs work a little more efficiently by applying more management to them, but in terms of the overall effect of building the nation's armed forces quickly, in a fashion that would have a strategic impact on the world, the Reagan administration did exactly the right thing. It will cost us less in the long run.

Matloff: In connection with foreign area problems and crises during your tenure as Vice Chief of Staff, were you drawn into problems dealing with NATO, the hostage crisis in Iran, or the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan?

Vessey: I was in only as the number two uniformed man in the Army. Gen. Meyer was the lead man in that. Personally, I continued providing the staff back-up and keeping abreast so that I could step in when he was gone, but he was leading the band as far as the Army was concerned on those issues. I was obliged to keep abreast of it. I don't want to suggest that the Secretary of Defense or the President was coming around the Chief of Staff of the Army to ask me for advice. The answer is, no, they weren't.

Matloff: On the question of the change of the Carter administration's position on the withdrawal of U.S. ground troops from the Republic of Korea, could you sense what made the administration change? Were you and Gen. Meyer consulted on this question?

Vessey: I was consulted in great detail. That all came to a denouement when President Carter came to Korea in June 1979. By that time, all of President Carter's advisers knew that it was a mistake, but President Carter was not yet quite sure that it was a mistake. I remember that trip very well, and I had the opportunity to spend a great deal of time with President Carter. It turned out that a trip he wanted to make to the front lines by helicopter got weathered out, so the President and I wound up in his car together traveling from the DMZ area to Seoul before he was to meet with President Park Chung Hee. It was then, I believe, that the President realized that it wasn't going to work. Brzezinski, Vance, Harold Brown, the President, and I spent a long hour and a half or so reviewing the whole thing before the President went down to see President Park Chung Hee. I went over what the security situation was, and why then was not the time to withdraw the forces. All of the other advisers, Vance, Brzezinski, and Brown, agreed that that was the case. President Carter said, "If we can't withdraw now, when can we withdraw our forces from Korea?" Then we went through the general strategic situation in the world. I remember getting a globe and looking at where Korea was in relation to the Soviet Union, China, and Japan

and the strategic advantage it gave us to be able to have some influence. Yes, I was very much involved in that.

Matloff: One last question about this period--what do you regard, in retrospect, as your major achievements in the position of Vice Chief of Staff?

Vessey: There were quite a few, and for me it was one of the most personally satisfying times, after I left division forces, because we did some major things. I happened to be able to give some pushes in the right place. We turned around the recruiting business to move toward getting higher quality people. We did it without additional incentives; we just said we were going to do it. We put better people in recruiting; we moved to get the best sergeants we could get. Next was getting the new equipment through OSD and the Congress. It was very difficult to get the new tank; we almost didn't get it. GAO continued to complain that we weren't testing it properly, which, I might add parenthetically, was nonsense. We put it through the most difficult tests that any tank has ever been given anywhere. We got the new tank, a new infantry fighting vehicle, the Apache, the Black Hawk, the Patriot air defense missile, and the artillery rocket, the multiple launch rocket system, MLRS. We got those things through the system, got money behind them, got them into production, and in the hands of

the troops. We got the national training center established, with the idea of having a good a surrogate Soviet force out there for our troops to train against. I think we made significant progress in people, equipment, and training.

Matloff: Did you have any major frustrations or disappointments, things that were not done that you would have liked to have seen done?

Vessey: I think a better integration of the active and reserve component forces--I felt personally frustrated at that. Neither the active Army side nor the reserve component side of the house wanted to go as far as I did on integrating the active reserve components. I think that today we are faced with that same problem and we need to get on with it. I am sorry we didn't do it then, because we would be a leg up on where we ought to be today.

Goldberg: Another major study is underway on exactly that.

Matloff: Now to go to your role as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from June 18, 1982, to September30, 1985. First, what were the circumstances of that appointment, and who recommended you?

Vessey: I don't have the foggiest notion. I had my retirement papers in and I was headed out. It was a difficult think for me. I got a message in South America,

in Punta del Este, Uruguay, that I had a call from Caspar Weinberger I called him from a telephone booth, and he said, "Can you talk secure?" I said, "No, I'm 150 miles away from the Embassy." He asked when I was coming back, and I said "Sunday night." He asked me to call him on the secure phone as soon as I got home. When I got home, I called Gen. Smith, his military assistant, because I didn't feel like calling the Secretary in the middle of the night. Gen. Smith said to come in the first thing in the morning. I came in and cooled my heels while the Secretary had his morning staff meeting. When I finally got into the office, the Secretary was putting on his coat, and he said, "Come on. We have an appointment with the President in five minutes." I thought the Secretary had wanted to see me about South America, so I had all my notes about my trip, and I thought, "I didn't believe the President knew I was in South America, and I don't know what in the world he'd want to know about it."

Goldberg: He probably didn't.

Vessey: I'm sure he didn't. We got in the elevator, and Secretary Weinberger said, "The President wants to settle this issue of the next Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff fairly quickly, and you are fairly high on a short list." I said, "We can't go over there. I can't accept that job.

I've put in my retirement papers; I told my wife I was going to retire; I turn 60 in June, and it's time to get out." Mr. Weinberger said, "We have an appointment with the President in three minutes, and you will just have to tell all that to the President." So, how I got the job, I don't know. In fact, I didn't think I was getting it while we were talking to the President. I talked to him for about an hour one-on-one. Then Judge Clark, the National Security Adviser, and Mr. Weinberger came in, and the President said, "I was just getting ready to ask Gen. Vessey to be the next Chairman of the Joint Chiefs."

Matloff: Had you met President Reagan before?

Vessey: Yes, a couple of times.

Matloff: Did he give you any instructions or directives of any kind?

Vessey: We talked a long time and he told me to get back with him later. We talked about strategic direction for the United States and the armed forces; what needed to be done to make the world a safer place. He seemed to be interested and somewhat congruent with my views. We also talked then and later about the importance of the President's getting military advice from the Joint Chiefs of Staff. When I finally decided to take the job, we talked again about the importance of regular meetings not only with the Chairman,

but with the Joint Chiefs themselves. In fact, we then instituted regular quarterly meetings with the Chiefs.

Matloff: Did you get any instructions or orientation from Secretary Weinberger as to what he wanted?

Vessey: Yes. I didn't get a single set of instructions from Secretary Weinberger saying, "Go do this," but he and I agreed that we would meet every day no matter what. We met every duty day when he was there and we were in contact when he wasn't there. I was convinced that the Chairman should be in constant communication with the President and the Secretary of Defense and set up a special communications package to take with me and I convinced Secretary Weinberger to take such a package with him. I would say that Secretary Weinberger and I stayed very close together. Wherever he was, we talked. If I was not in town, even though there was an acting Chairman, I many times talked with Secretary Weinberger from wherever I was.

Matloff: Did any problems arise when you came up for confirmation before Congress?

Vessey: No. I was treated very kindly by them.

Matloff: You were the first officer since Adm. Radford to become Chairman without first having served as the chief of a service. Did this prove to be a help, or a handicap?

Vessey: I didn't sense any handicap. I may have been handicapped, and not understood that I was.

Matloff: How important was your previous service to this new position?

Vessey: I had had a fair amount of joint service, particularly with the combat tour in Laos and then the tour in Korea at a time when Korea was a lively situation,. We had trouble with the North Koreans, and differences between me and the administration when Jack Singlaub, my chief of staff, made noises and got fired. I came back many times to talk to the Chiefs and the Congress, and I had a good relationship with CINCPAC at the time. They had both been personal friends of mine. I felt that I had a good understanding of the operational problems from the unified command's point of view, and I knew what the budgetary problems were from the Vice Chief's point of view. I didn't feel hampered. I had spent plenty of time in the tank as the Vice Chief of Staff and as the DCSOPS of the Army.

Goldberg: Did you approve of the emphasis requiring joint service before promotion to general officer rank?

Vessey: The way it was, it was honored more in the breach than otherwise. It existed from Eisenhower's time, and now it's in the law. Presently it is far more restrictive and rigid than perhaps it should be. Did I approve of it? Yes.

Matloff: One of your predecessors, Gen. Maxwell Taylor, wrote in Swords and Plowshares, "The Chairman should be a true believer in the foreign policy and military strategy of the administration he serves." Would you agree with that?

Vessey: Yes. I think that he was exactly right. On the other hand, I believe that the Chairman serves three bodies, and they are relatively small bodies. One is the National Command Authority, which is the Secretary of Defense and the President. Only three people are involved, with the Chairman as the adviser and the other two as the operators. The Chairman serves another body, the Chiefs themselves, and is a member of that body. The other body he serves are the commanders of the unified and specified commands. If Maxwell Taylor meant that the Chairman ought to be a plumper for the foreign policy of the administration, no matter what it is, I would disagree. The Chairman has to bring the interest of those three bodies, or at least the other two to the first body, the national command authorities, as well as bring the direction and interests of the President and Secretary of Defense to the other two bodies. That's the main job of the Chairman. There has to be some give and take in both directions, and the Chairman has to orchestrate that give and take. There are Presidents who want to do things that the armed forces can't or shouldn't do, and

there are people in the armed forces who are reluctant to do what they ought to do because they are duty-bound to serve the political leadership of this country.

Goldberg: He doesn't really qualify what he means by "true believer," anyway.

Vessey: Yes. I hope I have qualified my answer enough to make it clear.

Matloff: Were the administration's policy and strategy perfectly clear when you took over?

Vessey: The major element of the strategy--that is, to deter war and do it in the fashion that made it clear that the United States was the leader of the free world and was going to carry out that role with vigor and statesmanship--was clear. There were great debates within the administration on the details of what that meant in, for example, the Lebanon situation. We had bitter debates on that problem within the administration. Unfortunately, they were never resolved until we lost a lot of marines. I would say that it is probably never completely clear in the detail for any administration, but it was fairly clear.

Matloff: Were you briefed by your predecessor, General Jones?

Vessey: Yes, we spent a lot of time together.

Matloff: Did he have any words of wisdom to pass on about the job and how to handle it?

Vessey: Yes. I guess Dave Jones left office frustrated with the inability to make the joint system work in the fashion in which he thought it should. He had made some fairly radical proposals at the time, and I had to take them on, as proposals for changes and also to find ways to make things work in the existing system.

Goldberg: Did you feel that he was having problems in his relations with the administration during the last 18 months?

Vessey: Yes. There was no question that he was having some problems. That is, I guess, the hazard of any Chairman--when you serve one administration, you get linked with the security policies of that one. When you come in with a new administration that has radically different security policies, it is a tough transition to make.

Matloff: In connection with your conception of your role as Chairman, how did you see that role? You mentioned the three parts to which you had relations. What problems did you face when you took over and what priorities did you set for yourself or were set for you?

Vessey: I had a meeting with the CINCs and the Chiefs immediately after the ceremony. We had a CINCs conference with the Chiefs and the Chairman. I made some charts for

that meeting and laid out what I called the "menu" of things to be done. I think it's an important historical document. I will copy those charts and give them to you. I kept those charts in my office as a checklist on myself through the years of my chairmanship to see what we had done toward getting on with that menu. Needless to say, I came in with the same sort of prejudices that previous chairmen have come in with, ideas on how to improve the system. When my appointment was announced, I went around to visit all the former living chairmen to see if I could get some advice from them. So I not only talked to Gen. Jones, but also to Maxwell Taylor, Lemnitzer, and Adm. Moorer. The most important thing I felt that the Chiefs needed to do was operate more as chiefs. I had examined the law, and it was my view that the Joint Chiefs of Staff were perceived by many people to be a larger organization; i.e., the Joint Staff was the Joint Chiefs of Staff. I read the law as that the Joint Chiefs of Staff was the important body of five, responsible for giving strategic advice and direction, etc., down those nine items that were then listed in the law as the duties. One of my major goals was to engage the Chiefs in their duties as Chiefs in contradistinction to the Joint Staff and the great panoply of service staffs who supported the Chiefs.

Goldberg: You mean as members of the Joint Chiefs, not as chiefs of their own services?

Vessey: That's right. In that first meeting I talked about the difference between the two sets of duties. I told them that I believed that the service chiefs were the right members of the Joint Chiefs, because they had generally been chosen because they were thought to be the best sailor, airman, or soldier. But also, the two duties were markedly different. One was organizing, training, and equipping forces that would then be fought by the unified commanders. The other duty was to provide a strategic direction to the armed forces of the United States, to integrate the efforts of the forces of the four services, and to support the unified and specified commanders. They were two completely different sets of duties. But the knowledge that each chief carried from one duty to the other helped him in each of those separate duties. When he came to the Joint Chiefs of Staff to perform those duties, he had to hang his service cap on the peg outside the door and come in and take up a different set of duties, even though he brought knowledge from the other job that would help him with this job. I told the Chiefs at that very first meeting that if I understood the system, it all started with the war plans. The system itself was designed to have war plans that flowed

from the unified commands that drove the defense budgets and their duties as service chiefs to recruit, organize, train, and equip forces to carry out these war plans. I told them very frankly that I thought the war plans, for the most part, were in poor shape; that they grew like moss in the basement; and that they got too little top-down guidance; that the Chiefs saw them after they had already been through the system and been massaged for ever and ever. The Chiefs came in and got a briefing on them and blessed them. I thought that was wrong. I said that the Chiefs should examine the strategic problems of the United States to give some top-down guidance for the construction of the war plans, and then review them again. The same with the operation of the Joint Chiefs. I said that we have staffs, majors, down here telling us how we are supposed to do our job. I said that I thought we should examine the issues ourselves. I laid out to the Chiefs on that day a pledge to examine the issues. Both Dave Jones and Shy Meyer had laid out some proposals for improving the Joint Chiefs. I said I wanted to examine those, but that I wanted us to do it as the Joint Chiefs of Staff, not the staff officers nor the vice chiefs. And we would meet on the issue when all were here. They all signed up to that and we did it. I told the CINCs that in terms of war plans I wanted them to come in

and brief the concept of the operation for their most demanding war plan to the Chiefs, not to staff officers, and not to bring staff officers to do the briefing. If they needed someone to turn slides, or something like that, they could bring one man, but otherwise they were to come in and brief it.

Goldberg: This was a radical departure.

Vessey: Yes, it was. But I believe it helped, and I believe it made some useful improvements in the way the JCS functioned. They functioned more as a team as a result of working that way, and we found some more inclination to view the other man's problem and, I think, we came up with better war plans.

Goldberg: Do you know whether that was continued after you left?

Vessey: I don't know. A lot of it, of course, got institutionalized. We got the unified and specified commands very much involved and got them into the Defense Resources Board. We set up the outfit that is now the J-7, Interoperability, that does the examining of the budget. That was my goal, to take a different look at the budget to see what it does in terms of satisfying the war plans, rather than before, when it was reviewed only in the service contacts with the Chairman getting a look at it and an

opportunity to veto. We got much institutionalized, and a lot of it has been carried on. Some of it has been incorporated in the law.

Goldberg: Were you getting guidance from above?

Vessey: Not much on those particular issues, except to say that on the first review of the duties of the Joint Chiefs of Staff--on the 18th of June the Chiefs and I agreed that we would examine the proposals made by Dave Jones and Shy Meyer. Shortly after that there was some fuss on the Hill and the White House directed the Secretary to examine those. The Secretary got me and I told him that we had already had this examination underway. The Secretary then said he would like to have it done by a certain deadline. So then we engaged the Secretary in that examination of the functioning of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It was a very useful exercise. We learned more about ourselves. Only the Chiefs did it, and we came up with a briefing that we gave the Secretary. We wrestled with it for a long time before getting an agreement. When we started to read the laws, and examined the idea behind the Congress and the leadership--and Eisenhower's 1958 letter to the congressmen was very important--it occurred to us that the key man in this whole Defense establishment is the Secretary of Defense. It is an extraordinary position. Understanding

his role and serving him in performing his duties is the key part of this job. We laid out a briefing that, instead of focusing on the Joint Chiefs, focused on the Secretary, what his job was, and how the Joint Chiefs fit into that. There are some anomalies, and they still exist. They haven't been sorted out by any means. The law used to say, in talking about the Joint Staff, that the Secretary wouldn't have any other military staff. The first thing we noticed was that the Secretary had more military people on his non-military staff than there were military people on his military staff. That seemed to be a great anomaly, and we pointed it out. We tried to lay out for the Secretary a clearer description of the duties below the Secretary. The Secretary's duties are quite clear, but how he performs those duties is fuzzy. Some things have been written into law--for example, some Assistant Secretary positions--but other things have not been written into law.

Goldberg: The Office of the Secretary of Defense was not established by law until 1986.

Vessey: Right. So we tried to lay that out. I think we produced something very useful. Unfortunately, the Secretary gave it to Will Taft, then the General Counsel, to work. The Secretary had great confidence in Will Taft. Taft came to me and I went through the exercise with him.

Then he took to the other Assistant Secretaries and Deputies, many of whom used to say, "If the Joint Chiefs would only do their job, our job would be all right." But then it became evident that they were going to try to do their job, and this was dangerous. So the wagon trains began circling, but we didn't move much on that track. There was tremendous opportunity to improve the functioning of the department inside the department without regard to changes in the law. Unfortunately, the shift then got moved to changes in the law, with Nichols and that crowd in Congress.

Goldberg: Weinberger kept maintaining that he could do it without changes in the statute, but it didn't happen, did it?

Vessey: A lot happened, but nowhere near what could have happened. But the law only brushed the edges, too. My personal view is that the law is largely cosmetic. It made some good and important changes, but it made some other changes that were not useful, and hamstringing; for example telling some young captain that he has to spend so much time on joint duties, which is all sort of nonsense.

Goldberg: You were pretty much in agreement with Secretary Weinberger on this, weren't you?

Vessey: Yes, but we had a few disagreements, too. I thought that the Secretary had tremendous opportunities to reduce the size of the civilian staff. There is far too much pushing the paper around the building here than is needed. What is needed is a clear delineation of the various duties and clearer lines of authority in answering to the Secretary.

Matloff: To get back to your involvement of the unified and specified commanders in the budget process, you mentioned that you did invite them to meetings of the Defense Resources Board. Did this become a continuous affair, or was it a one-shot affair?

Vessey: It started as a one-shot affair, but my idea was to make it a continuous thing. The Secretary concurred.

Matloff: At the first meeting they were invited to comment on the defense budget planning document called the Defense Guidance, as well as on individual service budgets. Between the sessions, were they sending you their special requirements, keeping you apprised of what they wanted?

Vessey: Yes.

Matloff: And you were encouraging that, I take it?

Vessey: Yes.

Matloff: How effective was this involvement of the CINCs in the budget process in eliminating, let's say, duplicate weapon systems?

Vessey: It started out haltingly, to say the least. I think that probably the people involved in the first session thought it was a mistake, because it looked like the CINCs were in a different room from the people in the budgetary process, and that neither one understood the other. After the first session they both went their separate ways and each thought the other didn't know what the problem was. In terms of eliminating duplicate weapons systems, we did more by having the Chiefs examine the budget rather than the CINCs. I don't think we ever eliminated anything by having the CINCs do it, but we did perhaps find solutions for CINCs' problems without adding to the budget. The work of the Chiefs did find duplication, and we did make some changes in the budget.

Matloff: How serious a problem did you find inter-service rivalry in connection with the budget, weaponry, missions, or whatever?

Vessey: When I was Chairman, I was blessed with Chiefs who were able and willing to cooperate. They didn't always agree, and it would be unreasonable to expect them to, but they were always ready to agree to sit down and examine the

issue together. If you could get the Chiefs to examine the issue before their staffs got them into concrete, where they had to posture in front of their own people, we usually came up with pretty good answers. When the Chiefs got into a position where they had to defend a service's position with their own staff members present, without examining it as an issue that might have another side, then it was difficult. But I would say that inter-service rivalry, as expressed by the Chiefs, was a problem that was far overstated outside. There were a few times when the JCS met when I would come out and say, "Gee, I'm glad that wasn't on public television." But more often, I came out and was very proud of the Chiefs and thought it would have been a blessing to the nation if it could have been on public television--to see these people debate very difficult issues of great importance to the country, and do it in a statesmanlike fashion.

Goldberg: The Chiefs are probably more criticized by their own staffs than by anybody else, I think.

Vessey: That's right.

Matloff: Your tenure as chairman, particularly in the latter years, coincided with increasing resistance in Congress to the great increases in the Defense budget marked by Reagan's first term. Were you and the JCS drawn into

attempts to deal with the growing criticism both in and out of Congress? On such things as that the money allocated had been poorly spent; that the Pentagon lacked a coherent strategy for the buildup; that the funds were being mismanaged; and other charges?

Vessey: We were involved in it both as a body and individually, because when you've got $250 billion being spent and you've got a force of three million people (military and civilian), somebody's going to be making some horrible mistakes at any given time. The criticism frustrated me during those years because I thought that it was very shallow. There was room for criticism, and certainly we are not inhibited by lack of opportunity for improvement in the way we spend the taxpayer's money and the way we budget for it, but I thought that most of the criticism, including some from the Congress, was very shallow and missed the mark completely. The major areas for improvement are in better coordination between the Executive Branch and the Legislative Branch, a clear delineation of who's responsible for what; and then an after-action look at what we do. There is no audit, as there is in a civilian industry, where outside auditors come in every year.

Goldberg: You always have the GAO, you know.

Vessey: But the GAO is in nits and lice. We went through all the business of the $435 hammer and $600 toilet seat and so forth, and I was personally frustrated. In fact, I went out and flew a mission on one of those ASW airplanes with that toilet seat and came back with the conclusion that it was probably worth the money to keep those people from sloshing around in their own waste out there on that mission. Yes, we were very much involved.

Matloff: You mentioned that you were in touch with Mr. Weinberger every day, how about with the Deputy Secs/Def? How close were you with them--Carlucci, Thayer, Taft?

Vessey: reasonably close to the Deputies, because of their responsibilities on the Defense Resources Board. I stayed in close touch with the incumbent Deputies whenever they were there. I did not spend a lot of time with the Assistants, for "theological" reasons. I tried to establish the principle that the Secretary of Defense gave instructions to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and that the Assistant Secretaries of Defense did not.

Goldberg: What about the two Under Secretaries who occupy, theoretically, somewhat more significant positions than the Assistant Secretaries?

Vessey: I tried to deal with them as representatives of the Secretary in their two particular areas. I had reasonably

good relations with the two Under Secretaries--for example, with DDR&E and the Under Secretary for Acquisition. We established the Joint Requirements Review Board, or something like that, in which I tried to get the Chiefs as Chiefs, not as chiefs of service, to look at this business of joint requirements. I asked the Defense Science Board to recommend a system. The Board recommended a system. None of the Chiefs liked it, but I kept them in the tank long enough that they all bought it. We put it into effect immediately and it has been perpetuated, I believe in the law, but at least in policy, in a slightly different form. It has evolved as one of the major duties of the Vice Chairman to head that policy. The Under Secretary for Policy, Fred Iklé, often came to the Secretary's meetings with the JCS. We had reasonably good relations.

Goldberg: Did you have any strategic policy sessions with him? Did the Chiefs have any? Did he sit in on your meetings on strategy?

Vessey: Yes.

Matloff: How did you handle the problem of split views within the JCS when you had to deal with the Secretary of Defense, the President, or the Congress?

Vessey: On my very first day I told the Chiefs that our duty was to give advice to the Secretary and the President.

The law said timely advice. It was my belief that the definition of timely, in terms of military advice, was to give them the advice before they knew they needed it. If they had to ask us for advice, it was probably already too late. The Chiefs bought that beautifully. I also told them that the business of "timely" was very important, that the JCS were deficient when they had to be asked for advice on issues of national security, but they were even more deficient when they got themselves into the position to say "We weren't asked." I told them that in my view we had to be timely, and that I thought it was my duty as the Chairman to take their advice, that I wanted to take it as honestly as I could, that I didn't expect them to agree, that I would represent their disagreements as honestly as I could and that I would come back and tell them how I had represented them. I said that they all had the right to voice those disagreements and I would see that they got the opportunity to voice them if they disagreed with the way I presented the advice. I also told them that I would not stand around waiting for agreement to come before the advice went, and if the Chiefs were unable to produce advice, the Secretary and the President were going to take my advice. I tried to adhere to to that rigidly, particularly on very difficult issues where there were differences. We had many sessions

with the Chiefs alone in my office, where I went over what I was going to say, to make sure that they understood. I tried religiously to come back and tell the Chiefs what I had said. I guess the only really classic disagreement that we had was on the issue of the MX basing, specifically the issue of closely spaced basing. I agreed with the Chief of Staff of the Air Force that we should look at closely-spaced basing and that it should be examined as a means for protecting the MX. The other three disagreed. We took that to the President. I took it personally to him. Somehow, the Congress had a hearing immediately afterward, and I was asked to testify. Of course, I had to tell them that we had disagreed. We went back again to the President, and went through all that. Each of the Chiefs had an opportunity. We gave him another long rundown on strategic forces, which was sort of the precursor to his speech on strategic defense, because it was at that particular meeting that we as Chiefs suggested that there was an opportunity to incorporate defense into our whole strategic deterrence. The President had been getting some advice from other people of which we were unaware.

Goldberg: That was a surprise to you, also, when it happened?

Vessey: Not really a surprise, except that he came up with it so fast. We recommended to him that he do it, in more general terms, with the expectation that the recommendation would be examined over a longer period of time.

Matloff: Did you have direct access to the President, or did you have to go through the Assistant for National Security Affairs?

Vessey: The President told me that I had direct access to him. I never asked to see the President alone. I always went to Secretary Weinberger, because I viewed the Secretary as the President's agent. Sometimes the Secretary and I didn't agree down to the nub, but he had no reluctance to let me air those. I didn't want to air disagreements with the Secretary if we could find agreement. Many times the Secretary and I would go to meetings and I would be expected to brief the President in the meetings and I would show the Secretary what we were going to do beforehand. A couple of times we saw the President without anyone else present because of the particular issues, but I had no doubt that I had direct access to the President.

Matloff: On what issues did you find Congress the most sensitive, on defense?

Vessey: During my term as Chairman, as you pointed out, in the later years, there was the sensitivity and concern about

the budget. This involved only some members of the Congress. There were particular crises where there was a great deal of sensitivity, as in Lebanon and Grenada, where we had to go over and do a lot of explaining. Arms control was a major issue.

Matloff: In terms of organization and management, I take it that you did not see a need for Congress to mandate major reforms in the JCS organization?

Vessey: As I testified to the Congress, I thought there was more room inside the law for improvement and change than there was by changing the law; I still believe that. I testified to that, but I think the Goldwater-Nichols bill is fine, with the exception of certain elements which I believe should be changed. It has been useful, in fact, and has codified many of the things that were taking place during my time as Chairman.

Goldberg: Was General Meyer the only one of the Chiefs that who was strongly in favor of major changes in the Joint Chiefs of Staff?

Vessey: Yes.

Goldberg: He was a minority of one.

Vessey: Yes, but he sat in on all of our sessions and eventually concurred with the course of action that we took. We recommended some changes in law, and they were sent over

to the Congress. They were viewed as minor changes and were not enacted, but in fact they were more radical changes than the changes that eventually came out. One of those was to put the Chairman in the chain of command.

Goldberg: What about Gen.Wickham's position?

Vessey: By the time Gen. Wickham became Chief, it was clear that we were not going to get the changes made inside the law. By that time it was a matter of shaping the changes in the law. I got the changes made in the way the JCS operated. I was quite satisfied with the changes we made inside the JCS operations. I'm not satisfied with the changes that could have been made in terms of relationships with the Secretary's office and cleaning up the duties between the Secretary's civilian staff and his military staff. There was then, and is today, a great deal of opportunity for clean-up there. The Secretary's staff is far too big; too many military men up there; too many papers being pushed; JCS papers that get pushed back and forth between military people on the Secretary's civilian staff and military people on the Secretary's military staff. I think that is a monumental waste of time.

Matloff: You did make arrangements for the JCS to meet with the President, quarterly, which was an innovation. Has that continued?

Vessey: I think it has continued. I'm not sure what's going on with the Bush administration, but it continued during the remainder of the Reagan administration.

Matloff: You also made a change in the practice of filling the role of the Acting Chairman.

Vessey: Yes. We did that for one reason, and it turned out to have a benefit unrelated to the reason. One of the correct arguments that Dave Jones gave for his changes in the law--he wanted a Vice Chairman--was that when the Chairman was gone, the Acting Chairman changed sometimes several times a day, because it was done in terms of seniority on the JCS. This had become practice through the years. Dave Jones was absolutely correct; that was nonsense. I suggested to the Chiefs, and they agreed, that we work out a duty roster system that would make a Chief the Acting Chairman for a certain period of time, and that particular Chief and the Chairman would have to coordinate their travel so that one of them would be in town. If there were meetings with the President and the Chairman were missing, the other would have to go to those meetings. It led those Chiefs to focus on that particular duty. They became much more involved as the years went by. The Chiefs would come down and that particular Chief would sit with me a lot more closely during that period. I think it made them

far better Chiefs, as members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, because they had that duty over a longer period of time and they knew that they were going to be held accountable by the Secretary and the President.

Goldberg: Everybody got to be Chairman.

Vessey: Yes, and everybody got his visibility with the President and Secretary of Defense, and the President and Secretary got to know them all better. I believe it had a salutary effect.

Matloff: There were a number of steps taken by the JCS during your tenure to improve command arrangements, such as the establishment of the U.S. Central Command, converting the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force that had been set up during the Carter administration, planning and activating a new unified space command, and the establishment [redacted] to combat terrorism. Did you coordinate with OSD in setting these up?

Vessey? Yes, with the Secretary.

Matloff: How effective were these organizations during your tenure?

Vessey: One of the most important things we set up was the Space Command. The importance of space to even low-level military operations is increasing as time goes by. We have a far better handle on that business now because of the

Space Command. I think even in my time we were able to look at different types of satellite programs, rationalize those programs, and save the taxpayers some money and still come up with an effective system. The Central Command was strategic military deception in probably the grandest terms. We don't want to fight a war in the Persian Gulf, but we want to be able to influence operations. We surely didn't want the Soviets challenging us in the Persian Gulf. The efforts that we made setting up that command, putting in the prepositioned forces, and all that business, were designed to keep us from having to fight there. Many people criticized these steps by saying that we never really could fight there and that the plans were unrealistic. I would suggest that the whole operation was a great success. It was at a time when the Soviets had gone into Afghanistan. The situation in the Persian Gulf in general, with the Iran-Iraq war, was tenuous, and we had Arab states that might be friendly or unfriendly, depending on what we did. By setting up that command we increased the United States' influence with the military forces in those states and the Soviets did not go into the Persian Gulf. You might argue that they wouldn't have gone, anyway; we'll never know. But it would have been a disaster, had they gone, and the cost

was relatively cheap, compared to what it would have been had they gone. So I think they were both successes.

Goldberg: Did that happen as a result of some of the strategic discussions that you initiated with the Joint Chiefs? The sort of thing that was thrashed out? Was it deliberate, and did you know exactly what your purpose was in doing it?

Vessey: Yes. But let me say that not everybody agreed with that purpose, and I think that some to this day would not agree.

Goldberg: Some would make it more of a reality.

Vessey: Yes. Or not do it at all, because of the inability to make it more of a reality.

Matloff: How about the [redacted], how effective was it in combating terrorism?

Vessey: Actually, the agency was after my time. [redacted] was an outfit that was in my time and we made some significant progress in improving that. We used it, not for terrorism, but we chased around with it a lot for terrorists, during the incident involving the TWA aircraft that was rattling around the Mediterranean. We followed it; stayed very close to it. We were close to a military operation and wanted to keep the ability to do it, if it was needed. We used it in Lebanon for slightly

different purposes than for which it was designed, but also certainly well within its capabilities.

Goldberg: Wasn't that agency essentially a continuation of functions that had been underway for a long time? Both Joint Chiefs and OSD had had offices?

Vessey: Right. The agency was, in my personal view, an outgrowth of a push by Noel Cooke. He wanted to push the agency and saw himself as sort of a leader of the band in that business.

Goldberg: He wanted an ASD at that time, and didn't get it. Now there is one.

Matloff: Speaking about organization and management, did you and the JCS testify before the Packard Commission? and, if so, what did you recommend?

Vessey: Yes. It's difficult to remember exactly what I gave to the Packard Commission, but the Commission report was very close to my own personal views.

Matloff: You reacted favorably to its findings?

Vessey: Yes. My view is that if we had gotten on with implementing the Packard report, we'd have moved along.

Matloff: Did your views of the threat to the United States change as a result of your experiences as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs?

Vessey: I'm not sure that they changed much. The Charman's post gives you a unique look at the world that probably nobody else gets. The Secretary, in theory, would get the same look; the President could get the same look; but I would suggest that probably neither does. The Chairman looks at it from the day to day involvement of the military forces--if nation X does this, do we need to do something? The Chairman has to examine those things day to day. I knew the Soviets were big, strong, and dangerous, but my view of the Soviets was intensified by my look from the Chairman's position. My view of the Soviets as fallible and, certainly, capable of making mistakes and of being beatable, was also intensified by my view as Chairman. The magnitude of the threat was greater than I had realized it to be before, in terms of their overall capability, but my confidence in our ability, in conjunction with our allies, to deal with the Soviet threat also grew as Chairman. I did not leave the Chairman's job frightened.

Goldberg: To what do you attribute this increase in your optimism?

Vessey: I lived through a time when we made vast improvements in our own forces, and when the coordination with our allies was significantly improved. The move toward presenting a unified military opposition to the Soviets

probably came to its culmination during my time as Chairman, because of actions that the Soviets took, and that our own administration took, and also the fact that we had Mitterand, Margaret Thatcher, Helmut Kohl, and people like those in power. It just happened to be a time in history when the cold war came to its denouement.

Goldberg: Your perception that they were beatable also had to do with them, as well as with us? What was it that you saw there that enhanced your position or thinking?

Vessey: Rigidity and being bound up with the principle of mass. There was a great deal in modern Soviet military doctrine that appeared to me to be a holdover from some of the battles of the first world war; that the major ingredient of mass is humans, and if you get enough of it and push it in the right direction, you can overwhelm the enemy. It seemed to me that with what we were doing, we could handle that.

Goldberg: Did you see hollowness in their army?

Vessey: There's not a lot of hollowness, but there is a lot of difference between ours and theirs. The vulnerabilities that the Soviets have are the same weaknesses that Peter the Great faced in Russia many years before: the ethnic problem, the lack of a civilian-industrial growth, and a rather rigid military system. The combination of those

three things makes the character of the Soviet military forces. I don't want to downgrade the Soviets; they are very formidable. I am so happy the way this thing appears to be coming out. Our whole strategy was not to fight them and to convince them that they should understand that we should not fight, and that was a successful strategy.

Matloff: Were you sensitive to any differences in the view of the threat between you and the Joint Chiefs on the one hand and the Secretary of Defense on the other?

Vessey: In Weinberger's day, not much. Secretary Weinberger believed that the American people didn't understand how great the threat was. He personally instituted this business of the Soviet military threat, which has gotten mixed reviews. A lot of people know more about what the Soviets actually built in terms of military force. I think that the Chiefs were generally congruent with the Secretary. We spent a lot of time together looking at highly classified intelligence about the Soviet capabilities.

Goldberg: Do you think he had a stronger view of the threat than the Chiefs did?

Vessey: I don't think so.