Interviewer:
Good morning. Could you state your name, please?
MG R. Scales:
My name is Robert H. Scales, S-C-A-L-E-S.
Interviewer:
And your age?
MG R. Scales:
Iâ€™m 70.
Interviewer:
And your date of birth?
MG R. Scales:
Itâ€™s the 5th of August, 1944.
Interviewer:
And youâ€™re a member of the class of â€˜66?
MG R. Scales:
Iâ€™m a member of the class of â€˜66.
Interviewer:
At West Point, and your rank upon retiring from the Army.
MG R. Scales:
I retired as a Major General.
Interviewer:
And that was 19â€¦
MG R. Scales:
19 - or 2001.
Interviewer:
Okay. And todayâ€™s date is July 28, 2015. Thank you once again for -
MG R. Scales:
Youâ€™re welcome.
Interviewer:
Some time to join us.
MG R. Scales:
Great to be here.
Interviewer:
You spent 34 years in the Army, and you also grew up I understand in an Army family. Tell me a little bit about your background.
MG R. Scales:
Well, my father was a Mustang, member of the first OCS class for the Corps of Engineers in 1942. Because he wasnâ€™t a West Pointer, and most engineers were at that day, he served with a Boat and Shore Regiment, the Amphibs, and he fought through New Guinea, the Philippines, and was on his way to Japan when the atom bomb hit. I was born during World War II, and I didnâ€™t see my father till I was almost two years old. But my father told me from the very beginning that if I wanted to be an Officer I had to go to the trade school, and by that he of course meant to go to West Point. As my subsequent career at West Point clearly demonstrated, I wasnâ€™t very good in math. So I went to a military school to prepare for West Point; got my appointment and barely got into the Honor Military School System, which existed back in those days.
And I graduated in the top 5% of the bottom fifth of my class, and chose Artillery, principally because my wifeâ€™s former boyfriend took the last Armor slot that we had for my class. In those days you had a little poker chips, had different colored for the different Branches. And this guy whose name I wonâ€™t mention who was right next to me in the class stood up and picked Armor, and I was devastated, because my dad was stationed in Fort Knox at the time and I wanted to be a tanker. And so the closest thing I could think of to tanks was Artillery, because they look like tanks. And that, sadly, was the only reason I went Artillery.

Interviewer:
And you showed up - I mean one of the things that always fascinates me about sort of those early â€™60s classes, you showed up at West Point in the summer of â€˜62, I believe.
MG R. Scales:
Summer of â€˜62.
Interviewer:
And one of the things that always fascinates me about those classes is that you showed up in a sense expecting a very - preparing for a very different sort of war -
MG R. Scales:
Absolutely.
Interviewer:
Than the war you eventually served in, Vietnam.
Interviewer:
Yeah. I think a good way to put that is our class was the John Kennedy class. We came in â€˜62, when Kennedy was still alive. We all had listened to his inaugural speech, you know; ask not what you can do, you know, ask what you can do for your country. And most of the members of my class, even now, what, almost 50 years later, still refer to us as John Kennedyâ€™s class. We were the class that entered to serve the country, but not to go to war. And during the four intervening years that we were Cadets, we saw, you know, the 1963 build-up. We witnessed the battles of the Ia Drang in â€˜65, and then by the time we graduated, we were getting faculty members back who had fought in those early battles - Cu Chi, and the Ia Drang, and so forth. And so we were the first class really to go into war when the war got really, really bad. Thatâ€™s why my class has the highest number of killed in action of any class in West Point history, because we walked right into the Tet Offensive in â€˜68.
And for many of my class, served not just one but two tours, those of us who lived long enough unwounded in order to go back a second time. So Vietnam, for the class of â€˜66, probably more than any other West Point class, was the central defining moment in the lives of us. Particularly those of us who stayed around to serve.
Interviewer:
Tell me - but West Point also in that period, that time, was a much smaller institution, too, wasnâ€™t it?
MG R. Scales:
Yeah. I mean -
Interviewer:
A much different institution.
MG R. Scales:
My class was I think 588 graduated, and so you know, 50 years on, with a few exceptions, even for a kid who got out at four years or was wounded, we all know each other. Because we were I would suggest a far more intimate group back in those days, and we also changed Companies back in my day, and so you were exposed to virtually all of your class. The only people I didnâ€™t know of course were the Star Men, â€˜cause I had nothing in common with them at all. Yeah.
Interviewer:
Tell me a little bit about those returning faculty members who were coming back from Vietnam.
MG R. Scales:
Yeah, thatâ€™s a great question, because as I often teach today that West Point produces two classes. They produce a class of graduating Cadets, and a class of graduating faculty, and both of those enrich the Army, each in their own way. And we were in that cusp where people like Jack Woodmansee would come back to teach history. And Jack didnâ€™t even have a history degree, but he as a Major had commanded a Combat Aviation Group

in Vietnam. And so all of a sudden, things like Revolutionary warfare, which were sort of ambiguous to the History Department here, who mainly studied the campaigns of Napoleon and MacArthur and Eisenhower, were suddenly exposed to a new style of war. But at the same time, it was all ambivalent to us, because we werenâ€™t - we didnâ€™t have that emotional connection to Vietnam that we got years later. But we were in that first cusp of returning faculty who came to us, and telling us that when we graduated, we were going to be in for some rough - you know, for some rough times.
And by golly, they were right.
Interviewer:
What did you do after you graduated from West Point?
MG R. Scales:
After I graduated from West Point, because I was so low in the class, not only did I not get in the Armor, but I didnâ€™t get in Self-Propelled Artillery. I went to an Honest John Battalion, which is a Rocket unit, Ballistic Rocket unit. And my wife and I, we got married, and we spent our first 18 months in the 9th Artillery. And then after I had been in Germany for 18 months, suddenly I was picked up and moved to the 101st Airborne Division. And by the time I went to combat in â€˜68, I didnâ€™t even know what an aiming circle was - an aiming circle is the thing you use to lay a battery with - because Iâ€™d never been in a Tube Artillery unit before. The only real - and I didnâ€™t even go to the Basic Course. So the only real preparation I had for Vietnam was Ranger School. I didnâ€™t know anything about Artillery, and then I suddenly found - and of course, the Division Artillery Commander at the time knew that. So he gave me a Headquarters Battery - Iâ€™d already commanded two Batteries in Germany - so I wouldnâ€™t be near the guns.
And then while I was on R&R with my lovely wife in Hawaii, I got a Telex, actually, in Honolulu, telling me that a good friend of mine, a guy named Milt Freeman, had been killed, commanding B Battery. Literally executed by the NVA at Firebase Airborne. Two of his guns were knocked out, and only about 55 or 60 of his soldiers were left alive, and they needed somebody to command it. So after four days of marital bliss with my wife, I was on a airplane back to the 101st to take command of the Battery. And trust me, my knowledge base of Artillery was extremely limited at that time, but you know, it was war. And so I was thrust into command of B Battery, and I had to reconstitute the Battery while I was commanding it, under fire.
Interviewer:
I want to continue with that, along that line, in a second. But I also want to jump back for a second to your time in Germany, â€˜cause it mustâ€™ve been very interesting, though, being in what essentially was a peacetime Army of Occupation -
MG R. Scales:
Yeah.
Interviewer:
In Germany. And my understanding is that the units in Germany, especially during the build-up, were basically being hollowed out.
MG R. Scales:
Oh yeah.
Interviewer:
Everything possible was going to Vietnam.
MG R. Scales:
Yeah. Itâ€™s very interesting. When I joined the Ninth Artillery we had one Lieutenant Colonel, one alcoholic Major who was on his way out of the Army, and six Lieutenants, for the entire Battalion. So the idea of commanding as a Second Lieutenant seems like a great thing today, but back in those days, you either were Assistant S3 or Battery Commander. Those are the only jobs we had. And then in 1967 we got a huge rush of OCS Officers who came in to fill in the ranks, but they never really did. And oh, by the way, it wasnâ€™t just Officers. We had very, very few NCOs. We had what were then called Shake-and-Bake Sergeants, who were running the Rocket Sections. And so it was good news and bad

news. The bad news was I had no idea what I was doing, and everything I learned was based on experiential learning. But the good news was I didnâ€™t know what I didnâ€™t know, so I was fully confident that I could command a nuclear-capable Rocket unit with great confidence.
And then years later I realized I didnâ€™t know anything about nuclear-capable Rocket units. But at the time, since we didnâ€™t go to war, I guess it all worked out well. But the lesson is that when I went from Germany to Vietnam - and I went directly from Germany to Vietnam - I simply wasnâ€™t prepared for it. And I wasnâ€™t prepared for it in two ways. Number one is obviously I wasnâ€™t - I became a very good Artilleryman, and I became an intuitive Artilleryman, but I didnâ€™t have the Gunnery skills, say, that youâ€™d have had you gone to the Basic Course. And secondly, I didnâ€™t understand how intimate and tactically vulnerable units attached to a unit like the 2nd 187th, the Rakkasans, were, to being engaged in Infantry fights myself. I just didnâ€™t get that. You know, we were never taught that. We certainly never experienced it in Germany.
So within three days of taking command, I get overrun; I mean really overrun. And I lost 19 soldiers in like about an hour, and I wasnâ€™t prepared for it. The only thing I think I had that was any use was Ranger School, believe it or not, because Ranger School at least taught me how to be a small unit leader. But other than that, I wasnâ€™t prepared for the experience at all. Now, you could say I was prepared â€˜cause I went to West Point. I learned leadership. You know, I embraced the military ethos. I got all that. But in terms of site-specific, mission-oriented training to do things like maneuver, and shoot, and communicate, I went in and learned to fight by fighting.
Interviewer:
You started by saying an intuitive Artillery Commander, I think you said. What do you mean by that?
MG R. Scales:
Thatâ€™s a great question, and I often, when I go to teach Artillerymen, I talk about - you know, Infantrymen have a thing called a sense of terrain, and good Infantrymen are good at reading terrain. Well, good Artillerymen are good at reading the trajectory, and thatâ€™s just as intuitive as reading terrain. Itâ€™s not about gunnery, or computing deflection quadrant and time, but itâ€™s more the ability to see where you are, to envision whatâ€™s going on at the other end - which is the important end - and to be able to visualize what your guns will do when you pull the trigger. Just as a quick example, because I wasnâ€™t trained formally in Gunnery, I would oftentimes do unusual things. I remember one time the 502nd was in contact. They were screaming for support. We were on a Firebase called Rocket. And my Fire Direction Chief starts running around computing a mission.
And I remember I looked over and, â€œWait, wait, wait, wait, wait - theyâ€™re right over there. You see and hear it, itâ€™s right over there.â€ â€œWhere is it on the map?â€ â€œWell, just, I donâ€™t know, 1,200 yards away.â€ So I had them swing the guns around, and look through the tube to where the smoke was. What I did know is 17 - every turn of the hand crank was 17 mils. So I said, â€œOkay, guys, 17 mils at 1,000 meters, turn it four times, and youâ€™re 70 meters away. Load up Charge 7, fuse delayâ€ - which means the round went into the trees before it exploded - and we started pouring rounds looking through the tube directly at some spot in the trees, and we killed a bunch of guys. And if weâ€™d have stopped to do gunnery, you know, to do adjust fire and all that sort of thing, these guys mightâ€™ve been killed. So thatâ€™s what I mean by intuitive gunnery. Itâ€™s the ability to get beyond the firing tables and see yourself through your mindâ€™s eye to see yourself follow the trajectory down to the target.
Interviewer:
Almost a three-dimensional viewing.
MG R. Scales:
Exactly. You know, there was an old joke years ago that, you know, when the Commander starts bitching at the Battery Commander about his fire, you know, the answer was always

the same, you know. â€œWell sir, it looked good when it left here.â€ But what an intuitive Gunner knows is the ability to sense the trajectory, and to know when to start firing, when to stop firing, and where to shoot, what to shoot. And see, oftentimes the Infantry guy doesnâ€™t know that. The Infantry guy just wants fire. He wants help. Heâ€™s about to get overrun or whatever, and he wants it now. And he doesnâ€™t have time to go through a Socratic dialogue to explain to you what he wants to happen in front of him. So the key to intuitive Artillery is to really understand what effects are. Itâ€™s not the bullet; itâ€™s the explosion that counts in Artillery, and if youâ€™re able to envision the explosion. And what helped me, of course, is my first two or three months in command as I spent in the field with the Infantry, so I could see what good Artillery was like, and what bad Artillery was like. And then when I took command, I was able to sort of translate that.
Interviewer:
So intuitive Artillery is something thatâ€™s learned?
MG R. Scales:
No, itâ€™s something thatâ€™s intuitive.
Interviewer:
It is intuitive, okay.
MG R. Scales:
Itâ€™s something that comes out of sort of your frontal cortex, where you can see things. Because remember, now, in Artillery, youâ€™re not right there. And oftentimes the guy who makes the decision is way far away in some bunker or something. And when youâ€™re sitting at a bunker and youâ€™re listening to a radio with a squelch off, and you hear people screaming over the radio, you have to be able intuitively to sort through that to figure out what to do. Oftentimes, what Iâ€™ve learned in combat, is the guy that screams the most is the guy that needs Artillery the least. Oftentimes itâ€™s the quiet guy whoâ€™s about ready to get butchered. And the experience of listening to a radio, talking to people, knowing what the terrain is like, knowing what the machine you have there can do and what it canâ€™t do, is what keeps an Infantryman alive. Not just following the Gunnery tables or going through the effects tables to determine, well, thatâ€™s a Battery 5 or Battery 2.
No, you have to be able to know when to start, when to stop, where to shoot, and what to shoot. If you can do that, then you can sense that - oh, hereâ€™s the other thing. If you have an intuitive ability, Artillery ability, you know when itâ€™s not right. This is important, because Artillery oftentimes gets criticized for shooting too close or fratricide, friendly casualties. It happens too often. You stop that by listening, looking, and knowing whether it feels right. And if it doesnâ€™t feel right, you stop and you find out what the problem is. One of the things I used to always look at is Iâ€™d stand behind the guns and just see which way they were pointed. And to see if theyâ€™re all kind of at the same elevation. And then Iâ€™d look across the back of the Battery to see if they had cut the charge right. And itâ€™s pretty easy to do. Or the other thing is you can see when a crew is in a - to use the old Army expression - in a bit of a shitty.
Theyâ€™re disconnected. Theyâ€™re not listening to the Chief. Theyâ€™re running around. Theyâ€™re screaming at each other when theyâ€™re around the piece. And when you see that, you know that donâ€™t let them do that. Sort them out. Let the other guys do it, and then fix that. Because almost inevitably, when you see the body languages of a crew thatâ€™s in chaos, you know eventually theyâ€™re going to kill somebody not the enemy.
Interviewer:
When did you actually arrive in Vietnam?
MG R. Scales:
Arrived in Vietnam 21 October 1968.
Interviewer:
Amazing how everybody remembers that.
MG R. Scales:

Oh yes.
Interviewer:
How did you make the shift from doctrine against, you know - youâ€™d been prepared to fight a Soviet army or Warsaw Pact army. How did you make the shift from that to fighting the NVA or the Vietcong? I mean was there any sort of official -
MG R. Scales:
Well, I had an advantage in that I had about three or four months where I could watch everything around me, and see who did right and who did wrong, before I was given command of a Firing Battery. You know, itâ€™s the old idea of easing yourselves into a situation by looking at those around you and seeing who knows what theyâ€™re doing and who doesnâ€™t know what theyâ€™re doing. And the key was there were two or three Captains who were in that Battalion who were very, very, very good. And they - and I could listen to them on the radio, and then I went up, in this case, with the Rakkasans in the early days in the A Shau Valley, and I walked with them because I was the Brigade Liaison Officer at the time. And I could see from the other end who really knew how to do it and who didnâ€™t. There was this one guy named *RAY DELOACH* - he was a black kid - very unusual to have an Artillery African-American who was out doing his thing. He was the Battalion Liaison Officer. He knew exactly what he was doing.
And we would sit there in the night - Iâ€™ll never forget this - sit there in the Battalion Commanderâ€™s hole, and go through how we planned, where he put the rounds. I watched him fire a couple of DEFCONs, Defensive Concentrations, and then I got it. And then I went back to go on R&R, and I came back, and then of course I was thrown into it. But had I not done that - had I done what happened so often in close combat units is go directly into the situation, particularly without proper preparation, I wouldâ€™ve gotten the soldiers killed.
Interviewer:
What was your first impression of Vietnam when you got there? What was it like getting off the plane?
MG R. Scales:
My first impression of Vietnam was that it was incredibly beautiful. Iâ€™d been an Army brat. Iâ€™d been in countries all over the world. And the thing that struck me about Vietnam is it was all grace and beauty. It was the last place on earth where anyone would even think about fighting a war. It was - and maybe it was the French influence. I donâ€™t know what it was. But there was something elegant about the people. There was something intriguing, almost mystical, about the country. People talk about the horror of the jungle. I found places like the A Shau Valley to be almost mythical in its presence. Standing up on a 3,000 foot mountain looking down at this beautiful piece of terrain, this emerald green piece of terrain. The waterfalls, the sampans on the river.
The city of Da Nang, which was the old Imperial City of Da Nang, was just an amazing place. And it just struck me as so unusual that here I am with a bunch of country kids and city kids from the United States, thrust in the middle of this ancient Asian place of mystery, and fighting a war against the diabolical enemy, who really, really wanted to kill me. And it *WASNâ€™T A LAY THAT I FILLED OUT* that he really, really wanted to kill me. But you know, I really, really was intrigued. Even the Vietnamese soldiers I worked with werenâ€™t soldiers like we think of soldiers. They were thin, and they were frail, and they were very cerebral, many of these young Vietnamese Officers I met. Incredibly well educated, many of them; almost imperious, I guess, in a way.
And I found that so stark contrast to, say, the American Army Officers who were, you know, sort of a world apart. And by the way, thatâ€™s one of the things that struck me later in life, in my writings and so forth, is this need for - that struck me at the time was this need for cultural awareness, and understanding your cultural environment. Not just reading terrain off a map, but understanding the human terrain, I guess is the phrase now. Because that really - and also donâ€™t forget my father was in Vietnam at the same time.

Interviewer:
Oh.
MG R. Scales:
And this was my dadâ€™s third war, and I remember when I first got there visiting him at his Headquarters.
Interviewer:
What was he doing there?
MG R. Scales:
He was a Deputy Commander of Long Binh Depot. Long Binh was a big city, or big Depot just outside of Saigon. And I remember my dad said, â€œSon, I enjoyed World War II.â€ He said, â€œI didnâ€™t like Korea all that much.â€ But he said, â€œI hate Vietnam.â€ And I said, â€œWhy, Dad?â€ And he says, â€œWell, because weâ€™re doing really stupid things here.â€ And this, you know, is my dad at that time had, what, 25, 24, 25 yearsâ€™ service. And really intriguing to me to hear him talk that way about the Army that he loved; you know, the Army that raised him from being, what, a farm kid in Texas, and now heâ€™s a Colonel. And he just hated the war.
Interviewer:
Really.
MG R. Scales:
Yeah. And I picked up a little of that. And then, of course, you can imagine what this did to my mother. My mother sitting back in Virginia with her son and her husband.
Interviewer:
What were the mistakes that your father identified?
MG R. Scales:
My father had - well, remember, my fatherâ€™s a Depot Commander, and he says, â€œWeâ€™re trying to drown these people with matÃˆriels.â€ He said - it just so happens one of his areas of responsibility was the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, which is a huge Armored outfit whose base camp was just outside of Saigon. And he said, â€œIâ€™d go out there, son, and all these guys are d is rolling up and down the highway, and crashing into the hobo woods with M48 tanks, and M113 Armored Personnel Carriers, and crushing over hooches, and acting like a bull in a china shop.â€ He says, â€œWe never did that in Korea, and we certainly never did it in World War II. Why are we doing it here?â€ So he - it was this - it was a dichotomy between the wars heâ€™d fought in the past and the war he was fighting now, and how it just sort of seemed atonal to him. It seemed discordant.
And now his son was about to go up to, you know, northern I Corps, which is a bad place at the time. And he was worried about me, obviously, but he was also worried about the war. And he was there for my first four months before he rotated back.
Interviewer:
Did he ever change his opinion of the war?
MG R. Scales:
Never did. My father couldâ€™ve stayed till 1974. He left in â€˜72, principally out of frustration and disgust about what happened to his Army. And in fact, I think a lot of the reason I stayed in the Army was to help my - it was built on my dadâ€™s perception that his generation had broken the Army.
Interviewer:
His generation.
MG R. Scales:
His generation had broken the Army, and it was up to my generation to fix it. I know that sounds a bit philosophic, but itâ€™s true. You know, he said, â€œI fought in three wars, and the Army Iâ€™m leaving is a broken institution,â€ and it was. You know, 19% of soldiers in Europe were addicted to heroin. When I went back in â€˜71, â€˜72, you had to carry a pistol into your own barracks. The barracks were a battleground between black and white. 54% of the recruits in 1973 didnâ€™t have a high school education. You can just go down the statistics of that era, and you can understand what my dad is talking about.

Interviewer:
But itâ€™s interesting that he blamed his generation; that -
MG R. Scales:
He blamed his generation.
Interviewer:
That he internalized it.
MG R. Scales:
And he said to me, he said, â€œNow itâ€™s up to your generation to fix this, â€˜cause I didnâ€™t.â€ By the way, to the day he died my father was a bitter man. He died in 1977, when I had just been arrived at the War College as Commandant. And I remember him saying to me, he says, â€œAll right, now you got a - now you really have a chance to fix this Army of yours.â€ And so my generation, those in my class and subsequent classes who decided to stay when it wasnâ€™t popular. Remember, my class in 1970 was the class that - the great class of abandonment, when half my class quit in 1970. And General Westmoreland was so upset about it he did that famous War College leadership study in 1971, that was immediately classified because of all the vitriol that came out of the War College class. But half my class left in 1970, which is the reason why the class of â€˜66 had so few generals. Yeah, we -
Interviewer:
Had so few what?
MG R. Scales:
So few Generals. We only had 13 ACC Generals, Active Component Category Generals, as opposed to other classes, that had 25, 26 Generals. Because so many of us were either dead, wounded, or voted with our feet. So this small number - and I donâ€™t know what the number is. Iâ€™d say probably, Iâ€™m guessing 250 that stuck it out - or less - that stuck it out to 20 years, much of our motive sure as hell wasnâ€™t the prestige of being an Army Officer. Because remember the Pew Survey in 1972 put Army Officers just above sanitation workers in terms of public respect. We were a vilified institution at that time, so it wasnâ€™t that. Sure as hell wasnâ€™t the money, because inflation kicked in in the late â€™70s. My wife and I had a tough time making ends meet; it wasnâ€™t that. It was the fact that we thought we were onto something in the â€™70s.
We thought that the Yom Kippur war, the all-volunteer Army, the training revolution, all these things that were part of the foment of the â€™70s leading up to the reforms of the Armyâ€™s in the â€™80s - we were part of that. I helped write the Fires part of Air Land Battle Doctrine when I was at Fort Sill. You felt that you were taking a broken institution and reforming it in such a way that youâ€™d be respected again. Thatâ€™s what was so important to us. I remember going to a cocktail party with my wife - sheâ€™s from New Jersey - and what was it, I was just out of graduate school. And this guy came up to me, he says, â€œSo youâ€™re going to teach, right?â€ And I said, â€œWell, no, actually Iâ€™m not going to teach.â€ He says, â€œWell, youâ€™re going to get out, right? I mean you got a PhD in history; youâ€™re going to get out.â€ I said, â€œNah, Iâ€™m going to stick with it.â€ He says, â€œYou got to be crazy. Why would anybody wear a uniform in this day and age?â€ He said, â€œThatâ€™s ridiculous.â€
And so the difference between my generation and this generation is that, you know, a kid goes through BWI Airport, and heâ€™s got his ACUs on. Thereâ€™s a line of old farts like me waiting out in front to shake his hand, and to hug him, and thank him for his service, and buy him a beer at a bar. Well you know, I came home from Vietnam, and when I got to Travis Air Force Base to go to San Francisco International, an IC7 there said, â€œSon, get out of those khakis and go to the PX, get yourself some civilian clothes, â€˜cause you donâ€™t want to get on that airplane in uniform.â€ Thatâ€™s the difference, and I think to some degree, thatâ€™s what we gave to the Army in my generation. And you could argue that, yeah, 13 years of war changed the Army. But the starting point of the Army, I think, was this reformed institution that took shape, intellectually took shape in the â€™70s. Was

formed in the â€™80s, fought in the early â€™90s.
And then went through a process of reformatting in the 90s prior to 9/11. You can almost chart it in those epochs. And those of us who served for 35 years were the ones that sort of helped chart that course all along.
Interviewer:
I want to get back to Vietnam, so I can make sure we cover your experience there. You arrived in Vietnam, of course, at a very interesting time, late â€˜68 -
MG R. Scales:
Right.
Interviewer:
Nine months, approximately, after Tet.
MG R. Scales:
Right.
Interviewer:
Which was a turning point in the war in a variety of levels. Arguably, of military victory for the United States Army, but a political disaster for the United States government.
MG R. Scales:
Exactly.
Interviewer:
Explain a little bit about the situation that you found on the ground with American troops.
MG R. Scales:
Yeah. Thatâ€™s a good question. We were at the cusp of all that.
Interviewer:
On the back end, you mean.
MG R. Scales:
Yeah. I mean we - remember now, we were in the 101st Airborne Division, and thereâ€™s something to be said for the institutional pride that you have for being part of an organization, you know, the Screaming Eagles. By the way, I was the only - no, there was three people in my Battery who had Airborne wings. So it wasnâ€™t the fact that youâ€™d been to Airborne School and you were, you know, a badass paratrooper. That you were part of the 319th, or part of the 187th. This was the pre - this is the pre-revolt generation. Mostly draftees. My Battery was maybe 50-50 draftee, volunteers. But we hadnâ€™t kind of gotten to the point of dissolution. You know, there wasnâ€™t the problem with dope, and the problem with fragging, and the problem with sort of internal insurrection that you saw in â€˜69, â€˜70, â€˜71.
Part of itâ€™s also leadership. You know, one of the advantage of being at an isolated unit, a Battery thatâ€™s all alone on a firebase, is that you were a sort of Army capsule, time capsule. And youâ€™re able to establish your own - we were able to establish our own ethics for being on the firebase. We werenâ€™t the most military unit, God knows. We werenâ€™t terribly good at some things. We never really embraced technology at all, â€˜cause weâ€™re an Airborne unit. But at the same time, we were a very tight unit. I remember when I left, I was medevaced around the second week in October â€˜69, and I was on the D.M.Z. at the time, a place called Firebase Bayonet, which had been abandoned by the - not abandoned, but give up by the Third Marine Divisions. We took their place. Tiny little place, miserable. Raining every day. Oh, it was awful.
But I remember standing in front of this Battery. At that time my Battery probably had 25 of the original 55 regulars left, and Iâ€™ll never forget, they all came up to me. And it was a true Band of Brothers experience. Why? Well, because we were together longer than most units, after the horror of being overrun six months before. And we were survivors of that, and we had - as the old Army saying goes, weâ€™d had a chance to pet the elephant, and we knew that we were really, really good. We felt we were invincible at that point.
Interviewer:
Pet the elephant?
MG R. Scales:

Pet the - itâ€™s an old Army term about, you know, thereâ€™s an old saying that you take a blind man or you blind someone and you have them go pet the elephant. And if you pet different parts of the elephant, you figure out itâ€™s a different animal. You pet him on the trunk, heâ€™s one animal. You pet him on the tail, heâ€™s another animal. You pet him on the side. But petting the elephant means experiencing real combat. Youâ€™ve had a chance to pet the elephant, and you know what itâ€™s really like. Itâ€™s not like watching a movie, or going to the Basic Training. Youâ€™ve had a chance to see people die, youâ€™ve had a chance to try - and by the way, Iâ€™ll be honest with you, thereâ€™s a certain amount of hubris in all this as well. That after youâ€™ve been through something like this - you know I lost almost 60% of my unit, killed or wounded, and thatâ€™s bad. But for that 40% that stayed, we didnâ€™t have any problems, because we thought - perhaps wrongfully - but we thought we were really, really, really good.
And when a young kid came in as a replacement, either from another unit in the 101st, or perhaps part of the replacement thing, he was under this sort of NCO old soldier fraternity that he had to earn his way into. And I had a couple of kids who quit. I had a couple of kids that went back to the Base Camp because they broke apart emotionally. But for the most part, this drafted Army was not the Army of 1970 or â€˜72. This was the Army of 1968, â€˜69. But I would also admit this: two years later, the Army had just completelyâ€¦itâ€™s interesting what makes an Army break. When I was part of the Army as a Battery Commander, the Army had not yet broken. The signs were there; we didnâ€™t see it. 1972, what, 2 years later, the Army was a broken institution.
Interviewer:
What were the signs you didnâ€™t see?
MG R. Scales:
Ill discipline. A lack of respect for authority. Clanism and factionalism driven by race and whether you were a volunteer or, you know, an inductee. Bad Officers, and an absent NCO Corps. The key is an absent NCO Corps. When the Non-Commissioned Officers leave - theyâ€™re either dead, or theyâ€™re wounded, or they vote with their feet, or they leave in disgust, whatever the reason - they leave a vacuum that you canâ€™t replace by thickening it with Officers, or buying better soldiers. And weâ€™re unique in that respect among Armies. If the Russian Army has a discipline problem, they take a bunch of Officers and stuff them in there, and, you know, do whatever they do. Our Army, for better or for worse, is NCO-dependent. I had good NCOs.
Really good NCOs, tough, mean, hardcore, combat experienced NCOs. Two years later, at Fort Bragg or Fort Hood, they werenâ€™t there. And when you lose that institutional glue, and you lose that sense of fraternity with NCOs, then that glue that holds the institution together begins to unravel. And thatâ€™s what happened in the early â€™70s. So the lesson - if thereâ€™s a lesson - is that the canary in the coal mine isnâ€™t your unitâ€™s Status Report, or is isnâ€™t your days of training, or it isnâ€™t your C Status, or any of that. Itâ€™s this anecdotal sense you have of the health of your leaders. If the NCOs arenâ€™t performing, if the NCOs are gone, if the NCOs are disconnected from the unit, the best-equipped Army unit in the world wonâ€™t fight in that condition.
And sadly, I think, when I was the Director of Current Operations for a year in the Pentagon, and I often wondered about that when I get a C Rating, what do you call it, a Combat Rating for your status, Iâ€™d always try to look into the C to see what the real status, the anecdotal status of the unit is. Because in 1972, units that were C-2, C-3, 6 months later, they were essentially mobs.
Interviewer:
Essentially what?
MG R. Scales:
Mobs. How did that happen? So Armies break very quickly, and they take a long time to rebuild. I mean it takes 15 years to make a Platoon Sergeant. At least that long to make a good Battalion Commander. So youâ€™re talking about the West Point classes of â€˜72,

â€˜73, â€˜74, you know. Those kids that were Commissioned during that time were the ones who grew up in it, and were institutionally committed to not being part of the same institution they were part of in â€˜72. Thatâ€™s what changed the Army.
Interviewer:
You referred earlier to being overrun, your positions were overrun.
MG R. Scales:
Yeah.
Interviewer:
Was that before Hamburger Hill?
MG R. Scales:
It was immediately after Hamburger Hill.
Interviewer:
Letâ€™s talk then first about this, about your experience at Hamburger Hill -
MG R. Scales:
Yeah, sure.
Interviewer:
And weâ€™ll get to that.
MG R. Scales:
Yeah. Well, I was a Battery Commander on Hamburger Hill, and I was on the Firebase Berchtesgaden, which is about Charge 7, 326 mils. I remember it to this day. Charge 7 is the most powerful charge that a Howitzer has.
Interviewer:
But this was May of 1969.
MG R. Scales:
May of 1969, 1 through 11 May. And I sat there up on the hill with a BC scope. A BC scope is like a very powerful binocular that has - itâ€™s an Artillery binocular. And I could look through that binocular and watch the attack of Hamburger Hill. You could sit there and look at it. And I remember my good friend Reuben Davis - just a wonderful gentleman, now retired, a lawyer in Tucson, Arizona, probably the best soldier I think Iâ€™ve ever known, talking about this - and him saying to me, he said, â€œBob, theyâ€™re going to do it again, and I donâ€™t understand it.â€
MG R. Scales:
What made - why was the Army determined to take Hamburger Hill? What was the thing - describe the situation that you found.
MG R. Scales:
I donâ€™t know. Remember, I was a Captain at the time. And I can remember sitting in the Fire Direction Center, Reuben and I sitting together, and listening to Honeycutt give the orders for that.
Interviewer:
Honeycutt.
MG R. Scales:
Honeycutt, Weldon B. Honeycutt was the Battalion Commander of the Rakkasans that made the attack on that hill. And he was a little, short, mean-spirited man, who was determined that the Rakkasans were going to take this hill. This is his hill. Heâ€™s going to take it. His boss was a guy named Joe Conmy, who had commanded the Old Guard, and the Division Commander was Mel Zais, who was commanding the Division but heâ€™d also been, of course, with the Division in World War II, jumped into Normandy. So this is sort of Airborne thing, that this is a psychological face-off between the NVA - remember now, the other important point to make. This is the 29th NVA Regiment. This wasnâ€™t a pick-up team. This wasnâ€™t a sandlot team. 29th NVA Regiment had been in that part of Vietnam since the â€™50s, for Peteâ€™s sake.
And they were very, very, very good. I remember looking at dead NVA scattered around my Battery area, and the thing that impressed me most was they had clean haircuts. They had fresh, clean weapons, well-oiled. They were physically fit - thin, skinny, but physically fit.

Tanned - these are the bodies Iâ€™m talking about, and the few we captured were clearly dedicated, hardened soldiers. And I remember after it was over, I said to myself, â€œWow.â€ How do you put this? â€œNever again will I ever be in a situation as a combat leader where Iâ€™m fighting against an enemy who wants it more than I do. Heâ€™s better trained, and better equipped.â€ And thatâ€™s what we had. We had an enemy who was at that time better than we were.
And I said, â€œBoy, thatâ€™ll never happen again.â€ And it didnâ€™t.
Interviewer:
Better â€˜cause more motivated?
MG R. Scales:
More motivated. He had better weapons.
Interviewer:
Better how, how better weapons?
MG R. Scales:
Well, remember Iâ€™m the guy thatâ€™s under a lot of pressure, I guess, here in the Army community for writing articles about how poor our small arms are. Well, I write that because three of my soldiers - *WADDELL*, *WORRELL*, and *FUENTEZ* - were dead, laying on top of M16s that were broken open. Now, maybe they broke open those weapons to clean them. I donâ€™t know. I suspect they broke them open to clear a jam. And -
Interviewer:
Which in fact there with the M16 was a bit of a problem.
MG R. Scales:
Yeah, and now part of thatâ€™s my fault - again, this goes back to guilt - because all that day, we had - you know we were shooting 1,100 rounds a day. So we had an aerial resupply by CH-47 Chinooks that brought the ammunition in these cargo nets. And I remember, all day - weâ€™d start shooting about 4:00 in the morning - and all day they would bring in these cargo nets. And because the place, the Firebase was so small, and we were so low on ammunition, weâ€™d just cut the cargo nets loose and crack the boxes open with hatchets, and just load and fire the weapons, sometimes without even taking the plastic off. And the troops were exhausted. But what happens when these Chinooks come in is they kick up a huge mountain of dust, and that dust gets into everything - your radios, your food. It gets into your water. And it also gets into your rifles. And I went to bed that night about, oh, midnight, maybe a little before. And I remember distinctly, I didnâ€™t turn to my Chief of Firing Battery. I said, â€œEverybody take time out. Letâ€™s go clean our weapons.â€
I didnâ€™t do that. It I was an Infantry Officer, I probably wouldâ€™ve done that, but I shot big things. And it was at 3:00 in the morning, about two and a half hours later, that they overran us. And part of the reason they overran us was they had better weapons. AK-47s didnâ€™t jam when they were dirty and muddy. They were 30-round magazines, you know, much more potent close-in than our weapons were. And our weapons jammed, and I can remember soldiers saying, you know, using profanity, and theyâ€™re cursing â€˜cause their weapons wonâ€™t shoot. And I said to myself, â€œI will never be part of an Army that has to clean a weapon six times a day to be ensured it works. Itâ€™s just not right.â€ Itâ€™s - you know. They say, well, that even today, the problem with the M-4s. Everybody says, â€œWell, if the soldiers would just clean it and learn how to shoot it.â€ Well, the Russians donâ€™t say that, and they perfectly - not that bad, dirty rifles are a good thing, but you know.
When youâ€™re in close combat, youâ€™re in the field. Youâ€™re surrounded by dirt and grime, and you donâ€™t always have time to treat your rifle like a surgical instrument. And maybe we need to build a new rifle thatâ€™s able to do that. But part of that I think comes from my experience as an Artilleryman, with soldiers whose secondary weapons didnâ€™t work.
Interviewer:

So getting back to Hamburger Hill, the hill was about what, 3,000 feet up, about 1,000 meters?
MG R. Scales:
Yeah. Well, we were 3,300 feet. Hamburger Hill was about 24, 2,500 feet, â€˜cause you looked down at the assault; just -
Interviewer:
You looked down at the assault.
MG R. Scales:
I looked down at the assault. Distance of range was about 6,000 meters.
Interviewer:
And what did you see - I mean just tell me what you saw.
Interviewer:
I could see everything, because by the time I got there the hill was completely denuded. The last, oh, 150 meters to the crest of the hill was just thick, red clay; this gooey, red, almost vermilion clay, because it was wet all the time. Remember, this is the rainy season. And you could see the goo, and then you could see the bunkers. Thatâ€™s the other reason Iâ€™ve been a steady critic of air power, because I sat there day after day after day and watched hundreds and hundreds of air sorties, literally stacked up in a spiral up to 25, 30,000 feet, close air support that would just come down on this. It was like a train schedule. It would come down and make their final run, drop their thousand-pounders, 500-pounders, some cases 2,000-pounders, directly on that hill. And 30 minutes later, these guys would come out of their holes and start killing our soldiers.
And I thought to myself - finally, when I got to the hill. I guess it was in July or August, we finally cleared the hill, and I could see why. Because the logs, these coconut logs, were laced like that, like a triangle, you know, like a - I donâ€™t know, like an A-frame maybe is a better way to put it. And they deflected the blast that went off over them. And unless you hit it, the bomb actually hit the structure, you didnâ€™t hurt anybody. And thatâ€™s always been a lesson for me, even today in Iraq and in Afghanistan. When Iâ€™m in the media, I often say, â€œBe careful about people who view air power as the ultimate solution for the close combat fight, because itâ€™s not; it canâ€™t be.â€
Interviewer:
Itâ€™s also - thatâ€™s also part of the overriding faith in technology.
MG R. Scales:
Of course it is, and the same thing with my weapons, you know. We got good enough to where we could shoot - long as the troops were down behind cover, we could shoot within 40 meters of an approaching, of an attacking friendly force. But I wasnâ€™t killing much. And one of the great mysteries of Artillerymen is two-fold. Number one is, you know, why are we so inaccurate, and why donâ€™t we kill more? And the answer is because the enemy has a vote, and they have a way to hide from explosive power, whether itâ€™s bombs or artillery. And unless you catch them in the open, and unless you catch them in a counterattack, or you catch them being stupid - which was not infrequent - you wonâ€™t kill them.
Interviewer:
How many actual assaults were there?
MG R. Scales:
11 - 11 assaults. I was there for the last three, and then I was there for subsequent operations, â€˜cause we moved back from Hamburger Hill. They reoccupied, and then we had to do it again, although it was easier when I was there in June.
Interviewer:
Could you describe for me what you saw during those three assaults?
MG R. Scales:
Yeah. Through the BC scope, you could actually see. It was hard to see, but you could see the flashes. You could see the tracers. You could see we had red tracers, and the enemy had green tracers. You could see the criss-crossing tracers. You could see. And of course,

in your ear you could hear the calls for medevac, and you could hear Honeycutt, you know, shouting orders. I was on the Battalion net, not the Company net. You could hear Honeycutt shouting orders. And then, of course, you know, a strange irony is I could fire a round and then I could listen to it land on the radio; kind of strange. And then, of course, you knowâ€¦two weeks later, we get overrun.
Interviewer:
Weâ€™ll get to that in a second. Did these assaults go on all day, though? How long do these assaults last?
MG R. Scales:
No, the assaults usually started about 8:00 in the morning, 7:30, 8:00 in the morning went up the hill, â€˜cause Honeycutt - this is an Army that fought in daylight, unlike todayâ€™s Army. And Honeycutt tried to do it right after EENT. But it was so disorganized, and there was so much friction in getting units up and online to make an assault, that it usually didnâ€™t occur till early morning. And then by 11:00, 11:30, started over again. Yeah.
Interviewer:
You showed a certain amount of bitterness earlier; is that fair to say?
MG R. Scales:
Well, yeah. Much of itâ€™s, you know, ex post facto. I mean at the time, I was a brand new Captain - what did I know? But there was no love lost between Black Jack, who was a Battalion Commander, Weldon B. Honeycutt, and the soldiers. The soldiers believed that they were doing us, and perhaps thereâ€™s a better way to do it. And he was 100% committed to having the glory or having credit for taking the hill, and his leadership - and by the way, remember what was happening back here in this country while that was going on. I mean Ted Kennedy is going ballistic in the halls of the Senate over this wastage of lives in Hamburger Hill. So then you had the additional pressure, political pressure that I didnâ€™t feel but our bosses felt, that to back away without taking the hill, with all the grief we were getting back at home - and remember what â€˜69 was like -
Interviewer:
Sure.
MG R. Scales:
From Congressmen who were saying that, â€œSee, the Army canâ€™t take the hill.â€ Or, â€œWhy are you taking the hill and wasting all these lives?â€ You know, one way or the other. So the point of decision - and Honeycutt saying to Zais, â€œLook, I can do this. One more time - one more time and I can take it.â€ Well, 11 more times later, he did, but it was not pretty.
Interviewer:
Was there any great strategic value to it, or tactical value?
MG R. Scales:
Psychological value, â€˜cause remember, you were fighting the best in the NVA And there was a feeling that if you could break the back of the 29th Regiment, youâ€™ve broken the back of the most respected NVA unit in northern I Corps. So there was a though that if you can break the back of the 29th and send them reeling back across the D.M.Z., then youâ€™ve turned the psychological corner in that part of Vietnam. But it wasnâ€™t expressed in those words. But that was clearly - you know, you got the best there is, the 101st, going against the best they have, the 29th, and mano a mano, whoâ€™s going to win?
Interviewer:
So -
MG R. Scales:
Oh, by the way, nine months later my Battery, now commanded by a guy named Rice at Firebase Ripcord, was finally overrun and killed. My guns were all completely destroyed, those that werenâ€™t evacuated; same Battery. And it was the 29th Regiment. So 1970, you know, Iâ€™m sitting there watching my Battery on the news. Finally, the 29th Regiment

got us. And the Battalion Commander was killed. This guy Rice, who was my replacement, was severely wounded. Wins the DSC, and later commits suicide; four or five years later, the guy kills himself.
Interviewer:
So youâ€™re Battery, though, is overrun a couple weeks after that.
MG R. Scales:
A couple weeks, June 13, 1969.
Interviewer:
Tell me about what were the circumstances then?
MG R. Scales:
Well, I mean Iâ€™d literally just taken command, and as I said to you earlier, my obsession was just shooting and shooting and shooting. Thatâ€™s all we did. And we went to bed that night -
Interviewer:
But the hill had been taken at that time, right?
MG R. Scales:
Hill had been taken - well, it was taken and re-taken. The Battle of Hamburger Hill wasnâ€™t over on the 11th of May. The fight with the 29th went on around Hamburger Hill until August.
Interviewer:
Okay.
MG R. Scales:
When we finally pulled out of the hill, out of the A Shau Valley. It was all about the A Shau; no, no, no. No, no. The fight was ferocious into June and July, because the 29th wasnâ€™t going to be beaten. And their strategy was a good one. Was destroy the surrounding Firebases one by one; thatâ€™s what will force them to withdraw. And by the way, they were 100% correct. Thatâ€™s exactly what we did. By August, we were out of there, because the price of losing soldiers on these hills was just too high a price to pay, after the publicity of Hamburger Hill. But anyway, 13th of June. Remember now, I only had four guns and 55 men, because the original Battery of 105 and 6 guns had been butchered back in May, when I took command of the Battery that Milt Freeman was commanding. And we got hit about 3:00 in the morning. And my First Sergeant and I - Bob Brown, Korea War veteran, and I - came running out of our holes.
In exactly the precise uniform to get us killed, a pair of OD boxer shorts and a pistol, which immediately made us look like we were the bad guys. And they were just - geez, they were just everywhere. Everywhere. They were everywhere. Throwing satchel charges, firing RPGs, ripping with the AKs, killing my soldiers left and right. 19 of my soldiers were evacuated of the 55, so that shows you how tough it was. I think we probably had the highest casualty rate of any close support Artillery unit in Vietnam. And kids are - well, you know, the Chief of Firing Battery was shot in the elbow. First Sergeant wounded in the thigh. Two of my Gun Chiefs were seriously wounded. Four soldiers killed right there. And it was awful.
Interviewer:
As you said, the American Army was not an Army that fought at night, but the NVA obviously did.
MG R. Scales:
NVA fought at night. Yeah, they managed to crawl up the side of our hill, slit the throats of the Infantry who were on the outer perimeter, who were probably asleep - we donâ€™t know that. Worked their way up hand over hand, and all at once - and oh, by the way, beautiful coordination between mortars and the attack. There wasnâ€™t 20 seconds from the time the last NVA mortar went off that they were on us. We couldnâ€™t do that today. And they walked right through their mortar fire and right up over us. And you know, thanks to the 1st of the 506th was the unit, B Company, 1st of the 506th was defending us. But you know, the word hand to hand is overused sometimes, you know? People talk, â€œWell, it

was hand to hand;â€ well, it really wasnâ€™t. This was hand to hand.
Interviewer:
How long did it last?
MG R. Scales:
Ohâ€¦well, the whole thing probably lasted an hour and a half. This part, 20 minutes. I donâ€™t know. Seemed like forever to me. And I had a pistol, and then I picked up an M16 from one of the dead soldiers and I used that. And then I guess the most important thing I did is I left one gun at 1,100 mils, loaded with illumination; itâ€™s a round of bright. And I had Sergeant Brigham go over and pull the lanyard on that, and then that round went up, it had a one and one-half second delay, on Charge 7, one and one-half second delay. And when it went off right above the Battery, everything changed, because now you could see everything. Like literally a deer in the headlights, and the enemy froze, â€˜cause now they were fully exposed. And then thatâ€™s what turned the tide of the battle was all of a sudden we could see them now.
And we and mainly the 1st of the 506th - and there was a guy who I got to - itâ€™s in the picture of me getting a Silver Star. Next to me was Sergeant Major Hardcore. Sergeant Major Hardcore had changed his last name; went through the legal process of changing his last name to Hardcore on his - you see it in the picture - on his thing. Everybody thought it was a joke. No, no - his name was Hardcore. About 5â€™4â€, meanest little guy Iâ€™ve ever seen, six Purple Hearts. And he went around that night just killing people. Itâ€™s the damndest thing Iâ€™ve ever seen. Just standing up on a berm, walking around the perimeter, just killing people. And never any visible emotion. And so a little humorous there - I had failed my soldiers, and it was obvious to me I had. And the Company Commander of the 506 was a guy by the name of Harold Erikson; his call sign was Viking. Finest Infantryman Iâ€™ve ever known.
And Iâ€™ll never forget this. Iâ€™m sitting in the midst of all this horror - everybodyâ€™s gone. Itâ€™s about 9:00 in the morning, and Iâ€™m sitting there. It looked like a scene out of Apocalypse Now, you know? And he comes up behind me, and Iâ€™m feeling sorry for myself. And I remember he said, Viking said to me, he said, â€œWell, Captain Scales, what are you going to do now?â€ And I remember, Iâ€™ll never forget this, I say, â€œWell, Viking, frankly lately Iâ€™ve been giving serious consideration to law school.â€ And he says, â€œNo, no, no. What are you going to do now?â€ And I said, â€œI have no idea, Viking.â€ And then for the next hour, right in the middle of all this craziness going on, he took me and gave me a graduate-level class on how to defend a hill. Staking and wire, laying out limit stakes, emplacement of Claymores, use of OPs - our own OPs, not the Infantryâ€™s; our own OPs.
How to conduct a mad minute. Small arms maintenance. Simple things that I shouldâ€™ve learned prior to going to Vietnam, unrelated to my primary mission, that later, in my rather frenetic tours of Battery Commanders, saved my life on two different occasions, â€˜cause then I had it. Oh by the way, none of this is rocket science, you know? You got a range card to shoot at night. You got limit sticks for machine guns. But I didnâ€™t know that.
Youâ€™ve got the other thing, hand grenades. He said, â€œWhere are your hand grenades?â€ I said, â€œI donâ€™t have any hand grenades.â€ He said, â€œWell, how the hell - youâ€™re living on a hilltop, so if you have hand grenades, youâ€™ll win.â€ I said, â€œWhat do you mean?â€ He says, â€œWell, just roll hand grenades down the hill. They wonâ€™t come.â€ I didnâ€™t know that. Later, on Firebase Bayonet, we defended ourselves not with rifles, but with hand grenades.
We had boxes of them. Who knew? I didnâ€™t think of that.
Interviewer:
Who shouldâ€™ve thought of that? Thatâ€™s a question.
MG R. Scales:
Boy, thatâ€™s a great question. Thatâ€™s a great question.
Interviewer:

Who shouldâ€™ve thought of that? Was this a failure of the institution to pass on -
MG R. Scales:
Maybe.
Interviewer:
Institution - sort of hard-won, on the ground -
MG R. Scales:
Maybe.
Interviewer:
On the job training?
MG R. Scales:
You know, Iâ€™ve never thought of that. Iâ€™ve always felt that at that level in those days, you learned to fight by fighting, and that you inured yourself internally, and that you sort of picked it up by osmosis. You watched everybody else. It was discovery learning, I guess, is the phrase weâ€™d learn today. No, there was nothing in the Artillery School where you learned the art and science of defending yourself against a human wave attack. And I would venture to say that Korea was the same way. Maybe at Wanat - I donâ€™t know, Iâ€™m guessing now - but at the Battle of Wanat, and Keating, two events in Afghanistan where soldiers were over - maybe the same issue there. I donâ€™t know. Iâ€™ll just tell you this: I wasnâ€™t prepared for it. And I think back now, I could list a hundred things I shouldâ€™ve done that wouldâ€™ve saved 19 lives. I didnâ€™t think of them.
Interviewer:
Was the NVAâ€™s goal to take out your soldiers or was it to take out your guns? Take out -
MG R. Scales:
No, no, no. The NVA - in fact, the NVA on that occasion stood in my Battery and didnâ€™t spike my guns. Spiking a gun is very easy. You take a little - what do you call those things - a little - itâ€™s a little dough of -
Interviewer:
Plastic?
MG R. Scales:
Of plastic explosive, wrapped in plastic. It looks like a cord on a shade that you pull. They call them satchel charges. They really werenâ€™t; they were just little clusters. You wrap it in tape or string, and you pull the cord and drop it down all the way to the breech, and itâ€™ll blow. Itâ€™ll knock that breech loose, and you canâ€™t use the gun. They didnâ€™t do it. No, the idea was to push us off, and make us leave the valley. They knew they couldnâ€™t do it by re-taking a hilltop, their own hilltop. They could do it by month - every time there was no moon, they were coming, and we just didnâ€™t know where. And every month until we left the valley, they kept coming, and finally in August, the Division Commander made the decision that the politics are just too much. Letâ€™s just get out of here and go back to the coast. And thatâ€™s what we did. And what did it was Ripcord. Ripcord, they finally got - the NVA 29th Regiment finally got it right, and completely destroyed that Battery, and virtually everybody on it.
Thereâ€™s a book about it called Ripcord.
Interviewer:
What was your - what did you feel when you were pulled out, and you had been there for three months of hard-fought -
MG R. Scales:
Wellâ€¦
Interviewer:
You know.
MG R. Scales:
First of all, we werenâ€™t pulled out. We stayed there another month, firing like crazy. Then I moved to Firebase Rocket that we cut out of the jungle, which was right on the

Laotian border, and then we got hit day after day after day after day. Thatâ€™s when I told you the story about shooting the artillery piece directly into the next hillside. And then the Marines pulled out of the DMZ, and oh, that was a low point of my life. We were going to move back to Camp Evans, and I was leaving in, what, a month? Six weeks?
Interviewer:
End of your rotation.
MG R. Scales:
End of my rotation, the Battalion Commander came. He said, â€œBob, I got some good news and bad news.â€ He says, â€œThe good news is youâ€™re leaving the valley.â€ I said, â€œThank God, sir.â€ He says, â€œThe bad news is youâ€™re going to the DMZ, and youâ€™re leaving tomorrow.â€ So we got on our trucks, we drove to My Loc, and to Vandergriff, which is the Marine big Firebase there south of the Rockpile. And then we used helicopter lift to take us up to this Firebase Bayonet, that the Marine Artillery - I think it was the 10th Marine Regiment - had just vacated. And we went in and vacated it, and there I stayed until I got medevaced three weeks later.
Interviewer:
What were you medevaced out for?
MG R. Scales:
Well, I say I was medevaced because I sleepwalked. They say I was medevaced because I had what I guess today youâ€™d call PTSD, shell shock, whatever the right phrase is. But I was combat-ineffective. Basically what I did is I fell - â€˜cause the hooch was on the side of a mountain like this, dug into the side of a mountain. And I sleepwalk when Iâ€™m under pressure. And I got up out of my hole and I rolled down the side of that mountain and into the wire. Set off a bunch of trip flares, and I shouldâ€™ve died. But anyway, they pulled me out and they called my new Battalion Commander whoâ€™d just taken over, and he said, â€œWe got to get this guy out of there.â€ So the next day, unbeknownst to me, this helicopter lands, and out came my replacement. I says, â€œI got three weeks left in command.â€ He says, â€œNo.â€ He says, â€œWeâ€™re just going to take you out for a rest.â€ Next thing I know, Iâ€™m at Camp Zama, Japan, in a rubber room - Iâ€™m exaggerating, of course. But I spent 11 days at Camp Zama.
And then finally I flew from Camp Zama. I never went back to my unit, which is sad. But I went straight from Camp Zama back to San Francisco. Never saw my unit again.
Interviewer:
But so you were three weeks short of a full year?
MG R. Scales:
Mm-hmm. No, I served my full year. Just the last 11 days I spent -
Interviewer:
Okay.
MG R. Scales:
At Camp Zama, Japan. And then when my DROS came around, they said, â€œThereâ€™s nothing wrong with him; heâ€™s fine. Just send him back.â€ Today, of course, I know what the diagnosis would be today, but at the time, it was - I mean letâ€™s face it, you know? I was under - I commanded for a year in Vietnam. It was a long time.
Interviewer:
Tell me a little bit about your experiences with PTSD. How did it affect you?
MG R. Scales:
It didnâ€™t affect me that much. I came back - and of course, my wife is watching all this on television. This is before the computer age, and she went almost three weeks without every hearing from me at all, you know - a letter or anything like that. And so when I got back, my wife - who is an amazing - youâ€™re an amazing woman - is an amazing woman, and she got it, you know. And we went to New York, where we began progress on my first child. And I think a lot of it is the nurturing of your spouse. I think she - Army brat, you know, her dad was in World War II, and my parents. And if you come back from - this is

unscientific; Iâ€™m not a medical doctor. But if you come back and you get thrown into life as usual - the National Guard guy, you go back to the hardware store.
A soldier, you go back to, you know, I donâ€™t know, clean, or whatever it is, itâ€™s one thing. But in my case, I went back into the bosom of the Army. My dad was still in the Army. My father-in-law had just retired. And so you sort of came back to the clan, you know what I mean? And you found yourself talking about your experiences, just as my dad talked about his experiences in three wars. And it wasnâ€™t as if Iâ€™d done anything particularly extraordinary. I really hadnâ€™t. Iâ€™d just gone for a year, and came back. And my dad was gone for what, six years, maybe, in combat? So - and it wasnâ€™t an attempt for therapy. I never went to any hospital or anything. But I was, you know, I was spooky at night for about six months. And then after that, my daughters would tell me, years later, Iâ€™d get spooked sometime in the middle of the night. But as long as youâ€™re within the warm embrace of your institution.
As long as youâ€™re expected to perform at a certain level, and not be squirrelly around your soldiers, you sort of self - I donâ€™t know how to say this. But you sort of discipline your way out of it, if that makes sense to you. And pretty soon - itâ€™s probably never gone, but itâ€™s gone. But I remember, gosh, I can name the name. Private Anderson lost both his legs and his manhood. Guy put a satchel charge in his crotch and blew him apart. Fuentez had his helmet, it was actually caved in. A B-40, early version of an RPG, hit him right in his forehead, caved it in. One of my soldiers was stabbed to death. I shot a guy - I shouldnâ€™t say this. I shot a guy in our - we had a little - we couldnâ€™t have fires, so we had like a little mess tent down below. And I remember this guy going through. We had peanut butter, and jelly, and hot soup, and coffee that we kept down there on one burner. And he was so hungry, he started taking cans of peanut butter - I guess peanut, whatever it was, but I could see the can moving around. And I shot him through the can. Thereâ€™s nothing particularly traumatic about that. More the trauma really came from what happened to my soldiers. And the guilt that goes with that.
Interviewer:
I want to get to that in a second. But I mean did you observe a lot of PTSD in your soldiers?
MG R. Scales:
No. No. No. Itâ€™s funny. No oneâ€™s ever asked me that question. No. Now, Iâ€™m sure it happened later, or I guess it - I donâ€™t know. But we were so tight. First of all, thereâ€™s so few of us. Remember now, in terms of the hardcore veterans, the guys who I hung out with for a year, there werenâ€™t 25 of us left. All three NCOs, two Officers, and me; Lieutenant Hale and I forget the other Lieutenantâ€™s name. All my FOs were dead. Both of my LNOs were dead. So the only guys I hung out with were just my two Battery Officers and 25 or 30 guys, and no. I mean we did some stupid things. We did things that you couldnâ€™t do today, you know?
Interviewer:
Such as?
MG R. Scales:
Oh, we snuck booze on the Firebase. We drank beer every night out of fuse cans. And one of my classmates, Mike Snell, West Point classmate of mine, and he was LNO of the 502nd, which was on the other side of our hill when we got overrun - he was killed that night. I went and saw his body lying right there. But earlier in the day, since weâ€™re classmates and we all were Century Men, or big demerit earners here, and we werenâ€™t very high in the class, he came over with a fuse can full of beer. It was Olympia beer. And we sat in my hooch that afternoon and drank beer - forbidden on the Firebase. We drank beer, and he went back, and four hours later, five hours later, he was dead and I was fine. So itâ€™s hard to describe a war like that, you know, where casualties were so high where we were that soldiers would literally rotate through your lives. And the only way you left back in those days is if you took a bullet, or you got hit with a mortar round, or you got sent to the loony bin.

Interviewer:
You brought up, well, being an Officer, feeling guilt over what happened to your soldiers, so those 19 soldiers you lost that night. How do you deal with that?
MG R. Scales:
Well, I mean -
Interviewer:
Thatâ€™s part of being in command; thatâ€™s part -
MG R. Scales:
Thatâ€™s what - and thatâ€™s a great question. And I think thatâ€™s what made me stay in the Army was that when it was over, and I came home, I went to the Advanced Course, and it was okay. But I remember I told my wife very clearly, â€œYou know, I canâ€™t leave, because I canâ€™t leave a broken place.â€ And then I went to graduate school at Duke, and I did very, very well. Which for a guy who was the top 5% of the bottom fifth, was pretty amazing. I did very well as a historian. And when it was over, Dr. Richard Preston said, about my dissertation, he said, â€œYou get that between hard covers and weâ€™ll hire you.â€ And I remember going - this was 1973. And I remember going back. And back in those days, they were letting Officers - there was no such thing as a four-year commitment for graduate school.
They were letting Officers go for, you know, for virtually anything, â€˜cause the RIF was taking out 40% of the Officer Corps. If you wanted to leave, you could leave. And I went home to my wife, and I said, â€œThey want me to come back here and teach,â€ and I really wanted to do it. I really wanted to do it. But she said, â€œNo.â€ My wife, God love her, she said, â€œNo.â€ She said, â€œYou canâ€™t do that.â€ She said, â€œYouâ€™ve got too much youâ€™ve left undone here.â€ And so it was then, when I left Duke, it was then that I committed that I was going to stick this out. And I remember when I was doing my dissertation, I came up to the Army War College to the Military History Institute,and how much I loved that place, and how much I - I said, â€œSomeday, my ambition, if I ever, when I leave this Army, would be to finish my career as an Instructor at the Army War College.â€ Dreams come true.
Interviewer:
When you left Vietnam, what was your feeling? I mean did you leave with a respect for your adversary, for the NVA?
MG R. Scales:
Oh yes. Yes. I tell you, and Iâ€™ve written quite a bit about this. I wrote a now-famous article called Adaptive Enemies back in 1999, where I say, â€œBe careful when you get arrogant and too full of yourself about net-centric warfare, effects-based operations.â€ You know, whatever these new tech-based theories of winning came to be, you know. I said, â€œBe careful, because enemies adapt, and some of them are very, very, very good.â€ And Iâ€™ve never found better soldiers than the North Vietnamese. They were terrific. And oh, by the way, I might add - I donâ€™t know if thereâ€™s any correlation to this or not - but those young Vietnamese soldiers who were refugees that i had in my Brigade, most of them were Drill Sergeants, were little bitty wiry guys, but boy, they were great, great soldiers.
Maybe thereâ€™s something in their culture, I donâ€™t know, but those NVA soldiers from the - I mean the way they used mortars. And I found out later they werenâ€™t even using an aiming circle; theyâ€™re using a compass, for Peteâ€™s sake. And they were pacing off their ranges with a pedimeter. You know those little things thatâ€™s got a little ball in it that measures your pace? I mean these guys were amazingly adaptive, and very effective. And thatâ€™s why they killed 58,000 of us.
Interviewer:
Which leads me to my next question, which is does America have the stomach to sort of take I mean that level of casualties? During the Iraq War, I think there were 46, 4,800 KIAs. In Vietnam, there were 58,000 KIAs. Clearly, as a society we seem to have sort of the

threshold weâ€™re willing to tolerate is dropping; I mean how many lives weâ€™re willing to commit.
MG R. Scales:
You know, I wrote a book called Yellow Smoke, and I wrote it in 1980 - no, Iâ€™m sorry. The book was called Firepower in Limited War. I wrote it in 1984. And as my little round of interviews, and I went to view, Harry Canard, who commanded the First Cavalry Division at the Ia Drang. He retired as a Lieutenant General, and he was living in D.C., Alexandria. His wife was very sick, and I write this in my book. And remember, he - the First Cav. And he said, â€œYou know, Bob,â€ he said, â€œI was S3 of the 101st Airborne Division at Bastogne. I lost more soldiers in one day in Bastogne than I lost in the entire Ia Drang operation. When I left World War II, I was a hero, highly regarded by everyone. â€œWhen I left the Ia Drang, I was a villain. And yet the number I lost in the Ia Drang was much, much smaller than what I lost in Bastogne.â€ And that really led me in my future writings to talk about the continually lowering level of acceptance of the America people for dead Americans. And itâ€™s almost drops an order of magnitude with each successive conflict. So as we get better at preserving the lives of our soldiers - because of our technology, and our training, and all these other things - the level of tolerance matches and then exceeds the acceptance for dead Americans. So that I lost 19. You go to Wanat, where they lost 8, and if you read the literature after that battle was over, thereâ€™s just as much vilification - not vilification - perhaps upset over that battle as there was with mine. And mine was orders of magnitude less than, say, a unit in World War II, or even in Korea. So you have a sliding scale. Itâ€™s almost arithmatic scale of acceptance that the American people have. Now, what will change that? Well, what will change it will be a perceived threat to the nation. And I donâ€™t think our enemies understand that. If there really is a perceived true threat to the nation, to the homeland, then that acceptance curve will begin to bend upward. But as long as weâ€™re messing around in wars of choice, in distant and far places where the American people donâ€™t see a connection between their welfare and a fight going on in some distant land, every dead soldier is viewed as a mistake, and as a national tragedy. But I donâ€™t - we canâ€™t get to comfortable with that. Because once the American people perceive that theyâ€™re at risk, then I think all that will turn around.
But for now - and oh, by the way, I have no objection as a retired General and a serving citizen of our nation, to doing everything we can to preserve the lives of our soldiers in combat in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. As far as Iâ€™m concerned, we shouldnâ€™t expend another soldierâ€™s life for those two conflicts right now. And everyone that we lose is a tragedy. But losing 19 soldiers in one day?
Interviewer:
Well, itâ€™s also interesting, too, is that curve that you outline between World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, all through Iraq and Afghanistan. Also somethingâ€™s going on there, too, about Americans and the familiarity, though, of the society with death. Death has been removed -
MG R. Scales:
Yeah.
Interviewer:
As an everyday part, you know.
MG R. Scales:
Well, you know, remember who wrote human life into the Declaration of Independence. That was Thomas Jefferson. And itâ€™s been part of our culture ever since, this regard for the preservation of life and happiness. And weâ€™re unique among the world in that regard. Even though we lost 700,000 soldiers in the Civil War, 405,000 in World War II, yet at the same time, our view of life is different, say, than Russia, or China, or Japan, or North Vietnam, for that matter. Itâ€™s just a cultural difference between us and the rest of the world. And oh, by the way, I think itâ€™s shaped the way we build an Army, â€˜cause who does most of the dying? Well, the Army does. The Army suffers - in wars in the last 70

years, the Armyâ€™s suffered 81% of everyone killed in these wars has been an Infantryman. Not an Army guy, but an Infantryman. So weâ€™re the ones who carry the torch for keeping soldiers alive in combat. Which is interesting, because weâ€™re the service thatâ€™s least well serviced by the, you know, defense budget. But thatâ€™s a subject for another interview.
Interviewer:
With the benefit of decades of hindsight and all that youâ€™ve researched for your other books, what is the conclusion that you come to about Vietnam; was it winnable from the American perspective?
MG R. Scales:
No, Vietnam wasnâ€™t winnable. You know, what I write about and when I speak to groups, I say, â€œIn warfare, two things count: will and geography.â€ Warâ€™s a test of will, not of technology, and geography counts. And both of those work against you. No matter how much technology or money or bodies you throw at the problem, there are certain geostrategic and human conditions, if theyâ€™re not met will not allow you to go to develop the means to achieve the ends. And we were tone-deaf to the realities of war at the strategic level in Vietnam. And oh, by the way, that also affected the Army in subsequent wars, you know. I remember what was the Armyâ€™s great reform? What did we do for the Army? Well, we reformed the Army at the operational level of war. We rediscovered operational art in the late â€™70s.
We stole it from the Russians, Soviets, and we improved on it. Thatâ€™s what Air Land Battle is - itâ€™s essentially a way to elevate war, the operational level. But weâ€™ve still not embraced ends and means at the strategic level, because weâ€™re afraid of it, you know? Thatâ€™s not for us to decide.
Interviewer:
Afraid of it?
MG R. Scales:
Afraid of ends. Weâ€™re afraid of strategy. Weâ€™re afraid of, to quote Dave Petraeus, â€œHow does this end?â€ We donâ€™t do ends in the military, particularly in the Army. We do ways and means, but not ends. There was no end in Vietnam. What was the end in Vietnam? Throw back the Communist wave in Southeast Asia? What was the end in Iraq? Establish democracy in Iraq? Whatâ€™s the end in Afghanistan? Educate women and girls? I donâ€™t know. But if you donâ€™t have firmly established end, as I learned in Vietnam and subsequent studies; if you donâ€™t have well-established, achievable ends, no matter how efficiently you apply ways and means, youâ€™re never going to achieve those ends. And for my generation, we punted on strategy; still do, I think, to some degree.
Interviewer:
Which brings me to my next question, which is you wrote the first Army history on the first Gulf War.
MG R. Scales:
Yeah.
Interviewer:
How did the lessons of Vietnam inform how the first Gulf War was conducted?
MG R. Scales:
You know, people ask me that all the time.
Interviewer:
Iâ€™m going to be another one.
MG R. Scales:
And I say, and my first answer is the first Gulf War was a war ofâ€¦whatâ€™s the word? The first Gulf War was a war of vindication. It was a war of vindication. It gave meaning to why we stayed in the war. Everybody in that war who commanded at Brigade, Division, Corps, and Army level, had at least one tour in Vietnam - every one of them. And Battalion Commanders didnâ€™t, but we did. And it was always the thought in the back of our

heads is itâ€™s this time to restore the respect, and the regard, and the reputation of the Army. Not the Air Force, not the Navy, but the Army.
And the idea that we could fold up the Republican Guard in a hundred hours of active combat proved to us in our own - â€˜cause we werenâ€™t sure. Proved to us in our minds, and to the American people, that the war in Iraq was only eclipsed by Norman Schwarzkopfâ€™s parade down Fifth Avenue, and the welcome home. Lee Greenwood did more to reestablish the credibility of the Army in our country than anything else. So that was the main thing. I remember looking at somebody and saying, â€œHoly cow, this really worked.â€ The problem was, to an extent, that everything worked, and thatâ€™s what led to the problem with the first Gulf War.
Interviewer:
What do you mean?
MG R. Scales:
Well, everything worked. You know, if you have the New England Patriots playing Arkansas State in the Super Bowl, in all probability, the Patriots are going to win, and theyâ€™re going to win by a big margin, even if they send in their third team. And again, because of our lack of understanding of the human cultural nature of warfare, we then, as we still do today, are unable accurately to gauge the nature and character of our enemies. We just canâ€™t do it. We either make then ten feet tall, or we dismiss them as incompetent. We very rarely - and thatâ€™s what happened in the Gulf War. My God, itâ€™s the worldâ€™s fourth largest Army, equipped with first-line Soviet equipment, with an integrated air defense. Republican Guard made about six of the finest Divisions, best-equipped Divisions in the world.
Oh - itâ€™s an Army that just spent eight years of active combat against the Iranians. Combat-hardened, well-disciplined, inured to war. And here we have the American Army starting off from scratch going to attack these guys. Itâ€™s going to be terrible. Some estimates were 30-some-odd thousand casualties were going to, you know, happen. Now, others didnâ€™t. I remember when I wrote the book, my good friend Barry McCaffrey, who at the time was a two-star General, said, â€œBob, it wasnâ€™t that hard.â€ I never forgot that. So everything worked in the sense that no matter what you threw into the game, against the Junior Varsity opponent, it sort of worked. So after the war, when we tried to sift through that thing, as I did in Army After Next and as Army Future, itâ€™s trying to make something out of that experience.
Everybody made everything out of the experience, so pretty soon you didnâ€™t have a real wheat and chaff exercise. â€œOh, well the Air Force won the war. 38-day air campaign broke the back of the Republican Guard; didnâ€™t need a ground invasion.â€ Hello? â€œOh, well, the heavy Army is back, because look what the M1 Abrams and the Bradley Fighting Vehicle and MLRS did to the Republican Guard - destroyed them.â€
Interviewer:
There were no hard lessons, I think is what youâ€™re saying.
MG R. Scales:
If you donâ€™t stress an Army, itâ€™s hard to walk - you know what it is? Itâ€™s the opposite of the NTC. Why is the NTC so rich? Because the OPFOR is so damn good. And if thereâ€™s going to be a crack in any of your equipment, your matÃ©riel, your systems, your doctrine, your training, any of thatâ€™s going to show up in there in spades, because the OPFOR is going to kick your ass. Now, there were times in the Republican Guard, you know, when the Second ACR ripped into the Tawakalna; yeah, some tense moments there. When the First Armored Division broke the back of the northern end of the Republic Guard defenses, yeah. And Barry McCaffrey went slamming through the Rumaila oil fields; make an argument. But no, not really. I mean the Marines walked into Kuwait City. Theyâ€™ll tell you they didnâ€™t, but they did.
So by 19 - when I took over as the Army Futurist in 1996 - â€˜95, we were left with a real mess. So what do you walk away with? What do you think is immutable? What are these tendons or what are these connections that carry you from Vietnam, to the Gulf War, into

the future? And we came up with some that people sort of laughed at at the time, but we didnâ€™t think they were funny. One of the things that we said from the very beginning is, â€œItâ€™s about people, not about machines.â€ That didnâ€™t go over well with the Air Force. You know, the human dimension in war. I wrote a op-ed about this in the Wall Street Journal a couple weeks ago, that maybe these guys just arenâ€™t that good, and maybe today, in 2015, we canâ€™t make them better. Maybe they do tribal war better than they do Corps-level war. Maybe itâ€™s just something in their culture that prevents them from doing it.
Thatâ€™s what we thought after the Gulf War. â€œOh, no, no,â€ the Air Force said. â€œNo, we broke their backs psychologically.â€ So this fourth largest Army in the world simply collapsed under this rain of bombs, and therefore they were easy pickings for the Army guys. So what that means for the future is fewer Army, more airplanes, more precision. Weâ€™ll build in some stealth and weâ€™ll win the next war. They called it â€œthe gift of time.â€ Well, that never happened - hello? Fast-forward to 2004, and all of a sudden itâ€™s not working anymore. We told you so; itâ€™s about people and their will to fight.
Interviewer:
And the other thing, of course, about the Gulf War was that it was a very limited objective, in the sense of -
MG R. Scales:
Well, or one would say it was the wrong objective, which leads you to questioning the strategy. What was the end state? Restore the territorial integrity of Kuwait. What was the real end-state was regime change in Iraq, and deposing Saddam Hussein. That was the real end-state; didnâ€™t happen.
MG R. Scales:
Didnâ€™t happen.
Interviewer:
So it was time for a do-over. So maybe if weâ€™d have been a bit more ambitiousâ€¦and the other thing was, when will you do the do-over? The Air Force, even the Marine Corps, pushed back on Tommy Franks, and said, â€œWait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute. We can do this with speed, velocity, fire power. We donâ€™t need all these people.â€ Rumsfeld agreed, Wolfowitz, and so we go forward with 110,000 instead of 550,000, and we know how that turned out. So I guess what Iâ€™m saying is that the Gulf War was an act of vindication. It was an incomplete strategy. And there were certain things that came out of the war that seemed small at the time that we in the futures business figured out were bigger than that. One was the use of unmanned aircraft. The other was the importance of the human dimension.
But these things didnâ€™t pop out at you in 2001. They did later, and we learned a painful lesson about both of those.
Interviewer:
Could we pause the camera for one moment? Okay, weâ€™re back. If you can tell me, you served time at the Army War College, and Iâ€™m curious to know how you shaped the curricula there, and also your time at TRADOC and why. How did your experiences in the field influence how you shape curriculum?
MG R. Scales:
Yeah, thatâ€™s a great question. Remember, there are three levels of war, and three school systems for each. We have our Branch Schools for the tactical level of war. We have the Command and General Staff College for the operational level of war. And we have the War College for the strategic level of war. So if you ask our critics, you ask within the Army, and you ask other people around the world, â€œWhere does the American Army come up short?â€ And the answer is almost inevitably, going all the way back to World War II, â€œat the strategic level.â€ American military senior leaders donâ€™t do a very good job of strategic-level decision-making and advice. Thatâ€™s the make on the Army.

So how do you fix it? Well, I thought you fixed it by fixing the War College from within. And then I realized that I was pretty much wrong. It didnâ€™t take me long to figure out that it was impossible.
For a couple reason. First of all, the War College is not selective. Itâ€™s selective in terms of manner of performance, but not selective in terms of intellectual ability and acumen. What you did well at the tactical level of war, perhaps at the grand tactical level of war, commanded a Battalion successfully, didnâ€™t necessarily prepare you to enter into this level of learning at the strategic level. The two are not necessarily compatible. Thatâ€™s the first thing I learned. Second thing I learned was that the machine of the War College system, driven by the bureaucracies of the Joint Staff, and other requirements unrelated to learning about the nature and character of war; and the participants in that institution - civilians, members of other services, foreign allies, National Guard - this heterogeneous make-up of the War College prohibited you from doing what you should be doing.
Which is select, educate, and assign those who have this strategic genius or this special talent. So the only way I was able to beat that was to let the War College rumble along like it was - oh, a few tweaks here and there - as itâ€™s always been. And reach down and build a parallel universe, a sort of AP course, if you will - much as Leavenworth did with SAMS, School of Advanced Military Studies - and do it at the strategic level. Define those who have that special stuff, the right stuff to be strategists. And then connect it to the Army senior leadership, so that those who I found to have talent, I told people at the head of the services to select out and put into key billets. My shining example of this, of course, was then-Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel Joe Dunford. I mean he was one of my Advanced students.
And I called the Commandant of the Marine Corps, who I knew pretty well, and said, â€œThis guy Dunford, heâ€™s really, really good.â€ And sure enough, heâ€™s now Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. So you can do this, but you canâ€™t do it by tweaking a curriculum, because itâ€™s just too massive, and itâ€™s too ridden with bureaucracy and want-tos. Someone - I wonâ€™t mention any names. Someone came up to me, and they said, â€œBob, you know what, you just donâ€™t spend enough time on -â€œ you know, pick a subject â€œ- Force Development at the War College.â€ â€œYes sir. Well, thatâ€™s true, and I do it for a good reason.â€ â€œWell, you just need to do that, so schedule a week.â€ Well, thereâ€™s 23 weeks of the War College, so you got to schedule a week? Youâ€™ve lost 1/23 of your flexibility. So what I did is I made my new War College - a parallel universe. Itâ€™s based on selecting out people who wanted to do it. I made it an academic Ranger School; very, very hard. Youâ€™d think, â€œWell, that would turn people off.â€ Had the opposite of the effect.
Third, I made it case-study based, all around case studies. I based is around historical case studies. I included a rigorous staff ride that I personally led, and I connected it to the Human Resources Command, I guess you call it today, at the strategic level. So of the 14 or however many I ended up with, 15, 16, I picked 5 or 6. And I called the Chief of Staff of the Army and the Commandant of the Marine Corps, and I said, â€œThese are special guys. You need to take care of them. What I suggest is that thatâ€™s the wave of the future. For someone to go into the War College system and meddle with the curriculum is insufficient, because the way you pick strategic genius is through a combination of human resource development, rigorous evaluation and testing - Draconian testing - learning, and proper assignments for those with the right stuff.
And oh, by the way, the right stuff doesnâ€™t have to be the right stuff. There are General Officers who are operators. There are General Officers who are seers. There are General Officers who are bureaucrats. And there are General Officers who are politicians. Not all Generals are equipped to do the same thing. And each of those four categories demands a General of special talent. A politician would be Colin Powell. A bureaucrat would be General Pete Chiarelli or General Max Thurman. An operator would be Stan McChrystal, or George S. Patton. You see? And a seer would be Donn Starry or *HUBE WASTESAGEN*. You see what Iâ€™m saying? So itâ€™s one thing to pick out from this

field of War College students, and just willy-nilly go about random assignments at the strategic level, which inevitably leads to failure and poor performance.
Or we could discipline the system. We could have an excision process for the senior level. That if you canâ€™t read or write, think on your feet, or brief intelligently, or grasp concepts that relate to national security, you donâ€™t go to the War College. And if you do, and you go there, we can select out those - like they do at SAMS - who have that special talent. We have the instruments available for us to do that now, who have intellectual ability. They could be former SAMS students. They could have a graduate degree from Princeton. They couldâ€™ve served on the Joint Staff in a capacity that dealt with policy and strategy. And then test them, and put them in this smaller group, and turn them into Jedis, which is a phrase Iâ€™ve used in the past. Make the the Jedis at the strategic level. That would completely change the credibility of the American Army, and its effectiveness in national security. Absolutely fundamentally change the American Army. And we wonâ€™t do it. I would suggest Iâ€™m spending the rest of my life fixing this system.
Now, how did I learn that? â€˜Cause I learned that -
Interviewer:
And why wonâ€™t we do that?
MG R. Scales:
Because we have always - do the math. What does the Army do most brilliantly? Do it from Korea all the way through Iraq and Afghanistan. We perform brilliantly at the tactical level. Oh, we make mistakes. Units like mine get overrun because of the ineptitude of the occasional Captain. But for the most part, we do tactics better than any Army in the world, and all the Armies in the world understand that. We do operational art better than anybody. What other Army can move medical supplies to Sierra Leone, can pick up and move an Army to the most inhospitable spot in the world, Afghanistan, and fight for 12 years? Who can generate Brigade-sized units and thrust them into a combat zone, using this incredible system of logistics and transportation? Nobody does that better. Nobody makes the trains run better, or run on time better, than the United States Army.
And weâ€™ve had generations of Generals who were promoted because of that and are good at it. And then we get to the strategic level, and we fall apart. And I can tell you, after 13 years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, where the simple War College 101 ends, ways, and means equation has never balanced. No one that I know of that has a modicum of sense would deny what I just said isnâ€™t true, so why donâ€™t we fix it? And the answer - and by the way, the same with Vietnam. Tactical success, operational success, strategic failure. First desert war. Huge operational success, strategic failure. Iraq in 2011. Left that country with our heads held high. Strategic failure. Look whatâ€™s happening now. Thatâ€™s a strategic, not a tactical failure. And God only knows whatâ€™s going to happen now in this new Iraq; all strategic failures. Now, itâ€™s not just the Armyâ€™s fault.
These are mostly political decisions -
Interviewer:
Right.
MG R. Scales:
That are made by our betters. But the quality of advice, and the mentoring that people in uniform are expected to do, even to the most intemperate political leader, can change or alter his decisions for the good of the nation. Thatâ€™s what Generals get paid to do - and some Colonels. Thatâ€™s what we get paid to do. Thatâ€™s our job. Itâ€™s not to lead squads. You know, itâ€™s not to put a Brigade on a LMSR. Thatâ€™s not what - we do it well - thatâ€™s not our purpose and intent. Our purpose and intent is to shape the national strategic dialogue to ensure the ends that we build for wars in the future are achievable, and acceptable to the American people. Thatâ€™s what our job is.
Interviewer:
And thatâ€™s basically what youâ€™ve been concerning yourself with through your

books.
MG R. Scales:
The last 13 years - absolutely right.
Interviewer:
Since your retirement.
MG R. Scales:
Why canâ€™t we do this better? Why canâ€™t we do it? And I believe thereâ€™s several - hereâ€™s an interesting thing. Nobody selects Brigade and Battalion Commanders better than the Army. We make very few mistakes. Oh, occasionally somebody will have a problem. But for the most part, those we put into O5 and O6 level commands are superb. By the way, the Navy doesnâ€™t do that so well. They wind up with some real ding-dongs commanding ships, and they now that, and they try to make up for it sometimes by bettering the way they pick people for, you know, for ship commands. But we donâ€™t do anywhere near that well at picking people at the strategic level, in those key strategic billets. The J Staff. The NSC members. The G Staffs in the Army, senior Army leaders. The COCOM Commanders and their J3, 5, 7s, and 8s.
Those are all strategic. Faculty leaders at our War Colleges and our intermediate level of education. We donâ€™t do such a good job fitting those guys to the position as we do fitting an Infantryman to commanding an Infantry Brigade. Why donâ€™t we do better than that? â€˜Cause thatâ€™s our greatest failure. I would think as an institution, like the Army, you put most of your resources and attention on those things that you donâ€™t do well, rather than those things that you do well.
Interviewer:
Who has done that well in the past; what Armies have done that well, focused on the strategic level?
MG R. Scales:
Thatâ€™s a great, great question. Thatâ€™s a great - Iâ€™d say the one that probably did it best, of all of our great leaders, was Grant, Ulysses S. Grant. He came in, he and Lincoln, a Command team, if you will, came in with a strategic objective of preserving the Union on the battlefield, and they did it. The second one, I would say, would be Marshall and Eisenhower. Again, a team, and they said, â€œOur object is to crush Nazism completely,â€ and they did it.
Interviewer:
And then also Marshall went on to rebuild Europe.
MG R. Scales:
See, this is the point. Rebuilding Europe, for a former guy that spent 29 years as a Lieutenant Colonel. Came back and rebuilt an entire country - or entire -
Interviewer:
Continent.
MG R. Scales:
Continent, if you will. Thatâ€™s strategy. Thatâ€™s not - he wasnâ€™t figuring out shipping tables for getting grain to Italy. Thatâ€™s a strategic political genius that he had, and Eisenhower had the same thing, I would argue. And so did Grant, and so did - and hereâ€™s the interesting thing. The man we venerate most in the military profession in the Civil War is Robert E. Lee. Great tactically, certainly great operationally; a total failure at the strategic level. And yet we venerate him as a model for how we, you know, approach the profession of arms more than we do Grant. We always look at Grant as a great failure, Lee as a great - why? Because we look at his operational skills and Leeâ€™s operational skills, and we realize if you look at it at the strategic level, it looks like that. Isnâ€™t that interesting? Here in this very school. Thatâ€™s what we do downstairs in the Military Art program. Thatâ€™s ridiculous. Who has the vision, the strategic vision to end this properly?
I would argue the guy that did in the last 15 years is Dave Petraeus; had it figured out, pretty much. He had his ends figured out, and he had his ways and means figured out.

Now, itâ€™s not necessarily palatable to the Administration, so you have your limits. But I think the development of the Army at the senior leader is the most challenging thing that the educational system or the Army leadership or the Army Human Resource Command has to do in the future. And so far, weâ€™ve made a hash of it.
Interviewer:
Thatâ€™s quite a note to end on. Weâ€™ve been talking almost for an hour and 45 minutes. Oh, another carrier pigeon just landed. You mentioned guilt and competence in regard to your unit being overrun during your time in Vietnam. As an Artillery Officer, isnâ€™t it true that you werenâ€™t really trained in position defense, and that such a situation was not seriously anticipated, given that the war had been fought?
MG R. Scales:
No. No. This all goes back to anticipation and understanding the nature and character of the environment. If this were World War II, the answer would be yes, because in a linear warfare where the Artillery is 6 to 40 kilometers behind the front line, perimeter defense is interesting, but itâ€™s not what makes you effective. But when you get into a counterinsurgency environment, where the threat is 360, and all around you, not just the Artillery, but other Branches shouldâ€™ve known better. And the amount of training and the amount of acculturization, the emphasis that was given to something like perimeter defense, or Base security, or route security, or countering booby traps, surviving rocket and mortar attacks; those things that are ancillary to your primary function.
Letâ€™s say youâ€™re running a RETRAN site on a mountain in South Vietnam. You get overrun and everybody gets killed. You should know how to deal with that, based on the nature and character of the war youâ€™re in. So now, I was 24 years old. I was three years out of the Academy, so I shouldâ€™ve had - if Iâ€™d have had 20 years to write on this, and reflect on it, and practice it, and simulate it, then yeah, I probably wouldâ€™ve been pretty good at it. But remember, youâ€™re taking young men from 18 to 24 and asking them to do these things. And if you - young men and women - donâ€™t do a good job of it, if you donâ€™t force it down their throats, theyâ€™ll say, â€œWell, no, wait a minute. Iâ€™m an Artilleryman. My job is to put steel on target. Donâ€™t get into me about laying out limit sticks for my machine guns. I donâ€™t even clean those damn things.â€ Well, thatâ€™s a problem. But I will guarantee you, if you go through the training for Artillery units today, I would be very surprised if the level of immersion of those guys in defending themselves against ground attack is anything above rudimentary.
And thatâ€™s wrong.
Interviewer:
You know, another question I have, and weâ€™ve been talking for an hour and 50 minutes, which is really a good thing. Weâ€™ve covered a lot of ground, and itâ€™s been fascinating from start to finish. But one of the things I heard you say earlier is that in warfare, the individual counts. Thatâ€™s what Vietnam - will, I think you said, it was will that counts, and geography. And it seems to me that as a society now, weâ€™re increasingly obsessed with technology, and you know, our lives are technology-dependent. Weâ€™re all sort of obsessed with technology in our personal lives, and the Armyâ€™s getting more, certainly more reliant upon technology, in all sorts of ways in the military thought. Do you think the Armyâ€™s getting too obsessed with technology?
MG R. Scales:
Absolutely. No question about it. Hereâ€™s the problem with it. You know the good thing about technology? If you could develop the technological tools of war, in a one-sided contest youâ€™d be a hero every time. If you didnâ€™t have to fight anybody; if you just had to float around the world, or fly over the skies of the world, or march in parades, and show your new stuff, like in Red Square, technology would be a wonderful thing. But hereâ€™s the problem with technology: the enemyâ€™s got a vote. And in the wars weâ€™ve fought since the end of World War II, technology has always let us down. You canâ€™t name an occasion where the expectations of technology, once the dirty business

of war started, ever panned out to even be anywhere near expectations. Whether itâ€™s precision bombing.
Whether itâ€™s high-tech rolling stock. Whether itâ€™s fleets of ships. Some thoughts about that. Whatâ€™s the greatest killer of the American soldier on the battlefield - of the American soldier? What kills more Americans than anything else? This is from an enemy thatâ€™s developing ballistic missiles, like Saddam Hussein, or using chemical weapons, or has, you know, modern T-72 tanks. What kills more Americans? Iâ€™ll tell you what it is. Itâ€™s the mortar, followed in succession by small arms, and last, mines and booby traps. A mortar is a steel tube that throws a grenade about a thousand yards. It costs about 40 bucks to actually mold that tube and put it into production. And what do we use against it? Legions of counter-mortar radars.
Orbiting drones. Hundreds if not thousands of people, scouring the countryside looking for the next mortar attack from the North Vietnamese, or from al-Qaeda, or from the Taliban. Now, itâ€™s an asymmetry thatâ€™s driven into the equation by an adaptive enemy, who uses his own technologies. But he uses them to his own means. Heâ€™s able to defeat our high-tech intentions by using not-so-high-tech technology used in new and creative ways. The Israelis learned this in 2006. Simple Kornet anti-tank guided missiles that were properly hidden back behind the Litani River, fired by members of the enemy, who were perfectly willing to die in place. That stopped this Israeli juggernaut cold. The guys used old technology in new and creative ways.
In Afghanistan today, the rifles that are killing our soldiers are left over from World War II. Why? Because they can shoot 1,200 meters, and our rifles can shoot 400 meters. But when you go to a symposium in Washington, what are they talking about? Oh, theyâ€™re talking about digital manufacturing, and the use of lasers, and the development of new software and hardware for a new generation of computers. But thatâ€™s now how we fight, sadly; thatâ€™s how we prefer to fight. And thatâ€™s not now the enemy comes after us. He doesnâ€™t need troposcatter radios; he can use cell phones. He doesnâ€™t need to develop amazing counter-mines stuff; he just buries stuff in the ground. And hereâ€™s the thing - you know, probably end this conversation with a great quote. In 1964, a French female journalist asked Ho Chi Minh how in the world his little tiny country could ever expect to beat the Americans.
And he said, prophetically, he said, â€œThey will kill many of us. We will kill a few of them. And they will tire of it first.â€ So the enemy doesnâ€™t have to have an aircraft carrier, a nuclear submarine, a stealth bomber, or precision munitions. All he has to do is be willing to die, and persevere, and creatively and imaginatively find ways to either offset our dominance in technology, or make our commitment in technology so huge, and so expensive, that we canâ€™t afford to fulfill the mission with technology alone, and the enemy wins. And you know what? In the last 75 years, weâ€™re about 0 and 5, or 0 2 and 3, depending on how you do the count, in our ability to win these wars. So something tells me that our cutting edge technology that we always drag out and wave before the enemy is increasingly having less and less effect.
And so when it comes down to two things. It comes down to the will of your people compared to those of the enemy, and all the other intangibles that go into winning wars. And all technology does is make you a little better, but it doesnâ€™t make you dominant, and it doesnâ€™t ensure that youâ€™re going to win. And what do we do with our budgets today? We pour everything into technology, and we cut the Army 40, or some would say 80,000, men. So the very element that ensures victory in all of our wars in the last 70 years, which is the quality of our men and women in uniform, and their will to fight, is the thing we break first. That doesnâ€™t make any sense to me.
Interviewer:
That is a very sobering thought to end this conversation on. Itâ€™s been a fascinating two hours.
MG R. Scales:
Has it really been two hours?

Interviewer:
It really has been two hours, yep.
MG R. Scales:
Holy cow.
Interviewer:
And I want to just thank you for -
MG R. Scales:
Well, thank you; it was fun.
Interviewer:
For coming today and talking with us.
MG R. Scales:
Itâ€™s my pleasure.