

The Cold War is Over
Interviewer

Okay, we are here at the studios of the West Point Center for Oral History on June 6, 2011, with Lieutenant General Daniel Christman, C-H-R-I-S-T-M-A-N. Did I get that right?

Dan Christman

Correct.

Interviewer

Good. So welcome, General.

Dan Christman

Thanks, Todd.

Interviewer

I'm going to ask you just to do for me first a little highlight reel. Tell me the sort of greatest moments of your career.

Dan Christman

Well, the best, as far as I'm concerned, were the five years that I spent here as the Superintendent.

Interviewer

Which would've been the years?

Dan Christman

1996 to 2001. It was "I love the Army, the 36 years that I spent, and there were clear highlights in the course of the command of troops at the company and battalion and brigade level commands. But the one that was the most satisfying, the most exciting, and frankly, continues, June 6, 2011, continues to be that way, because I run into former cadets all the time who are now, you know, if they've stayed in, majors. If not, who have come through Washington, DC, and contacted me in some way" mostly electronically.

Dan Christman

But the five years that I spent as Superintendent to try in some modest way to influence the next generation of leaders for the Army was exhilarating, because the cadets are that way, and rewarding, because you can see the results of what that leadership development has meant to the cohort of officers that are now, in many respects, leading the Army, at the major junior field grade level. So the five years at West Point.

Interviewer

And in that period, what were your "what were the greatest" what did you come in intending to do, and were you able to do it?

Dan Christman

Well, I followed a lovely man—a real professional, named Howard Graves. And I respected all through my time—I didn't know Howard as a cadet, but when I was a young captain, fresh from [the] Vietnam [War] and teaching here at West Point in the department of social sciences, beginning in 1970, then-Major Graves was in the department. And Howard was, in so many ways, a mentor for me from that point on. We were both combat engineers. We had both prized continued intellectual development through one's career. Howard looked after me, I think, in so many ways. He commanded the same battalion on the old East German border, the 54th Engineer Battalion, as I did. He became the assistant to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs as a three-star—the same job I had before I came to West Point.

Dan Christman

So Howard, I thought, established the most important basis at West Point for a successor to continue to deepen, and that's the basic ethos within the [United States Military] Academy environment of what it means to be an officer. You value integrity, you value respect towards others—the two bedrock values of our profession. Howard did a fantastic job to nurture those values, and I admired that in Howard as a young officer. I admired it especially as the president of a college—i.e. the Superintendent of West Point—and wanted very much to continue in that vein.

The problem, though, Todd, that Howard faced and that I faced was the budget environment that sort of circumscribed what the armed forces were facing

tight fiscal constraints from the end of the Cold War in 1991 until I left as Superintendent in 2001.

Interviewer

Let's give people a little historical context. This is the drawn-down, essentially, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of communism, the end of the Soviet Union, there was the notion that we had a peace dividend, right? We're going to pull back—

Dan Christman

Enormous peace dividend.

Interviewer

And just paint the picture of that time, if you could.

Dan Christman

I will. In the aggregate, the Army was about 900,000 active duty. We fought Operation Desert Storm at about that level, and while Howard was Superintendent and then I took his place in '96, the Army fell from 16 divisions and 900,000 to 10 divisions and 480,000 in strength. And in budget, the total defense budget fell from around five percent of gross domestic product to about 2.9 percent of gross domestic product. And all that eventually trickled down to the posts, camps, and stations of our Army, in terms of constraining maintenance and repair, new construction, pay and benefits.

Dan Christman

In fact, what Howard faced, and I saw a residual of, was this question—Well, the Cold War is over. The Soviet Union has disappeared. Where is our enemy? Do we even need a service academy? And there were serious questions raised in the late '80s and early

â€™90s, which Howard combatted, and I still felt a little bit towards the beginning of my tenure, and that is: â€œWhatâ€™s the relative merit of keeping the federal service academy system afloat?â€

Dan Christman

The argument wasâ€”and it was erroneousâ€”but the argument was, â€œWe can do it more cheaply through ROTC, through Officer Candidate School, OCS. We donâ€™t need to be spending the hundreds of millions of dollars that the federal government spends on service academies every year, because A) we donâ€™t have an enemy, and B) the Armed Forces that we will retain can be acquired more cheaplyâ€”the officer corps.â€ And that was a major battle that we had to face early on in the stewardship.

Interviewer

Now, does that mean that the Academyâ€™s operating budget was shrunk as well, even though you still had the same number of cadets. Your force of cadets didnâ€™t actually drop, did it?

Dan Christman

The original authorized ceiling for the Academy was 4,400. When the Cold War ended, that was brought down to 4,000. Thatâ€™s the number that pertained while I was Superintendent, changed subsequently. But Iâ€™ll never forget this, Toddâ€™s Howard retired from the Army in June 1996. He was told in May of â€™96, just in the process of transition to me, â€œGeneral Graves, we are goingâ€”â€œweâ€ the Secretary of the Army, Chief of Staff of the Armyâ€”â€œAre going to cut roughly \$23 to \$25 million from West Pointâ€™s operating budget for the coming fiscal year. Make do.â€

Dan Christman

Howard was devastated by that, because he had begun a restoration program for barracks for the soldiers that are assigned here for the cadets, and for the infrastructure of the gymnasium, the physical development center, that were really in horrible shape.

Interviewer

Give me a sense of what percentage that is of the overall budget.

Dan Christman

Probablyâ€”

Interviewer

Whatâ€™s the overall budget of the Academy, roughly?

Dan Christman

Itâ€™s tough to say in operations/maintenance dollars, probably 300. So weâ€™re talking like this, you know, a range of, you know, close to 10%. And when I heard this, I went immediately, while I was in Washington, DC, to the Chief of Staff, and that was General Dennis Reimer, and said, â€œSir, I understand West Pointâ€™s budget has been cut. If I can have an opportunity while I get on board to take a look at what the needs of the Academy are, and what the impact of this will be, Iâ€™d like to come back to you, and if appropriate, reclama some or all of that.â€ And General Reimer said, â€œFine.â€

And so back down to your original question

When I first arrived, comfortable with the basic ethos of the Academy, worried about the Academy's ability to sustain itself in its basic mission because of the serious budget cuts that were underway, and which frankly continued for many of the years while I was Superintendent.

Dan Christman

Now, the answer to my reclama, fortunate during that time, I think General Reimer was very, very supportive, ultimately, and I was able to get back almost two-thirds of the roughly \$25 to \$30 million that was cut, and all of that went for basic infrastructure maintenance and repair for the Academy. Especially barracks, roofs, and roads and power grids and the like, that were necessary just to turn the lights on.

The Margin of Excellence
Interviewer

So did you see your tenure here as principally one of maintenance and resisting the pressure to reduce the budget and tighten the belt?

Dan Christman

No, it really was a lot more than that. What I told the Chief was, "Look, I was last assigned to the Academy in 1973. And so, you know, we're talking"

Interviewer

That's when you were on the faculty here.

Dan Christman

Mm-hmm, exactly. "We're talking 23 years later. Give me a chance. I have some instincts about what needed to be done, but give me a chance to take a look, and let me come back to you after 90 days with a report of where I think the Academy is and where it needs to go." And the bottom line of all that was to map out a strategic program that basically maintained what General Graves was doing on the fundamental values and education side.

Dan Christman

The academic program, I think, was in great shape, but we clearly had to tweak certain areas of that, recognizing that our common enemy for half a century had disappeared. And it was also clear by '96 that we were deploying more and more into areas to stabilize—the Balkans, for example, Iraq initially in '91—so we had to tweak a little bit on the academic side. Military training—we had a series of excellent Commandants, and I wasn't worried about that. But what really did concern me, Todd, was where the Academy was going in terms of modernizing its basic physical plant.

Dan Christman

And so what we tried to do was marry a modernization program of the Academy's physical plant on the government funding side—which was very hard for the reason I mentioned earlier—and combine that with our bicentennial celebration that was forthcoming—2002, year after I would have left. But all of us were spinning up for that,

even in 1996, to recognize some opportunities that were there.

Dan Christman

And so we used the bicentennial celebration as the first ever capitol campaign opportunity to try to attract private funding from our alumni and friends, to add to what the government was doing on the core side, to develop ultimately what we called "the margin of excellence" that would distinguish West Point from its peers by the value that the alumni and friends were putting into various programs in the Academy's infrastructure and academic programs that would distinguish it from the run-of-the-mill competitor giving bachelor of science degrees.

Interviewer

And the Center for Oral History is an example, and so is the Combatting Terrorism Center and the Center for the Rule of Law—all these various centers of excellence, as they're known here, initiated through this venture.

Dan Christman

That's right. And we had never done that. The Academy had had some modest efforts before to attract private dollars for specific projects and programs. But what we did in working with the Association of Graduates while I was Superintendent was to develop this holistic, strategic capital campaign that was built around the bicentennial. Initially, the goal was to raise \$150 million, but it was clear that we were having incredible success in the late 1990s in attracting dollars for the "margin of excellence." And we raised that goal to \$200 [million], and wound up raising, ultimately, over \$220 million by the time the capital campaign was over.

Interviewer

Why had this never been done before? Why had the Academy never reached out to the alumni community? I have my own ideas about it that might be the case, but I'd like to hear if they were "if they're true or not.

Dan Christman

Well, in large part, it was a competitiveness argument. And it was also part of the general fiscal environment that I had described here earlier. And the best example I used at the time with our alumni was the time when West Point was expanded just prior to World War II, when you could look at the playing fields down by the Hudson River and see the projects that were built under the Roosevelt administration—"Shea Track and Field Stadium, for example—a brand-new, ultra-modern, at the time, field house. Those were federal dollars in 1938 that were apportioned to the Academy—in part because of Roosevelt's connection with the area, in part because of the recognition that we were facing a very dangerous world environment, and needed to build up our Academy.

Dan Christman

And there was no need to raise private money for that, because when they were built—field house, track, stadium, even the barracks at the time were world-class in terms of what they represented for undergraduate facilities and opportunities for cadets to excel.

Dan Christman

By the 1990s that had changed dramatically. We were struggling just to maintain fiscal

dollars for the core programâ€”to turn the lights on and live in a barracks that didnâ€™t leak through hundreds of holes in the roof. And I was never going to ask the alumni to give money to turn the lights on. We called that the core program. But what I wanted to do was then add to that these additional programs, the margin of excellence that had become a competitiveness issue. Because so many other schools had developed clubs and activities, club sports, model UN debate teams that were globally competitiveâ€”that would take their students around the world.

Dan Christman

And West Point, when we did that, was unbelievably both popular and successful, and so I wanted to continue thatâ€”to embed it in a way, ideally, to endow it with private money, to complement the core program. So it was driven in great part by competitiveness, driven as well by the reality that we couldnâ€™t ask the federal government for money to build an indoor tennis complex or a football weight room or a press box for the stadium. We mightâ€™ve been able to do that in 1938, or, you know, say in the â€™50s, when the common enemy of the Soviet Union raised the defense budget accordingly. But not in the 1990sâ€”so the timing was such that we had to find the money.

Interviewer

Because the economy was certainly percolating in the 1990sâ€”it wasnâ€™tâ€”and yet, it seems like it was all driven by this sort of â€œend-of-historyâ€ notion, right? I mean the idea in the 1990s that war was obsolete or that kind of war that we had trained for here is obsoleteâ€”that the worldâ€™s not going to engage in those kinds of affairs again. NaÃ—ve, we now know, but pervasive, Iâ€™m guessing, and therefore the notion that defense budgets donâ€™t need to be as big as they were during the Cold War.

Dan Christman

Right. As I say, it shrank. I just was looking at the data â€”cause I was giving a speech on this a couple of weeks ago at Princeton University. And our defense budget, as a percent of GDP, just before 9/11, was 2.9%. It was almost 5% at the time we fought Desert Storm ten years before that. And of course, itâ€™s gone back up now, as weâ€™ve fought Afghanistan and Iraq, between four and five.

Dan Christman

But the fiscal budget came into surplus at the end of the Clinton administration, in great part because we had extraordinary economic growth, but also in great part because we had slashed the defense budget so dramatically, post-Cold War to pre-9/11. And that was done, as I had mentioned here earlier, on the backs of a lot of posts, camps, and stations, and programs that worried me even then, and frankly, they worry me nowâ€”the same trend.

Dan Christman

And it worries me, Todd, because we cannot be destroying the seed cornâ€”i.e. officer commissioning programs hereâ€”that will determine the success of future battles that weâ€™ll fight by ensuring the proper education and training of new cadets, new ROTC graduates, new Officer Candidate School graduates as well.

Interviewer

Was there any resistance when you did thisâ€”that is the turning to the alumni to raise these funds? Was there any resistance on the basis that thereâ€™s a kind of privatizing of

the curriculum that comes from that? Because whoever wants to write the check and says, "I'd love to see a Combating Terrorism Center," is, in some respects, shifting the academic goals of the Academy.

Dan Christman

Right. There was resistance, initially, Todd. I'm glad to say I think we've largely overcome that. But there were probably two sources of resistance—two arguments that were raised. One you just outlined, and that is that a particular donor—private individual or corporation, or even a nonprofit—would insist as a condition of the gift that we'd have to do something a particular way.

Dan Christman

And early on, we made the decision that there were some gifts that we wouldn't accept, either because the source was questionable, or because the conditions that were attached to it were inconsistent with the overall mission of the Academy. And I can point to two or three of those where we said, "Thanks very much for your interest, but we'll respectfully take a pass on that."

Dan Christman

The other argument was this—and it was, in many respects, probably more pernicious, and continues even to this day, a bit, and it's the following. Let's say the total operating budget for the academy was \$300 million, and we were successful in raising private funds that would allow the Superintendent and the staff to take \$25 or \$30 million, either annually in giving or a spin-off from an endowment, and use that \$25 or \$30 million to augment the basic budget.

Dan Christman

Well, the argument from the private donors was—and again, still continues a bit—that all the federal government will do is to say, "Thank you very much, alumni of West Point, for adding \$25 million to the operating budget. We will slash \$25 million more from what we're giving you."

Dan Christman

And so what we had to do I, the Dean, and the Commandant—the leader team at the Academy—we would meet every quarter in Washington, DC, with the Secretary and the Chief and the Director of the Army Staff or a G-level staffer who had responsibility for the school. We'd meet every quarter in Washington, DC, and I would take the Dean and Commandant with me.

Dan Christman

And the argument we made was, "Look, I need an assured base-level funding from the Academy. We'll come back here—and we did—to argue this should be the core funding from the government, to operate the Academy on a sound basis for the long-term—both yearly dollars and long-term capital investment for barracks, library, physical development center, and so on. I need that assurance, because our alumni, if they understand the government will commit itself to a long-term stable funding of the Academy, they will add to that for the "margin of excellence" that we're not going to come to you and request—a press box, a football weight room, an indoor tennis center, and so on—or endowment for—[Crosstalk] will not do that, because the alumni are willing to do

it, provided they have the assurance that their money to the Academy will not be subtractive of what the federal government provides. And that's the argument we still, the Academy still has to make, both with the government and with our alumni.

To Fight the New War
Interviewer

I mean this is before you left before 9/11, right?

Interviewer

You're in a period of great flux, 1996 to 2001.

Dan Christman

Right.

Dan Christman

Just before.

Interviewer

Yeah. And we did not know who our next enemy was going to be, really. I mean I remember a lot of arguments during the time that, you know, the Bosnian experience will be sort of the humanitarian war will become the next

Dan Christman

Absolutely.

Interviewer

Focus of American foreign policy.

Dan Christman

Correct.

Interviewer

But we also had the beginnings of cyber-warfare as a topic. We had the beginnings of germ continuing of germ warfare and issues associated with new technological and biomedical issues. During your time when you were here, academically, was there concern about the vagaries of the future vision? I mean the end of communism had come upon us very suddenly, really, in historical perspective, and I don't think anyone as recently as the latter years of the Reagan administration would've anticipated that the whole thing would collapse the way that it did by 1989.

Dan Christman

Right.

Interviewer

And yet, it did. And all that energy and brainpower, as well as hardware, that was dedicated to fighting the Russians the Fulda Gap war with the nuclear program,

whatever it was going to be” suddenly was in the history books. What kind of flux was there here in terms of understanding what the future was going to bring?

Dan Christman

Well, that refers spot-on to this point I was making earlier about the need to tweak the academic program. The academic program continues”it was solid when I arrived. It continues to be that today. But it was also very clear that the training of junior officers for a very different environment, particularly overseas engagement in areas where instability characterized the operating environment, required some adjustments to what we were doing here. One of those was language, a second was world cultures, and a third was an understanding of world religions.

Dan Christman

The reason I say that is that by the end of the decade of the 90s, we, the Army, had had extensive experience in the Balkans, the Dayton peace process leading to NATO’s intervention in stability operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and then after that, shortly after that, the Kosovo operation”again, as with Bosnia, predominately Muslim”in Kosovo, predominately Muslim. Post-Kuwait, Kuwait rescue and Operation Desert Storm”stationing and operating alongside predominately Muslim armies in combat formations.

Dan Christman

So it was very clear to many of us who had experiences in that region, in the Balkans, particularly in Desert Storm, that we needed to ensure the cadets had sufficient understanding of the global environment in which we were operating, particularly religion and cultural histories and language. And so we worked hard, not as successfully as we would’ve achieved, as we would’ve hoped, because at the same time, we had to balance areas like that against reaccreditation requirements, the DAC and AR reaccreditation requirements, for a Bachelor of Science degree.

Dan Christman

And we had already bumped off almost to the limits of the number of credit hours that we were granting in the non-math/science/engineering at the time we began to look at this.

Dan Christman

And so we did offer additional opportunities to specialize in foreign languages”introduced a broader global culture perspective in history, and then I brought in the Imam from Newburgh for a religious diversity seminar. And used other opportunities like that to introduce Buddhism”we had a Buddhist Priest here along with the Imam, our own Catholic Priest and Rabbi assigned here were part of an effort on my part and by the leadership team’s part at the time to ensure cadets understood the incredible diversity of the global environment in which they were likely to operate.

Dan Christman

Secretary Gates just gave his farewell speech here at West Point, what, two-and-a-half months ago, and Gates said from the time he first began to be exposed to national security studies in the Ford administration”the Mayaguez incident in the Gulf of Thailand to 9/11”Gates said, “You know, we have an absolutely perfect record of anticipating the next conflict. And that record is we’ve gotten it wrong every single time.”

Dan Christman

And it was pretty clear by the end of the '90s, we couldn't forecast where the next involvement would be. I mean as it turns out, how prescient it would've been to have looked at some of the indicators of al-Qaeda and Islamic extremism in forecasting [Crosstalk]

Interviewer

You were in the right neighborhood, then.

Dan Christman

In the right neighborhood, yes.

Interviewer

I mean you may not have predicted the actual events or the nature of them

Dan Christman

Right—that's right.

Interviewer

But it strikes me as prescient that you would've anticipated particularly the Muslim, and brought down the Imam from Newburgh, which—but there must've been a lot of head-scratching during that time here.

Dan Christman

Oh, yes.

Interviewer

And I imagine there was a substantial contingent that said, "Well, I don't think Russia's disappeared yet. Reformation could happen as quickly as it deformed, and therefore we're wrong to abandon conventional thinking."

Dan Christman

Right. Yeah, how do you, as an Army—I think the Army and the Marine Corps have the most difficult challenge, looking 10, 15, 20 years ahead, because they've got current conflicts that require boots on the ground, but they also have to intelligently hedge against the emergence of a peer competitor.

Dan Christman

And further, you've still got North Korea there, you've got Iran there, and you've got, Todd, precisely what you mentioned, and that is what's the Russian Federation view about its own near-abroad—about its Ukraine and Georgia and Moldova and the Baltics? And, you know, sadly, as we saw, what, two, two-and-a-half years ago now, in the Republic, former Soviet Republic of Georgia, now the Independent Republic of Georgia, that wistful longing for a restoration of the old Russian Empire has not disappeared.

Billowing Smoke and a Vegetable Van

Interviewer

Where were you on 9/11?

Dan Christman

In lower Manhattan, watching the south tower collapse.

Interviewer

Really. Where precisely, then, in lower Manhattan?

Dan Christman

Just south of Washington Square—in fact, I was just there, actually, yesterday. I had joined a corporate board called Ultralife—Ultralife Batteries, originally—now Ultralife, a maker of lithium batteries—

Interviewer

That would’ve been immediately after your time here.

Dan Christman

Yep. I joined the board in August of 2001, and our first meeting was 9/11 in New York City. And in fact, as I’ve learned subsequently, we had narrowed the sites down to one of three—one of those was Windows on the World. And we decided at the last moment not to have it there because the price was too expensive, so—

Interviewer

Windows on the World being the restaurant at the top of the World Trade Center.

Dan Christman

At the top of the World Trade Center. And so we, instead, decided to have it at a building at NYU’s campus, because one of the board members was a professor at the Stern School there. And so I got on the subway, the Lexington Avenue line, after having breakfast with her, and then headed down on the 4/5 line, on the Lexington Avenue line, down to Lower Manhattan, and—

Interviewer

From where—you were where for that breakfast?

Dan Christman

We had breakfast just north of Grand Central.

Interviewer

So you’d gone on the IRT, Grand Central-42nd Street, and you took the—

Dan Christman

I took the 4/5 down to—the stop was just above Canal, as I remember, and we got off of the subway, and we were walking up the stairs, and the first thing that hit me—because

the buildingâ€™s masked the Trade Center, the first thing that hit me was the billowing smoke that was blowing over the top of us. And I leaned over toâ€™her name was Tosh Barron, the member of the board of directorsâ€™and I said, â€™Boy, Tosh, someone here in New Yorkâ€™s going to get their ass in a hopper, because theyâ€™re violating air pollution regs.â€™ It was just thick, acrid smoke that was blowing over the top of the subway. And we walked one block, turned to the left, and at that point, both towers had been hit.

Interviewer

You didnâ€™t see it be hit, though.

Dan Christman

No, it happened while we were on the subway.

Interviewer

But while you were in the subway, the second tower had been hit.

Dan Christman

Right. And we were closestâ€™the one that was most visible was the south tower, which was the first one to come down. And so she went inâ€™it was very clear that this board meeting was not going to be held, so I stayed outside. There was a crowd had gathered around a cab driver who had his radio on, and we were watching this as the flames burnt successive lower layers of the towerâ€™of the towers. And of course, the radio then had on the reports of the attack in Washington, DC, and there were these other reports about, you know, bombingsâ€™that if you remember at the time, bombings reported by the reflecting pool there in Washington, DC, which were, of course, erroneous, but the Pentagon report was not.

Dan Christman

And Iâ€™I never forget this, Toddâ€™the most dramatic thing to me was the watching the South Tower burn, and then maybe 30 seconds before it collapsed, there was this river of molten metal that cascaded down the north-facing side of the South Tower.

Dan Christman

And I turned to this cab driver or the person next to meâ€™I canâ€™t even recall who it wasâ€™and I said, â€™My God, you know, this reminds me of Yosemite Falls in flame.â€™ Thatâ€™s exactly what it looked like.

Dan Christman

As it turns out, it was the molten wing and fuselage of the airliner that had gotten, at that point, so hot that all the metal had fallen off the side, as the building was just beginning to tilt. And the next thing was to see the floors explode to the side, and it settled symmetrically. But at that point, we just said, â€™We canâ€™t stay here.â€™ It was clear the North Tower was going to come down shortly as well, so this woman, the member of the board, flashed \$100 to the nearest van, and it was a fruit and vegetable delivery van that had just dropped off some food.

Dan Christman

Almost the entire board of directors piled in this smelly vegetable van, and we drove north

to 78th, which is where she lived, and several board members stayed there that night while we tried to get out of the city. So that was where I was on 9/11.

Interviewer

How helpless you must have felt after being here in a position of significance in the national security structure and spent a career in the Army in the national security business, and there you were, riding in a vegetable van from a scene that was an attack, a domestic attack on American home soil.

Dan Christman

I know. Lots of images went through your mind at the time. The one thing that was very clear, though, was that we were going to be investing, again, our young men and women's lives, the treasure, in military operations at some point. I mean you were correct, Todd—we had generally forecasted the part of the world and the culture that we were going to be investing this treasure in—not precisely the nature of the new enemy.

Dan Christman

But that's the first thing, you know, to think about what all this meant for the young people. And in fact, shortly thereafter, I was contacted by CNN to be a military correspondent, a military analyst, for them at CNN International in Atlanta. And as we were gearing up, both for the Afghan operation and then subsequently for the Iraqi mission, that same feeling emerged.

Dan Christman

I just felt—I really felt, I must be candid, sick to my stomach, because I knew the nation had committed itself. Regardless of what one thinks politically about the necessity to do what we did, it was going to happen. And just to know what all of us from the [the] Vietnam [War] era had gone through as young officers, leaving young wives or leaving parents to go off as lieutenants or captains—all that came really roaring back when I began to contemplate what all this meant in late 2001, 2002, and early 2003.

Interviewer

On that day, did you immediately have a sense of who the enemy was, or did you know?

Dan Christman

No.

Interviewer

You didn't.

Dan Christman

No, I really didn't. You know, it's a shame on us, because we were vaguely familiar with al-Qaeda, because of the earlier attempts to attack the Trade Center, earlier in the decade, earlier in the

Interviewer

1993, I guess.

Dan Christman

Correct. And the activities in Dar es Salaam, in Nairobi, and the Coleâ€”exactly. What that movement represented and what its leadershipâ€”Mullah Omar on the Taliban side, and of course, Osama bin Laden on the al-Qaeda sideâ€”that was only dimly appreciated. It quickly became apparent, but only dimly appreciated at that point.

How to Wage a War on Terror
Interviewer

One of the startling things, I would imagine, for someone with a career in national security and the greatest power in history, had to also beâ€”they did it with box cutters and, you know, it was primitive. And they took out an enormous number of people, and the soul of the country, for a period, I mean was reallyâ€”the sense ofâ€”again, back to the sense of impotence.

Interviewer

I mean with all the size of the American defense budget, and here we have something like this happen. It had to be a terrible shock.

Dan Christman

It was. It was. I had had enough experience on the intelligence community throughout my career in the Pentagon and Washington, with the CIA, with DIA. We used their data all the time, were briefed by them, and in turn, briefed them, throughout my 36 years â€”especially in the last 15 years with that. And what really both surprised me, then ultimately angered me, as you read more and more about how this happened, was the stove-pipingâ€”almost the hardened, perpetual stove-piping between DIA, CIA, FBI, NSA â€”the various elements of this intelligence tapestryâ€”that missed some obvious signals.

Dan Christman

Certain elements didnâ€™t miss it, but the ability of the institution of the intelligence community to, as they say so often, to connect the dots, to tie this together, to coordinate in interagency cells, was sadly, sadly lacking. Iâ€™d like to think that the intelligence reorganization thatâ€™s put all of these at least nominally under the direction of an office of the director of national intelligenceâ€”ODNIâ€”has gone a way towards solving much of that. But I still worry.

Interviewer

And this is an historical problem, not only with intelligence, but with the services, too. I mean thatâ€™s why we created the joint command, was because the inter-service rivalries and the unwillingness to share information led to, not only inefficiencies, but to, you know, corrupting various ventures, because they were not on the same page.

Dan Christman

Right. And thatâ€™s exactly right, Todd, and itâ€™s not just on the pure intelligence side as well, but as you were suggesting, it also spills over into the ability to execute operations based upon intelligence on the uniform military side. The special operations command had been created 15-20 years before that, but they suffered a great deal from a lack of synthesis on the intelligence data that was given to them. And still, from some bureaucratic infighting that, hopefully, as we saw in the raid that captured and killed Osama bin Laden,

has been largely overcome as well. That was a milestone in reflecting on whatâ€™s happened, both to the ability to fuse intelligence and to work on the ground with special operations command thatâ€™s truly joint, between the SEALs, Delta, Army Rangers, and so on. Itâ€™s a far cry from Desert One in Iran that was such a disasterâ€™

Interviewer

That would be in the Carter administrationâ€™

Dan Christman

Attempt to rescueâ€™

Interviewer

Attempt to rescue the hostages.

Dan Christman

Hostages in Tehranâ€™ exactly.

Interviewer

Letâ€™s go to that, that raid, for a moment. I mean whenâ€™so this happens in 2001, and youâ€™re now out of the service, but youâ€™re watching it, and youâ€™re involved as an analyst. Youâ€™re involved eventually as an advisor to Senator Clintonâ€™your sense that how we shouldâ€™ve responded to al-Qaeda in its various models. You could examine the crime model, in which you go after the one that did it, or should we try to prevent the next attack by sort of preemptive war, as the Bush administration undertook. Where did you fall on that argument?

Dan Christman

Well, I remember one of my first appearances on Wolf Blitzerâ€™s showâ€™

Interviewer

That would be the CNNâ€™

Dan Christman

The CNN Wolf Blitzer, typically on Sunday morning. There was a period there where almost every weekend Wolf would have a panel, and Iâ€™d be asked to comment. And there was one episode in particular, in the fall of â€™02, winter â€™02-â€™03, when a lot of us were wondering why are all the Rangers being pulled out of [the] Afghanistan [War]? We had sent elements of the 75th Ranger Regiment there, and obviously, elements of the more covert actors in the special operations command, to capture or kill elements of the al-Qaeda andâ€™

Interviewer

The sort of high-value targets.

Dan Christman

Mm-hmm, Afghan Taliban leadership. And a lot of us were wonderingâ€™ and this was before it was obvious that we were going into Iraqâ€™why the diversion of assets here,

because, surely, the job isn't over in Afghanistan.

Dan Christman

And then it became quickly apparent that, well, as a result of the efforts that we saw in the UN with Secretary Powell and so on, that we were after an additional target here in Baghdad. And I kept worrying, at the time, about the bandwidth of our Armed Forces' ability—not necessarily with numbers of boots on the ground. But all of us understood, there were precious few intelligence assets that were necessary—especially special ops folks—to go after the targets that we knew had been responsible for the long-term planning and execution of the attack on the United States.

Dan Christman

And so why are we doing this now in Iraq? And I think a lot of the Army felt worried about that decision for much the same reason—that we have a mission here in Afghanistan to go after a group that was responsible for an attack on our homeland, for the death of 3,000 in New York City, and that had clearly a long-term plan to take this battle to the US and to our national assets. And so that's, obviously, the debate that continues even to this day, as the Iraq venture continues to wind down.

Interviewer

And the answer to that, of course, was that the Bush administration started to adopt the language that the fight against terrorism is not against one man or one organization, and instead thought of it as sort of the defanging of the entire network that might be in support, and therefore to provide money and safe harbor to terrorism.

Dan Christman

Right.

Interviewer

Your feelings at the time was that this was unrealistic, idealistic?

Dan Christman

I think a lot of us were skeptical, you know, on two counts, really. One, the weapons of mass destruction path upon which Saddam had, you know, allegedly—

Interviewer

You were skeptical that he had actually pursued that path, you mean?

Dan Christman

A lot of us who were veterans of the planning for Desert Storm were aware that he had chemical weapons. In fact, as we were planning that mission in the fall of 1990, I never forget sitting with the Chief of Staff of the Army and the other members of—this was General Carl Vuono, at the time—and the Vice Chief, General Gordon Sullivan, and the DesOps of the Army, Danny Reimer, who became the Chief, subsequently—all trying not only to support Norman Schwarzkopf with the assets on the Army staff, but also trying to hypothesize various casualty estimates for alternative game plans.

Dan Christman

And the big uncertainty was does Saddam use his chemical weapons, yes or no? We knew he had them, and if he felt his regime was threatened, you know either just to expel his forces from Kuwait or felt threatened the deeper we went into southern Iraq, at the time, was he going to employ chemical weapons on our forces?

Interviewer

And it was an order of magnitude or two in terms of the casualty estimates as a result. So that informs some of our debate ten years later, in terms of the WMD piece. But I think that the nuclear link was far more tenuous. What was even more tenuous than that, as it turns out, was the al-Qaeda link to Saddam.

Dan Christman

There were reports of meetings in Prague, in the Czech Republic, which turned out, apparently, to have been ephemeral at best. So the rationale there was tenuous, but the other argument which is interesting in light of what's happening right now, on June 6, 2011 is the democratization argument. And that is here was a brutish, nasty dictator with a family that was wreaking havoc on a proud and historically rich nation, and wouldn't it be a turn of events for that region if somehow the precepts of representative democracy could be engrained? I'm not saying those of us in the Army felt this was an easy path, but we did understand that that was part of the argument that was being perpetrated at the time.

Arab Spring the Seedlings of a Democratic Iraq?

Interviewer

Although that was the sub-argument. The problem with editorialize a little bit here but the problem with the Bush administration's approach to the war is they sold it on weapons of mass destruction, when the far more legitimate argument was the planting of the seed for democracy. But I think they didn't believe that they could sell it on that basis.

Interviewer

But now we may be seeing is what you're arguing we may be seeing may be, we're not sure may be seeing the flower of that, not just in Iraq, but in terms of the Arab Spring and what's happening.

Dan Christman

That's just where I was going, yeah.

Interviewer

Tell me more about that.

Dan Christman

I was with the Iraq ambassador late last week Ambassador Sumaidaie who is a very, very accomplished international diplomat. And I was there, actually, meeting Secretary Clinton, with about 35 or 40 other members of the private sector, to encourage she wanted to encourage the private sector to get suits on the ground, not boots on the ground. Which I thought she's exactly right American private sector remains, still, unbelievably timid about going in, in comparison to Korea, Japan, and the European

Union. But nevertheless, that was the purpose.

Dan Christman

So I was talking to Ambassador SumaidaTMie, before the meeting with Secretary Clinton at the State Department, and I said, TMœAmbassador, in light of all thatTMs going on in the Middle East right now, from the Maghreb, from Morocco to the Gulf, Persian Gulf, Iraq is emerging through all of this as aTMâ€”and I paused for a second, TMœcause I couldnTMt quite think of the word. And SumaidaTMie said, TMœYou mean a beacon?TM And I said, TMœYou know, Mr. Ambassador, thatTMs a fascinating term,TM because in many respects, the Arab Spring, the outcome of the Arab Spring, is highly problematic.

Dan Christman

But of all the democracies that have begun to flower, if I can continue with the analogy for a second, Iraq, at this point, in terms of the roots of democracy that are emerging, may well be the most promising. And I often use this expressionTM I donTMt know how apocryphal it isTM but I had this opportunity to work for Henry Kissinger when I was an Army captain/junior major. And it was fresh after his success in the opening to China in TM72TM I joined the ClintonTM I joined the Kissinger staff in the summer of 1974.

Dan Christman

And this apocryphal, perhaps, story was told about KissingerTMs first meeting with Chinese Premiere Zhou Enlai, who was a student of history. And Kissinger was looking for a conversational opening, so he said, allegedly, to Zhou Enlai, TMœWell, Mr. Premier, I know youTMre a student of revolutions. What do you think is the significance of the French Revolution?TM And Zhou Enlai allegedly said, TMœDr. Kissinger, itTMs too early to tell.TM

Dan Christman

And ITMve often wondered, and particularly in listening to SumaidaTMie and meeting the Iraqi ministers, whom ITMve met prolifically with here over the last two years, whether it may still be too early to assign Iraq, there, to some dustbinTM particularly in light of whatTMs happening in Iraq right now to stabilize a form of democracy.

Interviewer

And itTMs equally too early to raise it up and say it is the beacon, because we may discover that the Arab Spring turns the Arab neighborhood into chaos.

Dan Christman

Right.

Interviewer

It may be that without that supporting structure that the US provided to Iraq to help build its democracy, that the rest of these Arab states are going to be finding themselves in a kind of revolutionTM a civil war kind of atmosphere.

Dan Christman

Well, thatTMs right. In fact, ITMm fond of quoting from Victor Hugo in Les Miserables, who wrote his novel, his historical novel, loosely based on the revolutions of 1831 and

1848. And there was this line from the musical drawn from the book that said, "We sang and dreamed about tomorrow, but tomorrow never came." And that may well be exactly what happens for the Arab Spring. And I think "the argument I've tried to make in my current job with the US Chamber of Commerce is the test case in that region for transitioning to a form of stable Arab democracy is Egypt.

Dan Christman

Is Egypt "it" "s been the cultural center of the region for generations, and it has a civil society that gives one some hope, but it needs jobs. It needs investment, it needs trade with the US, and it needs some aid, and sadly, our own government right now is hardly in a position to offer the kind of fiscal support, or, because of deeply divided internal politics, trade support.

We got Osama
Interviewer

Where were you when the bin Laden raid news came out?

Dan Christman

In North Carolina with my wife. We heard the announcement at about 10:15. We had just finished watching, what, I guess the NHL playoffs "the Caps had just gone down to defeat, and frankly, we were ready on Sunday night just to turn in. And the announcement came, "The President "s going to speak at 10:30 "on Sunday night? So we waited and waited until the announcement came, and"

Interviewer

Were you surprised that that was the announcement?

Dan Christman

Well, I was pleasantly surprised that it happened. Once it was clear, though, the President was going to be talking to the nation on a Sunday night, first two things in my mind were A) Muammar Gaddafi has been killed, or B) that we got Osama. And then the more we understand about the nature of the operation, the more, frankly, exciting and positive it became.

Interviewer

Did you think, at that point, having how many years passed "all of nine years had passed, I guess "that that was ever going to happen? Taking yourself absent from that night, I mean"

Dan Christman

No. No, I thought, frankly, that he would pass from the Earth in some way, and his spirit, the sort of inspirational leadership that he provided to that brand of extreme Islam, would continue to live on, and that we would never know what happened to him. You know, all of us anticipated that he was stuck someplace in a cave in North Waziristan, not living in, you know, right outside Pakistan "s West Point.

Interviewer

And what are your reflections on how the raid was carried out, and the disposal of the body,

and all that?

Dan Christman

I think professional and appropriate. Those that argue about the disposal of the body need to offer an alternative besides that that would have been any better in terms of the perceptions to global Islam or to the larger public. I think it was heldâ€”that it was conducted superbly.

Dan Christman

Sure. I think itâ€™s going to come out at some point, almost for sure. I canâ€™t imagine, just given the nature of modern technology, that thatâ€™s going to stay hidden forever. I think the decision was correct, especially at that period where emotions were so inflamed in the Arab world, I think one needsâ€”this is why, Iâ€™m sure, Obama did thisâ€”to listen to on-scene commandersâ€”Gates, Petraeus, and so onâ€”that understood what that would do to American lives in the region if that were published.

Dan Christman

The real issueâ€”I donâ€™t think is that at allâ€”the real issue is whatâ€™s this mean to US-Pakistan relations. And I think thatâ€™s the most significant national security dilemma that we face right now.

An Ex-Plebeâ€™s Reflections on Leadership at West Point
Interviewer

Letâ€™s go back to your personal historyâ€”to your class of 1965â€”

Dan Christman

Right.

Interviewer

At West Point, which means youâ€™re commissioned not at the height of the Vietnam War, but itâ€™s startingâ€”Vietnam is in the conversation, certainly.

Dan Christman

Right.

Interviewer

More than in the conversationâ€” itâ€™s on the front pages. Gulf of Tonkin had already happened, right?

Dan Christman

Yes.

Interviewer

And you wouldâ€™ve entered the Academy, that means, in â€™60â€”

Dan Christman

One.

Interviewer

â€™61. So you arrived at the height of the Kennedy yearsâ€”the enthusiasm, the prosperity of the â€œbear any burdenâ€ notion of the inaugural speech. And yet the world was, more or less, at peace, exceptâ€”I guess you were here for the Cuban Missile Crisis, too.

Dan Christman

I was.

Interviewer

And you were here for the Kennedy assassination, too.

Dan Christman

I was.

Interviewer

Letâ€™s actually begin by walking through those events and how you felt as a cadet here about what part you might take inâ€”how those events might affect your own personal history.

Dan Christman

When I first arrived, at least in my case, and I suspect most of the class of â€™65 felt the same way, we were just overwhelmed by the demands of Plebe yearâ€”especially that first summer, Beast Barracks. And it was a matter of survivalâ€”sort of, you know, the whole indoctrination into the military, leaving home, starting collegeâ€”thank God I had gone to an excellent high school that had prepared me superbly in calculus, so the academic piece was not an issue for me.

Dan Christman

But the culturalization process into the military sure was. And we didnâ€™t have much of a chance during that period, really, to contemplate in the summer, fall, even the winter of â€™61-â€™62, much that was happening outside the confines of the Academy.

Interviewer

Letâ€™s pause there for a second, because I have a sense that you were disappointed in the sort of culturalization aspect here.

Dan Christman

I was. I was. I had grown up asâ€”obviously, I still feel this wayâ€”as a great admirer of the Academy and the products that the Academy had produced for America and for leadership in the military and elsewhere. But the thing that really struck me was some of the sophomoric antics that the leadership cadre, when I was a Plebe, exhibited to those of us who were first introduced to West Point as Plebes.

Dan Christman

And that stayed with me, actually, all through my career—still does—and affected, in many respects, what I tried to do as Superintendent, and that was to make sure that the culturalization process, the introduction to the military, at West Point was tough and demanding and psychologically stressful, but that it wasn't demeaning—that tough and demanding didn't equal demeaning.

Dan Christman

I'd like to think that was my expression. Actually, that expression was used by General John Abizaid, then-Brigadier General John Abizaid, who was the Commandant of Cadets during my second and third year as Superintendent—a tremendous officer.

Interviewer

So this must have been the father of John Abizaid who served in Iraq, or was he?

Dan Christman

Nope. No, this is John Abizaid, himself.

Interviewer

I'm sorry, my mistake—okay, no, I get it.

Dan Christman

Yeah. No, that's all right. He was the one.

Interviewer

You said the Commandant. He was not—he was the

Dan Christman

Yeah. He was a one-star at the time. John is class of '73, and had come to the Academy fresh from assistant division command.

Interviewer

I'm getting confused—you mean during the time when you were Superintendent.

Dan Christman

Right.

Interviewer

Okay—

Dan Christman

That affected my time as Superintendent, because I did not want to have—and I must admit, I was probably only modestly successful here—have the new Plebes introduced to treatment like this, treatment that they would never expect to exhibit as officers in front of junior enlisted soldiers.

Dan Christman

But yet, somehow, when I came here in the summer of '61 with my class, I saw some behavior from the upper class that was just really sophomoric.

Interviewer

I guess my question comesâ€”you know that then. You knew that in '61. But itâ€™s still going on by the time you came back here as Superintendent.

Dan Christman

Some of it was, yeah. We had some whacky things in '61â€”shower formations, a lot of yelling and screaming, and sweating pennies to a wall, and you knowâ€”I mean it was justâ€”it bore no relationship, in my mind, to leadership development.

Dan Christman

And what was surprising was, in the middle of all this, this harassment, unnecessary harassment, were floating officers. Captains and majors, who were the tactical officers at the time, in '61â€”they were observing this. Most of them were Korean [War] combat veterans. Why werenâ€™t they asking themselves, â€œWhat relationship does this have to training a junior officer for the Army of a democracy?â€

Dan Christman

So anyway, that was the summer of '61, you know, and I was thinking about survival as a Plebe. Not much, at that point, aboutâ€”

Interviewer

And you were bringing a critique of what you were seeing, though, which isâ€”

Dan Christman

Yeah. Well, thatâ€™s right. I never really had an inclination to resign or even consider resigningâ€”

Interviewer

That was my next question, yeahâ€”you never thought about leaving during that time?

Dan Christman

No, I never did. I said, â€œLook, Iâ€™m going to give this first year a crack, and you know, assuming, you know, I donâ€™t fail in something while Iâ€™m here.â€

Interviewer

Any of your time here, did you ever think that, â€œthis is not for me?â€

Dan Christman

No. I got through that first year, things change magically when you become an upperclassman. Iâ€™d like to think that it affected, in a positive way, how I dealt with Plebes when I became a junior, a Cow, and subsequently a Firstie, but no, I never really thought about resigning.

Dan Christman

And frankly, once the academic year began, most of the upper class were muscling their way through calculus and English and physics and everything else, and I found those not particularly challenging. And so, you know, you have a little time to think for yourself.

Dan Christman

The most important thing, though—and I sort of reminisced about this a bit when I was Superintendent—was a period of about 75 days in the spring of my Plebe year—spring of '62—when I was the section marcher for the first section of English. And into my class comes William Faulkner for his visit to the school and his discussion with our class about his new novel, *The Reavers*.

Dan Christman

About two weeks later, Douglas MacArthur comes, and I'm sitting as a Plebe in the mess hall, and he gives his "Duty, Honor, Country" address, May 12, 1962. And then about three weeks later, John Kennedy comes and gives the graduation address for the class of '62. And, you know, as a Plebe, that was—

Interviewer

Pretty heavy stuff.

The Ghost of John F. Kennedy

Dan Christman

It was pretty heavy stuff. And I said to myself—probably still a little worried about am I going to get through Plebe year—but I said, "Boy, an institution that's able to attract visitors like that to give you the sense of identification with them while you're a student." And hopefully, you know, if you're successful enough to follow in the footsteps of some of these people, and I'd like to consider making a commitment, both to the school and to the profession afterwards.

Dan Christman

So then, you know, that was the first year—the Cuban Missile Crisis took place in the fall of '62, when I was a sophomore, and that was worrisome as hell. People forget how very, very dangerous the situation was then. We were briefed, I remember, in one of our clubs, in the barracks, by tactical officers about what was happening then, and said, "Look, you just need to be prepared here for some movement on your part, either to a safe area or whatever, if it worsens."

Dan Christman

And then the Kennedy assassination, I was a junior then, and we were getting ready for the Army-Navy game. He had come, Kennedy had come to the Army-Navy game that fall, in the fall of '62, and we were anticipating he was going to come in the fall of '63 to Philly. And when he was killed, they postponed the game—didn't cancel it, they postponed it. We stayed at the Academy, watched—I can remember seeing live on television, Jack Ruby killing Lee Harvey Oswald in that grainy, black-and-white picture that passed for TV back in '63.

Dan Christman

But the game was held the following week, and it was with an enormous heavy heart, because we liked Kennedy a lot. Politics wasn't important. The fact that he loved the Army—[Attorney General] Bobby [Kennedy] would come there frequently to see us train. He and Jack, brother Jack, were big supporters of the Green Berets and Special Forces, and we were doing things in training that were clearly designed—small unit warfare, irregular warfare, patrolling—that were designed for a very different future—i.e. Vietnam—than we anticipated when I applied for the Academy in '60, '61, you know, when the big issue then was holding the Soviets, you know, east of Fulda.

Interviewer

These days one might detect among the more conservative members of the Corps of Cadets that the Democratic Party is not their friend, and that they're soft on defense. But that wasn't the case back then, by any means, right? I mean Kennedy was a World War II veteran himself. The notion of both parties was that we were united on a defense posture. Can you speak to that just a little bit?

Dan Christman

Yeah, it's interesting you say that. We had a West Point grad, class of '15, Dwight Eisenhower, as our President for almost the entire time that I was maturing into political awareness. But if one recalls, the senior Army leadership wasn't terribly wild about Eisenhower's "New Look" policy, because the service that really suffered from that was the Army. Eisenhower was focused almost entirely on the Strategic Air Command [SAC], Air Force, massive retaliation.

Dan Christman

In fact, several of the Army Chiefs of Staff, to include Maxwell Taylor, wrote in Taylor's book, *The Uncertain Trumpet*, very critically about the defense policy under a Republican President who was, of all things, an Academy grad.

Dan Christman

So that change in emphasis, then, in the early '60s had two dimensions to it. One was this incredibly attractive, young, different generation Commander-in-Chief, who, second, had made it clear by the nature of the advisors he was bringing around him—to include Maxwell Taylor, former Superintendent at West Point—that the Army was going to receive a very different budget priority and nature of emphasis than was the case during the Eisenhower "New Look" period.

Interviewer

Ironically, one of the things I've heard said, ironically, is that Eisenhower is his own Secretary of Defense, and he knew where the skeletons were in the Army, and no one was going to fool him. So he looked, actually, more cynically upon the Army than a President who didn't serve in the same capacity. So you were a fan of Kennedy.

Dan Christman

I was. Mm-hmm, I was.

Interviewer

And so this news of the assassination must've struck you hard.

Dan Christman

Oh, devastating. I had come from the mess hall, November of 1963, and was studying for "just reviewing some notes" "cause I had the first hour free after lunch" for our law class, second hour in the afternoon. And I was in company L2 at the time, and as I was listening to the radio, I heard some radio announcements, and went out in the hall and saw this "again, I was a junior" saw this Firstie who was in tears in the hall.

Dan Christman

And I still remember his name "that's not important for this" but I said, "Jeff, is everything okay?" And tears streaming down his cheeks, he said, "Listen to this," and here was the announcement about the Kennedy shooting. And I can't recall at that point whether Cronkite had come in and made the announcement that he had passed, but it was a very, very dramatic moment. And I remember going to law class in the afternoon "normally, there's a lot of banter and chatter in the cadet areas as you're heading off after a class break. It was just as silent as a tomb as we were heading off to class, and, you know, it was really an emotional moment for the entire corps.

Interviewer

Did you sense that "cause this would've been a unique perspective, it strikes me, on the assassination here. Not only had you lost a President, you lost a Commander-in-Chief, too.

Dan Christman

Right.

Interviewer

Was that part of the sense of grief here "was the loss of not just a political leader, but your commander?

Dan Christman

Right. By the same token, though, I think all of us understood that there is a system in place to replace the Commander-in-Chief. Obviously, Johnson raised his hand on Air Force One and assumed that responsibility.

Dan Christman

I think it was much more visceral "it was much more emotional on the level of feeling that we had. This very, very dramatic, young, attractive, talented President, who was very quickly taken from us, after, you know, 1,000 days.

Leaving the Nest

Interviewer

You talked a little bit about the shift "which strikes me as somewhat mirroring what we discussed earlier" from the Eisenhower years, in terms of massive retaliation, and the Kennedy years, when there was a new understanding of the possibility of unconventional warfare "the rise of these sort of proxy wars. And which was prefiguring Vietnam, but we already "Algeria [the Algerian War] was going on at the time, I guess, and the notion of unconventional warfare was starting to enter the doctrine, I assume.

Interviewer

Did you find that that was part of the conversation here at the Academy in terms of preparing you for what was going to happen in the later '60s?

Dan Christman

It was. But it's interesting—it was in the context, still, of a view on the nature of the threat, which was global communism, and that particular phrase tended to be attached to so much of what we were about. We would understand, we'd look a little bit at the British experience in Malaysia [the Malaysian Emergency], but it was all understood there, well, there was a communist element to that. Laos was beginning to bubble over, and the Pathet Lao were attached somehow to a larger communist movement. The most dramatic, of course, was just off our shores, 90 miles away, with Cuba. See, here's yet one more effort on the part of the global communist hegemon to affect US security policy.

Interviewer

It was like a domino theory, essentially.

Dan Christman

Well, it was. It was. I got to know, while I was Superintendent, David Halberstam—actually, quite well—and had him sign for me his 1972 book, *The Best and the Brightest*—which I constantly refer to now, because I'm still amazed that in that period, as much as we admired Kennedy, the group that surrounded him, that set the policy for defense and security and foreign policy in the period while I was a cadet, was still absolutely beholden to this notion that there was this growing global hegemon called, you know, the international communist movement that affected so much of our intellectual thinking.

Dan Christman

I remember, I was just reviewing the other day—I applied for a Rhodes scholarship. Did not win it, but went to the final interview in Chicago, where the Rhodes candidates were selected. And I remember reading this portion on communism and the threat that it posed to our military. And there was an expression in there that I had used that our way of life is threatened by an atheistic totalitarian society that threatens to impose its will and way upon us—a phrase much like that.

Dan Christman

And I remember being asked a lot of questions in Chicago by the panel about that particular phrase, like, "What's wrong with being an atheist? What's the nature of this communist conspiracy here?" And you read the contemporary history about what guided policymakers in the early '60s, and there were really—and this is Halberstam's thesis, in large part—there were really two elements that I didn't appreciate as a young student.

Dan Christman

One was, "Who lost China," and that's where the Democrats still have this enormous challenge. Nobody wanted to ever be accused of losing another critical ally as Nationalist China was viewed during the war.

Dan Christman

And second, Joe McCarthy. And the combination of those two—McCarthy finally disappeared from the scene around ’54 or so—but by the time I was a cadet, that was about six or seven years before. And the impact which those two events had on the general context of thinking about security policy, strategy, and who the new threat might be and how we fought it was very much in evidence.

Interviewer

It’s interesting, ’cause both of them were reactions to the intellectual input into American policy. Acheson was accused of having lost China. He was certainly symbolic of the Ivy League kind of arrogance, right? And then McCarthy was a populist movement against the pointy-head intellectuals also, so there was a defensiveness, even though you had—you’re referring here to Robert McNamara as the Secretary of Defense, I guess. Bundy, the whole crew around Kennedy, which were certainly brilliant, but in their own way, were reacting to something rather than initiating.

Dan Christman

Right. And those that raised their nose or head above the parapet—Averell Harriman, George Ball, you know—and said, “Are we sure about this here,” were very quickly marginalized.

Interviewer

Yeah. So you’re commissioned in the spring of ’65, then, and you go where first?

Dan Christman

Well, there was an option then, if you finished in the top 5% of your class you could choose where you wanted to go. You could go to grad school—

Interviewer

And you were number one for your class of ’65.

Dan Christman

You could go to school right away, or you could go out in the Army and we’ll do our best—we, the Army—based upon where you finished, to give you your post and unit of choice. Well, I had enough of college at that point, and I said, “Look, I want to give the Army a fair chance.” So I said—

Interviewer

And you had branched engineer.

Dan Christman

Engineer. So I said, “I’d like to go to Korea.” You know, I’d heard wonderful things about the combat engineer experience there, and so my first assignment after Airborne and Ranger School at [Fort] Benning in the summer of ’65 was to head off to South Korea and to be assigned to A Company, 2nd Engineer Battalion, just by the Demilitarized Zone, near Panmunjom, from roughly December ’65 to January ’67.

Interviewer

And thenâ€”you heard about Vietnam from there, obviously.

Dan Christman

Oh, yes.

Interviewer

And thatâ€”did you sort of yearn to go to the hot spot, I guess?

Dan Christman

Well, I did. Again, I knew thatâ€”s where the bulk of my classmates were heading. By the spring of â€”67 when I came back to grad school, I applied almost as soon as I got to Korea to the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton and heard that Iâ€”d gotten in about a year later, so weâ€”re talking now winter-spring of â€”67.

Dan Christman

And I had a choice thenâ€”I mean do I turn this down and head right to Vietnam, or do I get the graduate degreesâ€”it was a combination of engineering and public affairs program at the Woodrow Wilson School. And I said, â€œWell, look, Iâ€”m here now, Iâ€”m backâ€”letâ€”s get the graduate degrees out, â€”cause my sensing is that itâ€”s probablyâ€”this war is not going to go away anytime soon.â€” So I spent two years at Princeton to get the advanced degrees and then went to 101st Airborne in the summer of â€”69.

The Minefields of Phong Dien

Interviewer

So 101st Airborne is your first real combat experienceâ€”talk to me about that. How did it match your vision of what combat was going to be like, and how did it depart from it?

Dan Christman

I felt pretty prepared, actually. There was one aspect, which Iâ€”ll just talk about in a moment, but just in terms of leading and managing a company in combat, I felt, actually, not only prepared because of West Pointâ€”

Interviewer

You were a company commander there.

Dan Christman

Yeah, I was thrown right into command B Company, 326 Engineers that was assigned to the 3rd Brigade of the 101st. At that point, was operating in what was called the A Shau Valley, which was one of the infiltration routes in northwestern South Vietnam, bordering on the Laotian border on the west, and the DMZ on the north.

Interviewer

Youâ€”re about 25 now.

Dan Christman

Iâ€”m 26. So I had had a company in Korea, at the end of my time there theyâ€”because

of the investment the government was putting into South Vietnam, they took a lot of the junior officers, the captains, out of Korea to fill the units. And so, essentially, there were second and first lieutenants left in most of these battalions in South Korea, and I wound up for six months commanding a company—which was fantastic.

Dan Christman

To be comfortable that I could do that, dealing with the NCOs, discipline, and of course, the combat engineer training that we had a responsibility for even then, which was mostly minefields and clearing booby traps, which today, you know, we call IEDs.

Dan Christman

Yeah. I was there, actually, just at a very important transition. Nixon had started the Vietnamization program—we still had over 500,000 in South Vietnam.

Dan Christman

We started doing that in South Korea, and that was, in great part, what we did during my time in South Vietnam. So I started that in the summer of '69 when I got there in August and commanded the company until the following January.

Interviewer

Give us a history lesson for 1969 in Vietnam. Where's the war at this point?

Interviewer

And describe for the viewers the Vietnamization program was the

Dan Christman

A plan to eventually turn the combat operations over to the South Vietnamese military—the ARVN—the Army of the Republic of Vietnam—by investing in their equipment and training, sending advisors to develop their officers and NCOs, and, then, increasingly to conduct joint operations with them.

Interviewer

This is what he referred to as his secret plan for Vietnam in their campaign of the year before, right?

Dan Christman

Right. Now, when my time—almost my entire time with the 101st, we did not work with the South Vietnamese, that was a different organization, a different part of our military in South Vietnam at the time. Our unit, 101st, was organic, operated alone, part of the corps that we were assigned to in northern South Vietnam, but the first part of the mission there was really main force search-and-destroy operations, where the 101st Airborne was operating in this section, as I mentioned, called the A Shau Valley, that had been a major infiltration route.

Dan Christman

And we were going after North Vietnamese, principally—North Vietnamese units that continued to work just across the border in Laos, but that would make incursions into

Interviewer

So this is North Vietnamese Army as opposed to the insurgent elements in South Vietnam, right?

Dan Christman

Yeah, and that's why I say I was sort of there at a very important shift, because by the late summer of '69, we had been able—the US Army had been able to push out a lot of the North Vietnamese main force units in these areas that were deemed important to us. But because of the Vietnamization program and the draw-down, we couldn't hold the area. So we were in the A Shau Valley for probably two-and-a-half months, and my company there had responsibility for supporting the Infantry units. We'd go out with them on the search-and-destroy missions, and either collect and demolish the booby traps and the demolitions that we would find, or engage in small unit activities with the 101st.

Dan Christman

But by the time—the late summer-early fall emerged, we were pulled back to operate along what Bernard Fall, the French historian of the Viet Minh operations in the early 1950s, called "the street without joy." And that's where my company, then, following the main force operations against the North Vietnamese, engaged in counter-guerilla operations against the Viet Cong. And our mission then—

Interviewer

Viet Cong being the insurgent units in South Vietnam.

Dan Christman

Right. Right. And what we principally were asked to do was to clear the small villages and hamlets of the mines and booby traps that had been left by the Viet Cong and encourage the South Vietnamese villagers, who had lived in this area. The district was called Phong Dien—"P-H-O-N-G D-I-E-N"—Phong Dien district of Thua Thien province, north of Hue.

Dan Christman

And so for the next two or three months, our principle mission, then, was not search-and-destroy that was the first part of my time as company commander, but it was what we would today call IED—"improvised explosive device"—clearance.

Interviewer

What did an IED or a booby trap look like in Vietnam at that time?

Dan Christman

Vietnam, at that time, it was principally captured American artillery or mortar shells that we had left behind, either Marines or Army, on fire bases that we had closed. But we'd incompletely close them and leave behind shells that the Viet Cong would grab and store, and then booby-trap.

Dan Christman

And there—in fact, my first casualties were sustained—a young Specialist named Craig Rogers was killed when he came across a booby-trapped 155 millimeter artillery shell that

had a branch separated by a small twig. And when he would step on the branch, it would close the circuit to a battery and explode the shell. And that was the nature of the IED at the time. It was not, you know, not radio-controlled, it wasn't cell phone-controlled—it was very rudimentary, but unbelievably effective.

Dan Christman

And it was bad—I mean the worst time of my Vietnam tour was that period of about two or three weeks, when we sustained, for a combat engineer company, fairly heavy casualties. Two killed and about a dozen seriously wounded, because of their tripping of these booby traps that were part of our mission.

Interviewer

As a company commander, this was the first time you lost any men, I assume.

Dan Christman

It was.

Interviewer

And what did that feel like, and how did you respond? How were you trained to respond and then did you respond in the right way?

Dan Christman

Yeah. Well, I'm not sure my battalion commander particularly appreciated the next thing, but because we had—the next thing I did—but I explained to them why I did it. I took the whole—I probably had two of the three line platoons doing this at the time, and I took them all out of the operation and brought them back to our base camp there, at a place called Camp Evans, just north of Hue.

Dan Christman

And I told the supporting brigade commander, the Infantry commander, I was doing this primarily because we had done such, in my judgment, a bad job of trying to figure out what these devices were, that I wanted to spend about two weeks getting as much information as we could from the casualties we had sustained. Setting up classes in our mess hall showing what these devices were like, and then trying to work through how we could defeat them, so we weren't sacrificing lives or limbs in the course of learning on the field.

Dan Christman

My battalion commander, I remember, flew in, and I'm not sure he was particularly pleased, but I said—his name was Mickey McClellan, and he just passed away—a wonderful man. I just said, “Sir, the casualties have been so great. I think our training on this was incomplete, and I want to deepen this training. I want to professionalize how we go after these booby traps so that we are not going to be using our soldiers as a training device.”

Interviewer

Did you feel any guilt that you'd not figured this out beforehand?

Dan Christman

A little bitâ€”I still do to this day. But the reason I do feel that way is when we were first sent into Phong Dien District to do this, it was to replace an Infantry unit that had essentially said, â€œWeâ€™re not doing any more of this.â€

Interviewer

Because theyâ€™d suffered so many casualties.

Dan Christman

Because theyâ€™d suffered so many casualties. And Iâ€™ll never forget â€”I went with these two platoons out to the siteâ€”it was an old, abandoned church. And sitting around the church walls were the soldiers, the Infantry soldiers, of the 101st, and they had told their unit, â€œWeâ€™re not doing any more of this.â€ And so the task force commander, the Infantry task force commander in 05, asked if my unit would take its place, because he knew we had mine detectors and had that as a secondary mission.

Dan Christman

And so I said, â€œSure,â€ and in retrospect, I probably shouldâ€™ve said, â€œLet me sit down first with your subordinate commanders and understand exactly what weâ€™re after here, and the nature of the casualties that youâ€™ve sustained, and why those were sustained in the way that they were, and train my unit up accordingly.â€

Dan Christman

But I didnâ€™t do that, you know. So much of what we are trained to do here is, â€œYep, this is the mission. We got it assigned. We can do this.â€ And you know, part of it was we did some of this in Korea when I was there as a company commander, on sections of the old DMZ. I felt, you know, we had pretty good expertise in counter-mine operations. This wasnâ€™t substantially different from what we were facing in Korea.

Dan Christman

It turned out to be hugely different, and so the regret wouldâ€™ve been that that particular decision, to say, â€œYep, Iâ€™ll do this.â€ And the sad thing about it, which I stillâ€”I wrote to family, and this was actuallyâ€”I told the story to a USA Today reporter when I went back to Vietnam, this time to Hanoi with the Secretary of State. I was the only veteran on the plane when we were recognizing the country of Vietnam in August of 1995, and the reporter said, â€œDescribe what you were doing the last time you were in Vietnam.â€

Dan Christman

And I said, â€œWell,â€ I told the story. And I said, â€œThe young man who stepped forward, he was from Iowaâ€”Waterloo, Iowaâ€”this young man named Craig Rogers.â€ And he volunteered to be the point on this team that was going through these rice paddy dikes that were essentially the trails that the villagers would take to go back into Phong Dien. He said, â€œSir, I got it,â€ you know, â€œIâ€™ll do it. Give me the mine detector.â€ Everyone followed himâ€”he was point on all this. And so I left him to go to the next platoon, and about 90 minutes later, I heard this radio message that he had tripped a booby trap, and they were bringing his body back.

Dan Christman

And so, yeah—that was the story I recounted to the USA Today reporter. He published this in the USA Today, and the sister of Rogers in Iowa read that and wrote me a letter when I came back to Washington, DC, and I, you know, subsequently wrote back to her, just to say how much she appreciated remembering her brother from that story.

Dan Christman

But, you know, he—although I was disappointed in myself at not having thought through the implications of saying, “Yep, I’ll do it, I got it,” I also felt that the way I treated the company in the months before that—with respect, the values that I had talked about here earlier of integrity and respect, caring for the soldiers. Of being worried about their welfare and where they were sleeping at night and their food and everything else—led that company to say, when they could see the other soldiers, the Infantry soldiers from the side, sitting down on the job, they said, “Hey, sir, we got this, sir. We’ll take care of it.” And so I had, you know, a great deal of confidence that the leadership style that I was trying to exhibit in the company ultimately, in an environment like that, would pay off, because you were able to instill the trust in the junior soldier in your leadership that you don’t get by alternate behavior—by the yelling and screaming and the kinds of things that we had discussed earlier.

Interviewer

Well, it strikes me, a couple things here—that leadership really goes two directions then, right? You’re given the mission, and part of it is leading the mission—the other part is leading the men below you, who must execute that mission.

Dan Christman

Right.

Interviewer

You had their trust. That’s why they were willing to step up. Then it turned out that you had not vetted the situation completely. You could imagine the men losing trust in you, in that instance. So as a company commander, that’s kind of a critical moment.

Dan Christman

Right.

Interviewer

What do you do?

Dan Christman

That’s why I decided to bring them back. I was worried about precisely that. That after we had sustained day after day of this, and although in today’s terms, only losing 2 and 12 wounded may not seem all that much, it is when you’re, you know, 26 years old, and you know these folks really well. But I just felt it was my responsibility there, especially thinking back on my quick decision to say, “Yep, we’ll do it,” to step back and to make sure that they had the benefit of all the intelligence, the battlefield intelligence, we could acquire at the time, before we headed back out and did this again.

Interviewer

Did you take on any fire at any point in your company, orâ€”

Dan Christman

Yeah.

Interviewer

And in what instance? What situation would that have beenâ€”during thisâ€”

Dan Christman

For this operation, very seldomâ€”the occasional mortar. But the Viet Cong had long since been cleared from this area, and so it was the residue. The focus was, in terms of the strategy, was to focus on the agriculture and population areas while we were training the South Vietnamese and to bring the villagers back into their native areas. So there was very little residual Viet Cong strength, except for these IEDs, these booby traps, which they left behind. The fire that we took was in the first phase, the main force operations.

Interviewer

Weâ€™ll come back to that in a second, but in terms of the IEDs or the booby traps that were left there, the villagers mustâ€™ve known they were there, right?

Dan Christman

They had been evacuated, months before, and put in refugee camps, that could be more easily guarded and protected and secured. And of course, the government in Saigon, and our own, wanted to bring them back and get them out of the camps. They were not, you know, the best places for long-term living. And so the mission was, letâ€™s clear these hamlets and bring the villagers back and allow them to live where they were born and raised.

Interviewer

Did you eventuallyâ€”through this focus now on what these booby traps were and how to discover them, did you have success in terms of rooting them out in a way that you couldnâ€™t before?

Dan Christman

Yep. The booby traps, you mean? Yes, as it turns out, we did, and it was really serendipitous. What we were able to work with the Infantry was a technique that essentially burned all the vegetation and foliage on the trails, that exposedâ€”that either burned the trip wires or exposed the booby traps. And we did that, essentially, by dropping contaminated JP-4 helicopter fuel from blivets that would be slung underneath helicoptersâ€”not probably environmentally friendly, in todayâ€™s terms, but thatâ€™s what we did. Dropped the fuel, set it off with a thermite grenade or some other device, and then burned the path through.

An Unexpected Kiss in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam

Interviewer

Letâ€™s close, if we could, with one other scene here, which wouldâ€”and then maybe in a later interview we can come back to some of the other, the earlier operation we talked about with the 101st, with the ARVN. But youâ€™re coming back here with Secretary of

State Warren Christopher in 1997?

Dan Christman

Five.

Interviewer

Five—very controversial, right, to be coming back to recognize Vietnam. How did you feel about it? How did you feel as a veteran from Vietnam?

Dan Christman

Yep. Well, I was a little nervous—nervous from, obviously, a very different basis than 1969—nervous, in great part, for how we would be treated—I in particular, because I was in full uniform—by our counterparts. However, a lot of the nervousness abated, based on the discussions I had with a real hero of mine—his name is Jack Vessey. And General Vessey was, at that point, the retired chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He had commanded our troops in Korea during the Reagan administration.

Dan Christman

But he had started conversations with his Vietnamese counterparts on a series of actions that were collected under the umbrella of Joint Task Force Full Accounting, i.e. securing Vietnamese help in identifying the remains of our, principally, downed pilots, for identification in Hawaii, and then return of the remains to the families. And the issue at the time was if we recognized Vietnam, would they continue to help Joint Task Force Full Accounting in the way that they had prior to the recognition, which had been very full—a very fulsome, good faith effort to help.

Interviewer

The theory being here that there was nothing left to win, so—

Dan Christman

Right.

Interviewer

In terms of recognition, so why should they cooperate?

Dan Christman

We got what we want, we got the recognition—we—TMII slack off on the identification, on the help. So my mission while I was there with the Secretary of State was to meet with a Vietnamese three-star, who was their principal go-between for Joint Task Force Full Accounting, that would help with relay sites and guides and interpreters, etc., and to try to convince him that it was in our collective self-interest to work this program for the coming years, as long as it took to identify the remaining MIA.

Dan Christman

And this Vietnamese three-star could not have been more cooperative and professional. As it turns out, he lost a brother in this area along what was called QL-9 at the time, an east-west road that went from Quang Tri on the coast, west into Laos, which is precisely the

area where my company was fighting in the fall of 1969. He lost a brother there.

Interviewer

And he couldn't have lost him to one of your

Dan Christman

To one of our missions.

Interviewer

Operations.

Dan Christman

But there were no recriminations. He couldn't have been more professional. When we landed, Secretary Christopher I just thought the world of him, an extremely consummate and professional diplomat, was met by a Vietnamese delegation that had, as I remember, Todd, there were four coffins that were on the tarmac at the Hanoi International Airport, covered with an American flag, about to be loaded onto probably a C-141 to be flown to Hawaii for the central identification laboratory work.

Dan Christman

But these were the most recent remains that were recovered in the mountains west of Hanoi and had been the result of this cooperative effort. And so there was a formal ceremony there on the tarmac, the coffins were put in the plane, and we were escorted, then, into town for our first series of official meetings.

Dan Christman

And it went so well that Secretary Christopher pulled me aside at one point and said he has just sent a cable to the President to describe this episode that I had with the Vietnamese policeman, and the episode, briefly, was this.

Dan Christman

We were sent on a brief sightseeing tour to a central park in downtown Hanoi elegant grounds, where they have, under a pagoda, these giant tortoises, which carry on the back plaques of all the Hanoi residents that have earned doctorates in college, studying there. And they date back hundreds of years, to the probably 16-1700s. It was a very, very placid, calm scene the Vietnamese were giving us the tour of this and so I was fascinated. I asked a couple of questions, and as we were leaving, there were four or five of the cars that were ready to take us from that spot to a meeting with the Vietnamese host.

Dan Christman

And as I was getting in the car, a Vietnamese policeman, who was wearing a two-tone blue uniform, medals and his saucer cap, saw me get into the car. And as we were pulling away, slowly, at first, the Vietnamese policeman gave me the best-looking salute. And then as I looked out and repeated that salute, returned it to him, he blew me a kiss as we were driving away. And I told the Secretary this, because it just conformed with this extraordinary hospitality that was shown to us by the Vietnamese leadership.

Dan Christman

The only exception was when we visited the Hanoi Hilton or tried to and that's a separate story entirely. But the official delegation, from prime minister on down to my three-star counterpart, couldn't have been more cooperative. And the story that I've just described, Christopher cabled back to the President as a signal for how we were being received by the Vietnamese important to Clinton, because as you correctly pointed out, this was a little controversial at the time, within both parties. But it was a signal that this was going to be a very successful visit, and hopefully a successful future, as we put the Vietnam War in its historical context and moved forward.

Interviewer

Let's stop there. We'll pick it up later, then. Thank you.

Dan Christman

Yep.

Interviewer

Thank you, General.

Dan Christman

Sure.