

THE GUANTÁNAMO BAY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Lawrence B. Wilkerson

Columbia Center for Oral History

Columbia University

2011

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Lawrence B. Wilkerson conducted by George Gavrilis on April 22, 2011. This interview is part of the Guantánamo Bay Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

3PM

Session One

Interviewee: Lawrence B. Wilkerson

Location: Washington, D.C.

Interviewer: George Gavrilis

Date: April 22, 2011

Q: This is George Gavrilis. I am here with Colonel Lawrence B. Wilkerson in Washington, D.C., on April 22, 2011. We are doing an interview for the Columbia University Oral History Project on Guantánamo. This is a relatively new project that Columbia is pursuing right now, and they hope to expand it and to interview many more people, but you are one of the first people that Columbia University wanted to interview for this project. Thank you very much for doing this.

Wilkerson: Certainly.

Q: There are many reasons why one would want to talk to you about these issues, not only because you have well-informed opinions on this issue of Guantánamo and its broader role in U.S. strategy, but also because — very much in line with what oral history is — you have a very storied and wonderful biography. You were once in the military, you served in government, and you also played quite a large role in academia in discussing these issues, so you have worn many hats. Today, we would like to not only talk about Guantánamo and your role in the State Department, but some of these other hats as well. One of the first things I wanted to talk to you about was about Bucknell. You went to Bucknell, but you left to serve in Vietnam, I believe.

Wilkerson: Correct.

Q: Before you tell me how you made that decision, I would like to know how you came to Bucknell, and why English literature?

Wilkerson: I was at Baylor University for my first semester. My parents and I lived in Houston, Texas, and Baylor was a close-by university for me and frankly, my girlfriend went to school right next door to it. We were planning on getting married at the time. I went to Baylor for the first semester and found that they did not meet my academic desires. Even as powerful as that was the fact that the girl and I did not see that much of each other and sort of fell out. My father knew the head of the business school at Bucknell and had asked him about the possibility of a transfer. Plus, my father was transferring — was he vice president at that time? Maybe he was regional manager at that time for Sears Allstate. Allstate Insurance Company was owned by Sears then. He got transferred to Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, so it was a good move for me, too. I could still be relatively close to my family and I could go to a better school, I thought, so I transferred to Bucknell.

After being there for a couple of years, my fraternity had lost one of its best members — an unassuming, self-deprecating young man who was just an extraordinary character — in Vietnam. I walked out of school in the summer between my junior and senior year. My parents at that point moved around a lot. My father had been promoted to vice president for the southern zone and had moved to Atlanta. I went to Atlanta for that summer, cogitating about things, met a young lady and fell in love with her, and she is my wife of almost fifty years now. At the same time, I was still concerned about what was happening. My father had fought in World War II as a B-17 pilot. My father-in-law had fought with [George S.] Patton's Third Army in World War II.

There were a lot of things happening on campuses around the country and I decided I needed to do my part, so I enlisted. I signed up for Airborne Ranger infantry. As I went through the process of basic training, advanced individual training in New Jersey and so forth, I kept running into my intellect. The infantry is basically determined by socioeconomic conditions. Rich men never fight in the infantry. Talented, educated men never fight in the infantry either — at least, rarely. I kept running into lieutenants and captains and platoon sergeants who said, “Why are you here? You should be an officer, not an enlisted man.”

“I want to be an enlisted man.”

Finally, on a snow covered field at Fort Dix, New Jersey, when I was teaching other people how to fire the M60 machine gun as a brevet corporal, my platoon sergeant — a big, huge, six-foot-four African American — came out and kicked me in the butt and said, “Wilkerson, the company commander wants to see you,” so I went to see the company commander. He was badly wounded in Vietnam and had an arm like this. It was frozen in front of him. He said, “Pack your bags, you are going to OCS.”

Q: OCS is —?

Wilkerson: Officer Candidate School. I went to Officer Candidate School and when I signed in I said, “I can go to Vietnam, right? As an infantry lieutenant, right?”

“Yes, absolutely. We guarantee it.”

Well, I graduated from OCS and they made me a tactical officer in OCS. I trained other officers, so I still had not gotten there. I went to see my battalion commander after about three months of that and I said, "Colonel, I have to get to Vietnam. I want to go to Vietnam. Time is wasting. I enlisted in 1966. It is now 1968." He said the best way to go is to go to flight school and become a helicopter pilot. The way the Army does that is they put you on orders for Vietnam TDY — that is temporary duty — to flight school. I said, "Wonderful." I went to nine months of flight school, and I finally got to Vietnam in March of 1969. That is the long story of how I finally got to where I wanted to go.

Q: Practically three years after you had enlisted.

Wilkerson: Not quite three, because I enlisted in the late 1966, so two and a half years.

Q: Then you got to Vietnam?

Wilkerson: I got to Vietnam and I was immediately made a platoon commander of a bunch of scout helicopters. We were losing about a helicopter a month. The major who put me in charge of the platoon said, "I want you to stop that," so I did. It was not very difficult. All I had to do was go out there and see all these reconnaissance helicopters with guns bristling all over them. I said, "They are not doing reconnaissance. They are trying to hunt down and kill, and if you hunt down and kill from a small helicopter fifty feet off the ground doing about sixty knots, you are going to die half the time, at least, because they are going to shoot you."

I took all the guns off and my pilots hated me, initially. I told them, "Your job is to scout, not to fight, not to kill. The infantry does that on the ground to whom you are reporting and you are scouting for." We did not lose another helicopter in thirteen months. We had a lot of people shot up and some killed and some wounded because you are still very vulnerable even scouting, but we improved our scouting and reconnaissance.

Q: Can you explain something to me? How was it that pilots that were supposed to be scouting were also fighting?

Wilkerson: Vietnam was a very free environment in terms of innovation on the ground, so this scout platoon had gradually evolved without good leadership. It had gradually evolved into being minigun-equipped, forty millimeter grenade launcher-equipped, and M60 machine gun-equipped. They had all manner of weapons all over these things. The biggest thing was the GAU-2B/Alpha minigun, which fired about four thousand rounds per minute. It is a furious thing, an Air Force weapon system that the Army had stolen a few of and then liked, and began to procure itself and put them on aircraft. On a Cobra or an A-10 aircraft that is fine, but on a scout aircraft, you are not scouting, you are not using your eyes, and you are not reporting if you are machine-gunning. We received some kudos after that from the division and from the battalions on the ground that we were supporting.

Q: But the men hated you?

Wilkerson: At first. Then they realized why I had done it and that we were getting better intelligence and we were doing our job. The influx and outflux in Vietnam was constant, so I would get new pilots and new officers and, over time, the platoon turned into a pretty good outfit. I was made the Air Cavalry Troop Operations Officer when I got promoted to captain in December 1969.

Q: How long did you stay in Vietnam?

Wilkerson: Just a year. When I came home I fully expected to go back. Partly because of the record I had established — here again, be careful how well you do — I was picked up to go to the Armor School rather than go to the Infantry School to, a real feather in a captain's hat at that time, because I had served with a cavalry reconnaissance squadron in Vietnam. With that experience and with the efficiency reports I had received, I was picked to go to the Armor course rather than the Infantry career course. The infantry usually does not send but ten or twelve people to that course, and they usually send their best because they do not want to be embarrassed by another branch.

I went to the Armor School career course and, in the course of going, the war began to wind down. In 1972, the North Vietnamese launched their first major conventional invasion of South Vietnam and they were turned back with maximum casualties by the U.S., principally because of both Army and Air Force air power. It then looked like the Vietnamization program was working — at least that was the patina that people put on it. Of course, the Congress began to weigh in

with refusals to continue to fund the war and Henry Kissinger made his deal in Paris, the details of which now trouble me somewhat when I read about it.

Q: How so?

Wilkerson: I think people like Robert Dallek in his book *Nixon and Kissinger* and others have revealed that Kissinger's words —which Dr. Kissinger does not necessarily deny. I have talked with him once about this. When his interlocutor in Paris asked him — I think it was in Paris. It might have been later. It might have been in China, but I think it was in Paris. I think the comment went something like this — “How long should this space be?” Kissinger went back to him and said something like, “We cannot withdraw and you mount a full-scale invasion right away, so it needs to be a year or two at least before you do.” Nods on the other side of the table. In effect, Dr. Kissinger was saying, “We know you are going to invade. We know you are going to take over South Vietnam. We will interpose no real strenuous objections.” Indeed, “we cannot” because Congress has cut off the purse.

Q: It was a face-saving measure?

Wilkerson: Yes.

Q: I see.

Wilkerson: At least wait a couple of years. Grow a new army before you do it. Let your sixteen-year-olds become eighteen-year-olds.

Q: At the time that you are watching these events, was that also your sense of what was happening?

Wilkerson: No, my sense at the time was one of frustration for a number of things, looking back on it. One, because it did not seem like we were making a whole lot of headway, except against the NLF [National Liberation Front]. By the time I got to Vietnam in March of 1969, the so-called Vietcong had been virtually eliminated. I have subsequently learned through my own research that that probably was at least one of the intents of [Vo Nguyen] Giap and Ho Chi Minh. If you start an offensive all across the country and you win, terrific. If you drive the invader out — the Americans, Australians, others — terrific. If you do not, they will destroy the Vietcong, the NLF. Then when we eventually do take over the South, there will be no southern element for us to have to contend with. I am pretty sure that was their strategy. They have as much as said that.

As a consequence of the so-called Tet Offensive, we had virtually eliminated the Vietcong. You could not find them. In III Corps' area, where I was operating — which was the broad, central swath of South Vietnam — you could not find Vietcong. All we fought were khaki-clad, red-star wearing NVA [North Vietnamese Army] regiments that would infiltrate across the Parrot's Beak from Cambodia. When we got into firefights, we got into real firefights. I remember one firefight that I recon'ed the periphery of around Fire Support Base Hunter where, when the sun came up

the next morning, there were probably six hundred dead NVA in the wire. It was a huge firefight. These were battles, not insurgencies.

It was a very different context than what someone would have read about and watched on TV. It was frustrating from the point of view of, what is going on now? Is this now not just a civil war, but a civil war between uniform-wearing, rifle-carrying, airplane-flying, artillery-shooting conventional forces on both sides? Of course, in 1972 — which I watched as an instructor pilot at Fort Wolters, which was my first year back after Vietnam — as I would go to Beach Army Hospital at Fort Wolters in Texas, I would meet some of my former pilots with casts on and I would talk to them. I would say, “What happened?”

“We invaded Cambodia. We went in and attacked what we call Fort Polk West, which was essentially the NVA's training ground headquarters with regiments displayed like on a square in Paris or Brussels.”

My former unit led the invasion into Cambodia, and one of my former pilots said, “When we invaded, we flew in early in the morning, BMNT — Beginning of Morning Nautical Twilight — and my God, they were just there. They were everywhere. We surprised them, but my squadron lost a lot of airplanes and a lot of people, too.”

Frustration. Not knowing exactly what was happening, and then to realize that, when I got home, the American people — these were days when people were throwing their medals on the Capitol steps, and Kent State had happened. The White House was besieged. One of the seminal

moments for a president in my life — I would later see Richard Nixon give his remarks and say that he was resigning the presidency, which people would think was a more formidable moment, or a more tortured moment, for any citizen, no matter what you thought about Nixon. But it was not. For me, the tortured moment was [Lyndon B.] Johnson when he came on and said he would not run again. That was as a result, in my view, of Vietnam. It had brought down an American president, just like the hostages in Iran would bring down another American president, Jimmy Carter. Watergate, of course, would bring down Nixon.

It was frustrating. It was extremely frustrating. Then as My Lai broke and we heard more about the war crimes. Inside the Army we knew of a vaster panoply or array of war crimes. That array is available now in archives. It is a mystery why some people do not go in there and dig it out and write about it a little bit more, but they do not. Not on any regular consistent basis.

Q: Why do you think that is?

Wilkerson: American people do not want to hear about those sorts of things. War crimes have been around since war. My father-in-law told me about Germans that they massacred in the snow in the German counteroffensive in the Ardennes in 1944 and 1945. At the same time, the lead elements of [Hasso von] Manteuffel and [Josef] Sepp Dietrich's panzer armies and [Joachim] Peiper's, advanced strike force were murdering Americans because they simply were moving too fast to take prisoners. Because these sorts of things get through the troops fast — and they get blown out of proportion, normally — Americans were machine-gunning Germans in retaliation. It happens. It happens in every war. It is the reason you have rules. It is the reason you best not

abandon those rules. Particularly, you best not abandon them at the highest policy levels because you make it extremely difficult for the officers on the ground to control those men within their units. Now women, I suppose. I hope not. Usually your best killers in your platoon are those men that you need to watch the closest, and you need to have the hammer ready. Whether it is Geneva or the Army Field Manuals or whatever, you need to have a hammer ready, because if they step across the line and you let them step across the line, that is a very slippery slope.

Q: You have just brought up a number of incredibly fraught and complicated issues at all levels – everything from the horrors of war to the political fallout from war to the contradictions of fighting and becoming frustrated with it. There are many things that I want to pick up on that you just said, but let me start with one. Given what you saw in Vietnam and in the aftermath, you chose to remain in the Army. Why did you make that decision?

Wilkerson: Principally because I did not see it happen with my troops, and when it did happen with my troops, I stopped it. This is the saying we used to have, those of us who felt strongly about these sorts of things, and it was not just war crimes. It was corruption and bad leadership, too, that we felt strongly about — “If all the good people get out, all that will be left is the bad”

More often than you might think, that was the rationale we suggested to one another for staying in. I was court-martialed at one time. I was Article 15-6 investigated and then I was shifted to what you would call in the civilian world under the UCMJ [Uniform Court of Military Justice], a preliminary hearing or a grand jury. It did not go to general court martial because the grand jury did not recommend it go to general court martial, primarily because the enlisted men who were

accusing me of having struck them on the field in Korea broke down and told the truth. These two enlisted men said that they were pressured by this sergeant who was bringing the charges against me to say what they had said.

Q: When was this?

Wilkerson: This was when I was in the 25th Division in Hawaii in 1983, 1984, on exercise Team Spirit in Korea. We had a really bad accident. I had just left the forward area refueling point and I chewed this sergeant out something fierce because I saw something coming if he did not stop his negligence. I found him asleep in his tent at ten o'clock in the morning when helicopters were refueling at this fast area refuel point — a very dangerous time for a helicopter. You have fuel everywhere and bladders. It is all in the field. You let a lot of the safety things go in order to get hot fueling and fast turnaround time to get your helicopters back up in the air. I caught him asleep and that was about the second or third time I had caught him asleep, so I gave him the ass-chewing of his life, and — something I do not normally do, but I wanted it to have a full impact — I did it in front of several of his enlisted troops. I told him that if I caught him again in that way, I was going to court martial him. The next thing I know, about a day and a half later my squadron commander is calling me in and essentially telling me to go to my tent because I have been accused of having struck an NCO [noncommissioned officer]. Therefore, I need to stay away from everybody and there will be a 15-6 investigation and so forth.

The long and short of it was when we got back to Hawaii, I had a civilian lawyer and a military lawyer. The military lawyer said, “The two enlisted men who are the strongest against you are

going to have to testify under oath in the hearing. I have talked to both of them and I do not think they are going to hold up.” Sure enough, they did not hold up. They told the truth and the case was dismissed. I have had some highs and lows in the military, but again, we all said to ourselves, if all the good people leave, then there will be nothing left but the bad.

Q: Tell me about some of the highs.

Wilkerson: Flying was wonderful. I love flying. I did not think I would ever leave flying. In fact, when I finished up at my primary helicopter training facility as an instructor immediately after Vietnam — that was my first year back after Vietnam — I was going to be selected to be the Standardization Instructor Pilot for the entire outfit there doing primary training. There was just nothing else for me. That was it. I had arrived. I was the captain and I was going to be the best pilot in the training complex that did this very difficult and very challenging training of people who had never flown before. One of the most exciting moments in your life is when you get out of the helicopter with a young man or a young woman — I trained Iranians, I trained Iraqis, I trained Turks — after anywhere between ten and twenty hours and you say, “It's yours. Fly it around the pattern one time all by yourself.” That look in their eye — sometimes when you see the look in your eye, you say, “No, I have changed my mind. I am getting back in. One more time with me.” It is exciting.

When I got picked to go to the Armor career course, I really had a decision to make — either keep moving and going in the chain of command or stay and be a pilot. It was a hard decision, but my wife and I talked about it. She said, “No, you want more senior-level responsibility,” so I

went on to the career course. A real high point was flying. It really was a remarkable thing to be able to fly a helicopter as well as some of us achieved. It is not like flying an airplane. It is very difficult. As Harry Reasoner once very eloquently said, “An airplane almost flies itself except when you take off and land, but a helicopter, you are constantly fighting it just to keep it together.”

Q: I have been in helicopters as a passenger. You can feel it.

Wilkerson: It is very different. You are using everything. You are using your feet, you are using your hands, you are using the collective, you are using the cyclic, you are using the throttle on the collective. It is everything all the time.

Q: That definitely sounds like a wonderful high. You mentioned in passing that you discussed with your wife about whether you should stay in the Army or move to higher command posts outside the Army in government, presumably. Did you often consult with your wife about these things?

Wilkerson: Generally. I think I moved sixteen times in thirty-one years in the Army. She had put up with a lot, and she did put up with a lot. So did my children. Children in the military, if they are of the type and if they have attentive parents, who can get around the first move and maybe the second move become far more resilient and far more able to do things differently and even uniquely because they are so used to making new friends, adjusting to a new school, adjusting to a new environment and so forth. My kids today are just — knock on wood — as healthy and

robust in that respect as they could be. Nothing bothers them because they have been through it all. They have stood there at five or six crying about leaving their friends and everything. My daughter went to high school in Hawaii and knows everything about discrimination. Her school was full of Chinese and Japanese. They were the competition. She got put through the ropes.

Q: I imagine you heard about this at the dinner table every night.

Wilkerson: It was three years before my daughter got invited into the home of one of her fellow students. Three years, because she was *haole*. She was white. I remember that day. She was so elated she had been invited into a home of a Japanese American.

Q: Then presumably you picked up and left again?

Wilkerson: Yes. She picked up and went to Georgetown, which blew my mind. You are going where? All the way to the —

Q: Sixteen times in thirty-one years is a lot, and you do not just mean the United States. You also mean abroad as well.

Wilkerson: Overseas, yes.

Q: You mentioned that you also trained Iranian pilots?

Wilkerson: Yes.

Q: I take it this was before the revolution.

Wilkerson: This was before the revolution. This was when the Shah was our man. The remarkable thing about the Iranians and the Iraqis — we used to have hot wash ups after flying with foreign students in particular. They had no —

Q: I'm sorry, what is a hot wash up?

Wilkerson: A hot wash up is an after-action review immediately after the flight. Across a broad swath of pilots and their students, they had, with one or two exceptions, so little touch for technology. It was incredible to watch the cultures because, generally speaking, with Americans, the next thing they touch is adapted pretty soon. But Iranians and Iraqis were like, “My God, this metal actually turns around and holds the helicopter up in the air? How does that work?” As a consequence, it was much more difficult to teach them the skills that involved controlling that technology and making it work for you. Sometimes it was scary as hell. More than once we lost an entire helicopter. We never lost a foreign student, not during my time. They would roll the helicopter up into a cinder. It would just be a black cinder and they would walk out of it.

Q: That is something to be proud of on your part, certainly. Let's shift gears a little bit. I would like to learn more about how you made the transition from Army to government. How did that come to be?

Wilkerson: It was [Colin L.] Powell. It was all Powell. When I worked for him when he was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, I saw put into practice what I had learned in theory as a student at the Naval War College. The Naval War College, in my view, was the finest education I had ever had anywhere in my life. It was about a year of civilian-military tag team seminars. Stansfield Turner, president of the Naval War College, had put this into motion in the late 1970s. The civilians were from Princeton, Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Chicago.

Mine happened to be from Princeton and Northwestern. I had an incredible civilian on the one hand, and the military guy that was in that thing was just extraordinarily unique. He had a doctorate in comparative religions, he had a doctorate in English literature, and he was a Mormon. This guy was an extraordinary teacher. He also commanded the largest military intelligence brigade in the Army, the one in Germany. You had the operational flavor from him, you had the academic and theoretical flavor from the civilian, and yet this particular officer was able to deal with both dimensions. They were a brilliant tag team and they taught me everything from Thucydides onward. The only thing we did not touch, and this is interesting, was the Vietnam War. About halfway through the semester with them in strategy and policy, I went to the civilian, and I asked him. He said, "That is interesting. We tried a case study and it was so vituperative and rancorous that we could not even control the seminar. We decided we would use almost any other case study we wanted, but we were not going to use Vietnam."

Q: What year was this?

Wilkerson: This was 1982.

Q: Wounds are still fresh from it?

Wilkerson: All of the officers in the seminars were veterans, even the State and CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] guys. Occasionally, State or CIA or Treasury or any other government agency that wanted a seat could get a seat. You might have twelve people in the seminar and one would be a civilian. They might be CIA or State or whatever. Even they had had experience in Vietnam. It just was too much that you could not deal with it.

Q: You had wanted to discuss it, I take it?

Wilkerson: We did offline. I discussed it in my papers. We wrote small, eight to ten page essays about every week. Lots of times the subject would be Vietnam. We would be trying to apply the principles we were learning, essentially from *Vom Kriege*, [Carl von] Clausewitz's central text on war. We looked at [Antoine-Henri] Jomini and we looked at [Alfred Thayer] Mahan and we looked at other strategic and theoretical thinkers about warfare, but Clausewitz was undoubtedly the centerpiece — the theory that war is absurd unless it is an extension of policy. If you do not have a political purpose for killing people, then why are you killing people?

As I said, that was the best education I ever got in my life. Here I am later with Admiral [William J.] Crowe at USCINCPAC [Commander in Chief, United States Pacific Command] being an executive assistant to his right-hand man and strategy and policy admiral — Admiral

Stewart Ring — and seeing a little bit of this at what we would call the operational/strategic interface level. Then, all of a sudden, I go back to the Naval War College and actually get to teach this stuff, which was my preference, and I did.

That pretty much ended my Army career when I told my admiral I wanted to work for the Navy again, and the Army divorced itself from me. They did not even want to talk to me anymore. In fact, when I reported into Newport with my son in 1987 to be on the faculty there, the Army colonel — I was lieutenant colonel at the time — who was in charge of the Army portion of the faculty literally cursed me for having taken the spot that he was trying to get a buddy into, and for being someone who was an unknown factor to him. A year later, he would come and apologize and literally bow to me when the admiral had come to me, because I was the only person on the faculty who had joint experience having come from CINCPAC. He asked me to be his personal representative for turning the curriculum at the Naval War College into a more joint curriculum, that is to say, less emphasis just on the Navy and more on combined operations between the services. That was the way we were moving with the Goldwater-Nichols Act — the penultimate amendment to the 1947 National Security Act — called the Department Of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986.

My admiral in the Pacific, Bill Crowe, of course had been selected by [Ronald W.] Reagan to be the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. I had been exposed to him in his fighting the Navy, and the rest of the services too, but principally his own service. All the services were against this. They wanted to see that voted down. They did not want to see that amendment to the act passed. They felt it took away their power. But Bill Crowe saw what it would do for the war fighting

capability of the armed forces and how much better it would be. We had gone through 1983 in Lebanon where we lost the Marines. We had gone through Urgent Fury — the invasion of Grenada — which was just a muck-up par excellence against a very inferior force. The Army knew how badly it had done. Then the raid against Libya in 1986. We had had some problems with communications and such there and the Congress was fed up, so they passed that act in 1986.

Crowe was the forward-looker and I had been exposed to that, so when I went to Newport, I was looking for the opportunity to hit at exactly the right time when this was going to be flushed through the education system. I remember Ike Skelton standing up in front of the committee one day when I was there listening and he said, “The most important part of this act is not what we are doing with the chairman, it is not what we are doing to make the chairman the principal military adviser to the NSC [National Security Council], secretary of defense, and president. The most important thing is the education. It will take ten years” — and it did to the day almost — “but once we get these officers trained and educated the way we want them, the whole complexion of the services will change.” He was right. The best staff in the world now is the Joint Staff in Washington. Before, it was the service staffs.

I got to go through that and in the middle, this phone call from the admiral comes and he says, “The National Security Advisor of the United States wants to speak to you.” This was Ron Kurth, who had been the US attaché in Moscow, a really bright guy whom I had been working for to make the curriculum more joint.

I said, "Admiral, what the hell would the National Security Advisor of the United States want to talk to me for?"

He said, "I do not know, but get down to my office. Do not make him wait."

I get down to the office and, of course, it is a secretary on the phone, but she says, "Would you hold please for Colin Powell?"

I turn to the admiral and I said, "What kind of name is Colin? That is down here, isn't it?"

He says, "You know who he is."

I said, "Yes, but I always thought it was Colin."

Anyway, he comes on the phone and he says, "Are you interested in working for me?"

I said, "In what capacity?"

Anyway, long story short again, I had an interview with him January 25, 1989, in the Pentagon.

It lasted about an hour and a half, and he asked me, "Would you like to work for me?"

I said, "Frankly?"

He said, "Yes, please."

I said, "No, because I am very happy where I am. I am happy doing what I am doing. I like what I am doing. I love what I am doing. I like teaching. No."

He said, "Okay. Thank you for being honest."

About a month later, the admiral asked me mid-February, "Heard anything?"

I said, "No. I will not hear anything. I told him I did not want to work for him."

He said, "What did you do that for?"

I said, "Because I don't."

He said, "Well, thank you. I would rather have you stay here too."

About a month later I got a phone call from the admiral again. He says, "You must have lied to me. He hired you."

I said, "What?"

He called me down and he said, “He wants you to move to Forces Command in Atlanta. You have to be there in fifteen days.” I left my family up in Newport and drove to Forces Command and joined Colin Powell as he got his fourth star and became the commander of United States Army Forces Command — all the Army forces in the United States of America, reserve, guard, active, and in the territories. That started my long, long way of getting to my point, which is that that started my education in the pragmatic, realistic application of all the theory I had learned. I had got a little bit of it at USCINCPAC, but that was the operational/strategic interface point. This is pure strategy and policy.

Q: You fought in theater, you taught it theoretically at school, and now you are in policy development and implementation.

Wilkerson: Now I am in it.

Q: Once again, you brought up a million things that I want to follow-up on and I am not sure where to start, but I would like to talk more about how it was that Powell got your name. There must have been such a huge pool of qualified people, and you shined somehow through that. That is one of the things I would like to know.

Wilkerson: I will tell you through an anecdote. I was walking in one day to talk to the deputy secretary of state of the free world, as he called himself, Richard Armitage. He says, “Chief, what do you want?” I am chief of staff for the State Department, and I said, “I am really pissed and this is why.” I lay it out for him and everything, and he just started chewing on me for being

recalcitrant. I maintained my position and then he broke into this, “Don't you know who got you here? Don't you know why you are with Colin Powell? Don't you understand that it was Admiral Ring and myself who made the recommendations?”

I looked back at Rich and I said, “I absolutely do not understand it that way. I know how I got here. Not only has Powell told me, the general who got me here told me.” Rich was taken aback and sat down and calmed down a little bit. I turned on my heels and walked out of his office.

He was trying to tell me. I know that the admiral I worked for in the Pacific, Stewart Ring, and Rich Armitage were really close. They were drinking buddies. Every time Rich would come to the Pacific — he was then the assistant secretary of defense for International Security Affairs — and with Powell as Military Assistant to [Caspar W.] Weinberger, who was secretary of defense, they ran the Pentagon. My association with him in the Pacific was as a lieutenant colonel who took his hat and his cane, that sort of thing, but I sometimes accompanied my admiral on these trips so that I could pick them up afterwards. Rich used that to advise his then close friend, Colin Powell, that I seemed to be a pretty decent guy. I knew that.

Rich thought that was everything, but what really happened was that the Director of Military Personnel, Lieutenant General Jim Crysel, had been the deputy to Stew Ring as an Army brigadier general in 1985 and 1986. When Jim came to retire, he told me at a ceremony what he had said to Powell when Powell had said, “I am going to get a fourth star. I am going to go to Forces Command, and I need a list of people whom you think are just top drawer. I want them to be my speech writer and strategic brain trust, if you will.” Crysel gave him about twelve files.

Jim did not know how many Powell actually talked to. Powell told me later that he talked to all of them, either on the phone or in a face-to-face interview. I asked Powell, "Why did you select me?" He said, "First, because Crysel gave me your name."

Here is an interesting note too. When Powell had come to Washington early in his career, he and Alma and their small children at the time could not find a place to live. He is an African American. Everywhere they went they got, "Yes, we'll get back to you," but nobody got back to them. He was getting frustrated and angry, and Crysel found out about it. Crysel did not know him from Adam at the time. He just knew he was a fellow military officer. They ran into each other one day, I think somewhere in the Pentagon, and Powell acquainted him with the problem and Crysel said, "I have a home in Woodbridge. Live with me." Jim told me that he gave Powell a place to live for four or five months.

Powell found a place finally, but that stuck with him. That made his relationship with Crysel more intimate than it would have been otherwise, so I think Powell listened to Crysel in a big way. When Crysel gave him those twelve files, he gave one file a special imprimatur because he had known me. The admiral traveled with Admiral Crowe a lot and every time the admiral would leave, Jim would be thrust into the role of being the J5 [Strategic Plans and Policy] at USCINCPAC, which was a very important role. I helped him a lot when he was in that role. Jim was a great guy, but he was not a strategic thinker. Most of the things we did out there were, as I said, at that operational strategic interface.

When I would pick up the hotline in the admiral's office, it just might be Weinberger. It just might be the National Security Advisor. In fact, I realized I had talked to Powell before, I just did not know it. He was Frank Carlucci's deputy then, I think. I knew that probably the major thing that had gotten me in with Powell was Crysel's statement about me, however it was rendered. When Powell had boiled it down to two or three, the fact that Jim had put me in the list in the first place probably had a lot to do with it. I asked Powell one time later. I said — and this again, was in a moment of frustration between both of us — I said, “Why did you pick me anyway?” He looked back at me and he said, “Because you did not want the job.”

Q: It was between 1989 and 1993 you were special assistant to Powell in the Joint Chiefs, right?

Wilkerson: Right.

Q: What kind of things were you working on at the time?

Wilkerson: I wrote 484 speeches, everything from small sets of remarks when he was promoting someone to major addresses, like his address at Harvard. One that actually floored me was when he spoke at Gettysburg, the same place Lincoln had spoken, in a celebration of [Abraham] Lincoln's farewell address or Lincoln's address at Gettysburg. It was a cold day and the snow flurries were coming. Everybody was all bundled up. He gave a set of remarks that would bring tears to your eyes. Working with him writing speeches was a real labor of love, if you will, because we did most of our work on the weekends at his quarters. The speech was 80 percent him. You just started it and gave him some grist for his mill. He refused to read someone else's

words. People tell me today that they did not believe that. I said, “I am telling you the truth. We would work sometimes five weekends, like the Harvard address. We worked about five, six weekends. Six hours each weekend on that.” He would make his own changes because he wanted it to be exactly right.

I have never met a person other than George Wallace — George Wallace could do this better than Powell, but Powell is the second best at it — who could walk into a room where you are going to give a major address, have maybe twenty minutes to schmooze and shake hands, assess the audience such that the entire speech gets changed in your mind, and you give your own speech. Even though you have a text in front of you and you read from it occasionally, you are essentially giving the speech you developed as you talk to people and understood what was really on their mind. George Wallace was unbelievable at that. He could walk in front of a crowd and give a speech on anything at any time that sounded like it was written yesterday by Winston Churchill. It was incredible. A horrible man in some respects, but brilliant speaker.

Q: Colin Powell did the same thing?

Wilkerson: Yes.

Q: That must have been sort of frustrating for you, writing these speeches and having him —

Wilkerson: I understood what he was trying to do. When he became secretary of state, incidentally, this became a tremendous pain for him because he hates to give pro forma speeches.

He hates to read from a piece of paper. Yet, when it is going to be front page of the *Washington Post* above the fold, right side, you cannot afford to make mistakes. You cannot afford to say something that you might say from the heart. By the time he ends his secretariat, he is reading almost verbatim from the script. It really put him in a straightjacket he did not like. It was very interesting working with this guy and watching his mind work while he was chairman and when he was Forces Command commander. He is probably the most brilliant tactician I have ever met. Not much of a strategist. That is obviously one reason he hired me. I am a lousy tactician, but he is a brilliant tactician. Getting through the day, no one can beat him, but not having a long-term vision and not having a strategy and being ruthless about applying that strategy or executing that strategy really hurt him in the [Richard B.] Cheney, [Donald H.] Rumsfeld group. They did have a strategy, they were ruthless, and they did execute it, so if you are a tactician and you are trying to tact between the inter-splices of their strategy, you get swamped.

Q: This is a very interesting point that you have made and we are coming to it slowly but surely. I have a question prior to that. Why is it that Powell was able to ad-lib speeches more when he was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but then as secretary of state is not able to ad-lib? Don't both roles give public talks?

Wilkerson: The chairman is, more often than not, speaking to a military audience or an audience that is composed of those very favorable to the military. There are stock paragraphs, there are stock statements, there are stock phrases that go into that and do not haunt you afterwards. I will say that there were a couple of occasions where he did get haunted afterwards. Everything from Bill Safire telling him there was no such thing as the word "dis-invent." We then bought a copy

of the Oxford English Dictionary and shipped it to Bill — the compact version, two-volume version, along with a magnifying glass — and told him the first example of its use is [Benjamin] Disraeli in 1852, I think it was. So on occasion, he would have a slip-up.

Q: A very appropriate first use, I should say. What is an example of a stock phrase or a stock paragraph that you might give in front of military audiences?

Wilkerson: A lot of his talk was about the base force, which was a stock phrase he used that George H. W. Bush approved for the floor through which we dare not go. In his words, that was to prevent what Harry Truman called in 1946 and 1947, not a demobilization, but a disintegration. He did not want to see the end of the Cold War and the so-called peace dividend decimate the armed forces. He could almost rattle off a page or two about the base force and why the base force was necessary, why the force planning tools to develop it were the right force planning tools and why the dollars to go along with it were the right dollars and so forth. He could give you that. In fact, he could probably give you six pages on that. I saw him give close to that to George H. W. Bush without looking at a single note when he was getting Bush to go to Aspen, which he subsequently did to give his own speech on it. Then, of course, a day, two days later, Saddam Hussein invaded Iraq and it was overwhelmed by realities.

This was something that he had started doing at Forces Command and had received calls from [Robert M.] Gates who was then either Deputy DCI [Director of Central Intelligence] or Deputy National Security Advisor. I cannot remember which. Bob called him and said, “You have to shut up.” What he was saying was, “What does the preacher do when the devil dies?” That is a

stock phrase too. The devil was dying. The Soviet Union was dying, and Powell was going around as a four-star general in charge of the Army forces in the United States essentially saying, "We have to do something." All these letters are pouring in from retired generals, for example. Some active duty generals who were saying, "What the hell are you doing? This is crazy. The Soviet Union is not gone." Gates simply said, "The Soviet Union will be back. It will be back, mark my word." Gates was a Sovietologist. That was his whole life, studying the Soviet Union. He said, "They will be back. The bear will be back, so shut up".

Powell said to me one day, "Look, I know I am beyond my writ, but I was Deputy National Security Advisor. I was National Security Advisor. I sat down with [Eduard] Shevardnadze, I sat down with [Mikhail S.] Gorbachev. I was in St. Catherine's Palace when Gorbachev broke into English, looked me square in the eye and said, 'I know in your other life you are a general. What are you going to do now that your bogeyman is gone?' "

He said, "I feel I have to do this because I know what is coming and I have to set the stage for it." I think in part, that is what got Cheney and [George W.] Bush to select him to be chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff because they knew here was a guy who knows what we are going to have to do. H. W. [Bush] had been there too from time to time. He had been there on Long Island, for example. He looked into Gorbachev's eyes and had not seen his soul, but he had seen that the Soviet Union was truly dead.

Powell just had this knack. He still does it. I watched him give a speech not too long ago — he did not know I was in the audience — and he never referred to a single note and he did not miss a beat. The cadences, the rhythm, the poetry even is exquisite. He did not use a single note.

Q: It must have been very exciting then working in those years.

Wilkerson: Frustrating in a sense, but not in the sense that you were suggesting, although that sometimes got me. I had a stable of speech writers too, eventually. I had a Navy commander and a Navy captain. I had to modify them from time to time because they wanted to write speeches. When Powell would do what he did, they would say, “How do you work for this guy?” I said, “You have to enjoy the bright side of it.”

It was satisfying from the point of view that you were seeing into his mind rather intimately. I was seeing into the other service chiefs' minds and the way he dealt with them. For example, I have never seen anybody lead five different people with five different leadership techniques all in the same room at the same time. I have seen people do it individually and independently, that is to say you call the commandant of the Marine Corps in, you treat him a little bit differently than you treat the chief of staff of the Air Force, because the commandant has a different personality and character than the chief. But to do it all in the same room and have none of them know what is happening? It is incredible the view of leadership that I got that this individual possesses. Al Gray gets one kind of directive, the chief of staff of the Air Force, Tony McPeak, gets another kind of directive and the chief of staff of the Army gets another kind of directive. It is not couched the same way — “You have to give Al A, B, C, D, E, F, G. Do you understand,

Al? You can say, go shoot that guy to the chief of staff of the Air Force. Don't give him A, B, C, D, E. You know he is going to do right. You do not have to supervise him. You have to give every step to Al and you have to supervise him along every step of the way to make sure —

Q: That must have taken incredible finesse to do that out front of everybody without offending.

Wilkerson: Extraordinary. He virtually canceled the tank. The tank is the place where all the chiefs had met with all their horse holders, the lieutenant colonels, the three-star generals they bring in with them, et cetera. When a chief got a question from the chairman, he would invariably turn to the three-star or the lieutenant colonel and say, "Can you answer that?" Powell brought them all into his office around a little round table and said, "Put up or shut up." Very soon they learned to be smart. They learned that they could not bring their staff in.

Q: Then he becomes secretary of state, and you —

Wilkerson: Then he becomes chairman of America's Promise — The Alliance for Youth. That was interesting too. That was an interesting time.

Q: How so?

Wilkerson: First of all, because he called me one day and said, "Get your ass down to the District of Columbia. I am doing something in all fifty states, but I am not doing anything in the District and I need to do something in the District. Go down there."

Q: Did he often speak to you like that?

Wilkerson: Yes. Julius Becton was the retired three-star African American who was superintendent of the schools at the time. Julius had called him and said, "Yu are not doing anything in my district. Come down and do something."

Q: What year was this?

Wilkerson: This was late 1997. I went down there and began an operation that lasted about eleven years in the District, giving scholarships to kids and forming a leadership club, things like that. We had some real interesting times. He was affiliated with some people that were disgusting, and rallying those people. Nonprofits are either genuine or they are false as hell. The federal government does basically nothing about differentiating. It just gives them all 501(c)3 status and they can rake in money and cheat and steal underneath that. We found some doing that, and I even had threats on my life. I had one individual in Washington who said he was going to make sure that I had daisies coming up out of my chest.

Q: Well, that did not come to pass.

Wilkerson: We got rid of him.

Q: What was the context of that?

Wilkerson: He had just gotten a \$100,000 grant out of Fannie Mae, as I recall. About \$2,000 of that had made it to the high school I was working with. The other \$98,000 had been pocketed by him. It goes on all the time. I would not have even known if the principal had not called me and said, "I really want to thank you for getting us this money for our general fund. This is unbelievable. We are going to be able to buy this and buy that." She was talking about little things. I said, "Toni, buy things? \$100,000!"

She said, "What? It's \$2,000." So I did a little investigation.

That was an interesting time in seeing how he distanced himself from the details, and sometimes the details were pretty corrupt. Yet, I think he did some good, particularly with Boys and Girls Clubs of America and other organizations that he did not front but helped raise money for. It was a look for me into a very seedy, corrupt world of nonprofits that was somewhat shocking.

Subsequently, I do not give money to anybody anymore now unless I have thoroughly researched from a reputable source to find out what their figures are in terms of overhead, what their administrative costs are, management costs, personnel costs, and how much they actually apply to their stated purpose.

Q: These were the [William J.] Clinton years at this point, right?

Wilkerson: Yes.

Q: What did you —?

Wilkerson: We spent the first Clinton year with Clinton as chairman. That was an interesting transition too.

Q: How so? How was that an interesting transition?

Wilkerson: Powell would go up for a nine o'clock meeting with the secretary of defense as he had done every day virtually with Cheney when Cheney was in town. He would come back frustrated at nine fifteen or nine twenty. [Leslie] Aspin was not there. He was out with his latest bimbo on the tennis courts. He had forgotten about the meeting. I remember one particular morning, Powell's executive secretary Nancy Hughes said, "He is furious. You do not want to go in there."

"Why is he angry?"

"He went up again and the secretary of defense was not there."

They would go through these interminable meetings and no decision would be made. Cheney was twenty minutes and a decision. At eighteen minutes, if he did not have the information he needed to make the decision, you got chewed out and you went away to get the information he needed to make the decision. It was not quite that formal, but it was almost that formal. That is what Powell liked. He liked an agenda. He liked the agenda to be followed. He liked time not to

be wasted and so forth. Aspin's whole modus operandi wasted time. We had the infamous Barry McCaffrey incident. Barry was our J5 three-star. He went over to the White House and some young staffer said, "What are you doing over here? We do not like military." I do not even know if it happened, but Barry said it did. He played that into notoriety that lasted at least a decade. Barry is a highly decorated soldier and everything. Barry was a card.

That year I watched George H. W. Bush and his NSC principals, deputies, and inter-agency working group apparatus function like a well-oiled machine once Brent got it going. It took him about three months to get it going. Once he got it going, it was really —

Q: Brent Scowcroft?

Wilkerson: Scowcroft. In the post-World War II era with the 1947 apparatus — NSC, Pentagon, CIA, so forth — next to [Dwight] Eisenhower, it probably was the most efficient decision-making team. It did not necessarily produce the best policy, but it was the most efficient decision-making team. Clinton's was the worst I had ever seen the first year. By the time I got up close and personal with it in 1996, 1997, it had gotten a lot better, especially under [Samuel R.] Berger. Tony Lake did not know what he was doing. Berger was a much better National Security Advisor. He organized the process better.

Q: I would like to talk to you about the whole idea of a National Security Advisor and its broader meaning in American foreign policy-making.

Wilkerson: The National Security Advisor is unelected, not subject to the advice and consent of the Senate, and once became co-president with Richard Nixon.

Q: There you go. I would like to go even further back to 1947 because you mentioned that a few times. In the National Security Act of 1947, [Dwight D.] Eisenhower compromises with Congress —

Wilkerson: Truman.

Q: I'm sorry, Truman compromise with Congress. There is a pretty nice document that —

Wilkerson: Neither likes it.

Q: Right, but they compromise. Can you tell us a little bit about that and the process and the significance of 1947 in the decades to come?

Wilkerson: I like to compare that period to that hot summer in Philadelphia that produced the Constitution. You have an entirely different democratic federal republic to deal with in 1945, 1946, and 1947. Some have called it the new Rome. In terms of power it certainly was, maybe even more powerful than Augustinian Rome. The world was prostrate. The world that we dealt with trade-wise and commerce-wise was prostrate. We were the only member of that world that was not. In the last year of that war we made 54,000 airplanes. We made 7,000 ships in a single year. We owned probably 52 percent or 53 percent of the world's gross domestic product. We

were absolutely all-powerful. Japan was a burned cinder. France and even England were prostrate.

A host of really bright guys — Ferdinand Eberstadt, James Forrestal, George Kennan — came together. They tried to design a process, realizing they were under pressure from Congress to do so, partly because Congress did not want another FDR [Franklin D. Roosevelt]. They amended the Constitution to make sure they did not get another FDR, at least in terms of four terms. They tried to craft what they thought would be a decision-making process equipped with tools, and the two primary tools were the intelligence agency they created that would be different from the past. It would not be State Department anymore. People do not realize how much we depended on foreign service officers in the State Department for our strategic intelligence, particularly before World War II. Then, as we developed this monstrous thing in terms of the standing armed forces for war, as the founders would say, we developed a massive tactical and operational intelligence apparatus serving that entity.

We never had the kind of intelligence that a president needs, except from the State Department. Intelligence was coming to Truman increasingly with the bias of the State Department. I think this is pretty much documented in what he said and what he wrote. I think this is when we began to get this affection for the military. FDR was not too good about this either. It is understandable for FDR. He was fighting a fricking war on two fronts. Harry picks it up, too — primarily through his ardor for George Marshall — that they are the real talent. They are the real savior of the nation. They are the real place you go to if you want security advice. The State Department begins to become — what Dick Nixon will deride it as — a bunch of commie, pinko fags. If you

listen to those tapes, you know how virulent or how nasty his rhetoric was towards the State Department.

The act was designed to solve that problem, that is to say, to give the president strategic intelligence. The CIA was the entity to do that, even though Harry thought that if any of the OSS [Office of Strategic Services] leaked over into the CIA, which it invariably was going to do, it would contaminate it. In 1963 in the *Washington Post*, Harry writes an op-ed that says, "I do not recognize the CIA. It is not what I created." Allen Dulles rushes out to Missouri to essentially disabuse Truman of his feelings. Truman stands strong and says, "No, it is running."

It ran, but it did not run in the afternoon paper. At that point, the *Post* had two versions, a morning version and an afternoon version. Although I cannot find documentation that says Truman physically called or wrote, apparently he pulled the afternoon one. It was a blow at the CIA from Harry Truman on December 22, 1963. Just a month before that, a president had been assassinated. I am sure that is what got Harry into the mood for writing it.

Regardless of what people say today, the Warren Commission was a white-wash and the CIA has fingerprints all over Kennedy's assassination. Whether it is retired CIA working with the Cubans, or whether it is Cubans and Russians, or whether it is Russians, Cubans and CIA, their fingerprints are all over Kennedy's assassination. I do not know if we will ever know the truth about that all together.

They created that for that purpose, and the consolidation of the armed forces underneath a single civilian secretary was not their original thought. Their original thought was a national military establishment with a weak civilian in charge of it. Forrestal changes all of that, and Harry's deft stroke was to put the man who had been so opposed to consolidation in charge of that consolidation. It drove him to commit suicide.

Marshall will probably sum it up best. Marshall says to Truman, "I fear what we have done, Mr. President, is militarize the decision-making process." I think it was the day before he signed, July 25. Some authors have said July 26, 1947, the day he actually signed it. If you look at that original National Security Council — the third entity of Pentagon, CIA, National Security Council — and you look at the original members like the joint munitions board, for example, you see a lot of detritus from the war. You can say that Marshall was right, *prima facie*. Look at all those military people. I think he was right in a far more prescient sense, even about the statutory NSC today. It is a militarized decision-making process. Our foreign policy today is militarized. Even the Congress realizes that. They do not know what the hell to do about it. Even Bob Gates realizes it, although I do not think he knows what to do about it either. Neither does Secretary [Hillary R.] Clinton, but it is militarized.

There is a brilliant piece in this issue of *Harper's Magazine* [Jonathan Stevenson. "Owned by the Army." May 2011] about a Naval War College professor that says the president is the captive of his generals. It could not be truer. President [Barack H.] Obama had absolutely no discretion about the surge in December 2009. Not only had he walked himself into a trap in his campaign rhetoric, but he had also been ensnared by David Petraeus and others.

It is a mixed bag even at the beginning, and there are people like Marshall who understand it is a mixed bag. I do not think anybody liked it. I do not think Truman liked it. I believe Truman went to seven NSC meetings until he decided to oppose the North Korean invasion of South Korea. Then he went to something like seventy-three out of seventy-eight. It became a war council then, testifying to what its real purpose was. Its real purpose was to wage war. A lot of the original writing on the NSC came from people like Ferdinand Eberstadt and George Kennan and James Forrestal and others. It came from watching the British and how they did things, and watching us and how we did things, and how we had to build during the course of the war towards what the British were doing in terms of a Combined Chiefs and a person over the Combined Chiefs and so forth. Then we just formalized it after the war.

The real kicker for this whole time, and why I compare it to the constitutional period, is that they had to deal with this new power and designing a mechanism to manage this new power through national security decision-making, and yet not forget about the traditional political and cultural values that had gotten us to the pinnacle of power in the first place. They tried to acknowledge the Founders' disdain for a standing military. They tried to acknowledge the Founders' — James Madison in particular — very clear statements about how that is the fastest way to tyranny, yet at the same time realizing they had an existential threat with a poisonous ideology — Soviet Union communism. NSC-68 really points this out in almost biblical terminology. After all, there were twenty million troops poised to come on to the English Channel if they wanted to. I think that is one reason Truman decided to drop the second atomic bomb, because he wanted [Joseph V.] Stalin to know not only do we have them, but they work, and they work more than once.

While Patton's statements were politically untenable and he had to be recalled, they were arguably pretty accurate in terms of if the Soviets had wanted to come on, they probably could have come on. Logistically, they would have had a problem. I have studied that now, and I think if we had looked at it a little harder, we would have realized that they might not have been as war-weary as we were in terms of a dictatorship. They could have said, "keep going," but their logistics capability had just about expired and they would have had to generate an entirely new set of logistic stocks. It would have probably taken a year before they could have gotten their act together and pushed on. Those were difficult times. It is hard sometimes to realize why he dropped this second bomb. People will say because the Japanese had not come forward. The Japanese were already negotiating for surrender. We just were not listening to them.

It was a difficult time, and people were trying to deal in a compromised way because they knew they were going to have to compromise. There were so many interests. Truman and Marshall were for universal military training. That was their shtick. That was the end-all and be-all. I believe that was the greatest thing that they could do, in both of their views, to maintain the old political and cultural values — sort of a militia approach to it rather than a standing military approach to it. Everybody should participate. Every able-bodied male should participate, and they should participate through training, like what went on at Plattsburgh and other places before the war. It failed because it is one of the few times in post-World War II history where conservative and liberal interests, for very different reasons, dovetail and they come together to stop UMT [Universal Military Training] from happening. It was a difficult time, a challenging time. They did the best they could to produce a new set of instrumentalities that would deal with

this awesome power, manage it properly against this existential threat that would explode an atomic bomb in 1949, and at the same time try to protect the traditional political and cultural values, realizing that as they moved along, it was going to get more and more difficult.

Take the military-industrial complex, for example. Prior to World War II, we did not have private defense contractors. [George] Washington had put the kibosh to that in the very beginning when he ordered ships to be built in government shipyards. Private contractors would come in from time to time to do things, particularly in war time. Of course, the Civil War started that in a really big way, but there never was a complex that stood up and stayed. You began to get these monstrosities like Lockheed Martin and Grumman and Boeing's military arm and so forth that stood up in World War II. You have about six of them today that do well over a billion dollars' worth of business and are, as William D. Hartung at the New American Foundation has called them, the "prophets of war." So they are trying to deal with all this and they are trying to do it, as I said, in a way that does not sacrifice the country's basic nature.

Q: I would imagine that that comes to have implications for what follows in decades ahead and eventually in the post-9/11 era, which is the next thing I want to talk to you about.

[END OF SESSION]

3PM

Session Two

Interviewee: Lawrence B. Wilkerson

Location: Washington, D.C.

Interviewer: George Gavrilis

Date: April 22, 2011

Q: This is George Gavrilis. I am here with Colonel Lawrence B. Wilkerson in Washington D.C. on April 22, 2011, for our second interview session for the Columbia Oral History Research Office's project on Guantánamo.

Colonel Wilkerson, thank you once again. It has been a pleasure talking to you so far. What we talked about last time was largely biographical. We talked about the many hats you wore in the military, in government, in academia, and your thoughts on some very deep and fraught foreign policy issues that inevitably intersect with things that were to come, particularly the War on Terror, U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, and the detainee issue that is very much part of the oral history project. This is what I would like to focus this session on, namely, the post-9/11 years. I believe between 2002 and 2005 you served as chief of staff to Colin Powell.

Wilkerson: That is correct. Before that I was a policy planning staff member under Ambassador Richard Haass.

Q: How was it that you came to serve as chief of staff?

Wilkerson: When I went to the transition offices of State in December of 2000 at Powell's invitation, he called me in one afternoon late December, just before Christmas, and he asked me what I would like to do if I were going to stay with him at State. I said, "Anything but write speeches. I am tired of writing speeches."

He said, "What do you want to do?"

I said, "I would like to work on the policy planning staff because that is the only strategic think tank in the government."

He said, "We are going to probably have Ambassador Haass there."

I said, "Okay, that is fine. I would like to work for Richard." I started out working for Richard on East Asia and the Pacific. Richard moved me up, as I recall, in July of 2002 to be an associate director, so I moved myself up to being one of his deputies, I think because he realized that I had contacts with Powell that he did not have and so he could better exploit them if I were one of his deputies.

In August, Powell called me in and said, "I would like you to be my chief of staff now." Bill Smullen had been it to that point and my first reaction was, "Is Bill leaving?" He said, "Yes, he is leaving. I need someone with more foreign policy experience and I need someone who thinks more strategically."

He surprised me by saying, “If you come here and you are my chief of staff, if I go, you go within hours. If you stay with Richard and I leave, you could probably stay. Do you want to think about it?”

I said, “Yes, I do,” so I went back and had a conversation with Richard and talked to my wife again. The next day I told him, “Yes, I will be your chief of staff,” so I came in to be his chief of staff.

The chief of staff at the State Department is defined by the secretary of state if he or she actually fills the position. Some do not. I am told that Secretary Clinton, for example, uses her chief of staff principally for liaison with the Congress. I am told that Madeleine Albright used the chief of staff principally to take care of her. Powell had given me some marching orders that would tell me I was not only going to be looking after the building, as it were — the foreign service, the civil service and others — but I was also going to be covering his flanks and his rear with the press and with others. It was a unique job, whereby he used me as a sounding board. At the same time, I tried to protect him as best I could. He also allowed me to get in rather intimately with areas that I was very interested in, principally North Korea, Japan, China and so forth, but others too.

Q: What was the first year like?

Wilkerson: Hectic, to say the least. From my policy planning perch I had seen how divided the government was. Richard turned to me almost immediately in February, March 2001 and said,

“George Kennan had Joint Staff talks with the policy planning staff, go do it.” I was the only one on the staff that had military experience. I said, “Aye-aye, sir,” and I went off to the Joint Staff meeting.

I met General [George] Casey who was then the J5 for the Joint Staff meeting, and later commander in Iraq. I said, “We need to have an agenda,” so we began meetings between the uniformed military staff of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs and the State Department Policy Planning Staff. You could probably develop our agenda yourself — it was China, North Korea, Iraq, and so forth. We would talk about these things. These went on for about a month fairly successfully, I thought, until one day the colonel in charge of the contingent coming from the Pentagon said to me, “Secretary Rumsfeld has ordered cancellation of these talks.”

“Why?” I said.

“Well, it is a long story. We do not want to cancel them, so we will meet somewhere else. Let's meet in Crystal City.”

“Okay, I am willing to be as clandestine as you want to be.”

“I do not have to be from my boss's perspective,” he said, “but understand I do.”

So our next meeting was in Crystal City, off-campus. We met on the national military strategy as a matter of fact. The Pentagon was just wrapping it up and I remember asking the colonel, “How

can you do a national military strategy without a national security strategy?" I knew my own answer, having been in that boat before myself with the civilians being delinquent. He said, "We are anticipating and we have our schedule and we are going to stick to our schedule." In the course of doing that three, four-hour meeting, he took me out in the corridor on one of the breaks and he said, "I am afraid this is probably the last meeting."

I said, "What has happened now?"

He said, "Well, nothing new. It's that I have just come out on the brigade command list, and if I am going to be a brigade commander I have to really dot my i's and cross my t's right. I probably cannot defy the Secretary. I just cannot." So that ended.

At the same time, Secretary Rumsfeld was recalling all of his military officers from the State Department. There are quite a few there, in political and military affairs for example. There are quite a few military officers because PM [Bureau of Political-Military Affairs] does things like basing agreements and overflight rights. They need military expertise not just on the loan, but they need them there all the time, so he recalled them from the Congress, he recalled them from State, he recalled them from everywhere that they were working — in his words because they were not being functional for the Pentagon. Later he would reverse himself as case after case came up where he was killing himself, cutting his own throat and began to send these people back, particularly to the Hill.

It was an indication to me of how different the relationship was going to be between Defense and State. I knew how torturous it could be. Indeed, Powell had lectured me about that during the Weinberger-Shultz years. I studied the Weinberger-Shultz years myself to include reading their books and so forth, so I knew that those were difficult years, but I had no idea that we were going to, by an order of magnitude, surpass the Weinberger-Shultz period. In fact, on January 13 when Powell had his outcall with the president after four years as secretary, he told the president among other things that there was a very, very bad relationship between State and Defense. The president came back at him and said, "Come on. You saw [George P.] Shultz and Weinberger during the Reagan years. You cannot mean it is worse than that."

Powell fixed the president with a look, as he later described to me and said, "It is much, much worse Mr. President. Much worse." Their conversation went on from there.

Q: The bad relationship, that was not a function of 9/11. Was that something that was —

Wilkerson: No, this was. Here is another note. As we approached August of 2001, we had a little poll amongst some of us. I should say a pool and a poll. We were all unanimous that the first cabinet officer to be fired would be Rumsfeld. This had to do with his bitter relations with the Hill and even his own armed services committees. They hated him. He would not respond to their requests. He would not acknowledge their existence. His relations in the rest of the government were bitter and rancorous, and his relations with the uniformed military were beyond bitter and rancorous. He had come in with the idea that civil control had to be reasserted and there are two ways to do that. You do it like Gates did it, and you do it subtly. You fire a few

people, you let them know who is in charge. Or you do it unsubtly. You are disdainful of the military. You put sycophants in key places as Rumsfeld did. Dick Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, sycophant par excellence.

I went to a ceremony for an old friend in the Pentagon that was hosted by the chairman, Dick Myers. She was retiring after twenty-eight years, and we are in the chairmen's mess having the ceremony and the chairman lingers after the remarks, after the kisses and the roses and everything and “bye-bye Carolyn.” He lingers. He lingered and lingered and lingered. I am getting ready to leave because I cannot linger any longer, and I turned to Carolyn, and I said, “Carolyn, why is the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff hanging around so long? Is this really a kudo to you?” She said, “No, he does not have anything else to do. He has been completely eviscerated,” she said. Rumsfeld had taken virtually everything away from him.

The Goldwater-Nichols Act — the penultimate amendment to the 1947 National Security Act — says very carefully that the chairman is not in the chain of command. Those communications from the commanders in the field to the secretary of defense normally pass through him, and when they go down they pass through him. They do not have to. He is not in the chain of command. Powell used to say, “I do not command a single soldier.” This was a tip of the hat of the old political and cultural values, and fear of the man on horseback, frankly. Rumsfeld cut him out. Rumsfeld told him what he wanted him to hear and did not tell him what he did not want him to hear, which was most everything.

We were betting Rumsfeld would be gone. Everything was so bad and the Pentagon was being run so badly, trains were not even running on time. Paul Wolfowitz, the deputy, conceptual guy – not an administrator, not a manager. We were really shocked to say the least when Rumsfeld did not go and when 9/11 essentially turned him into a secretary of war and he became a preeminent, if not the preeminent, cabinet officer.

Q: Could you give me a flavor or tell me about the atmospherics of the days before 9/11 and the days after 9/11 as you experienced them?

Wilkerson: Yes. Along with the UN [United Nations] presentation by February 2003, the thing that almost caused me to submit my resignation letter was our testimony before the 9/11 Commission. I worked with John Bellinger, Dr. [Condoleezza] Rice's lawyer, on both Powell's and Dr. Rice's testimonies once she was directed by the president to testify before that 9/11 Commission. The reason was because we were trying to make it look like we were very attentive to Al-Qaeda before 9/11, and we definitely were not. The priorities in the Bush administration were very clear. On the international scene, they were unilateralism from Kyoto to ballistic missile defense. On the domestic scene they were reducing taxes and No Child Left Behind education policy. Al-Qaeda did not even come into any of that.

The only person that I recall in the transition process that asked the czar of counterterrorism, Dick Clarke, to actually brief a second time was Powell. This was because we very much feared another attack on an embassy. After all, we had been hit in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi and we had lost Americans and others working for us, so we were very sure we were going to get hit in

another embassy. We asked for billions of dollars from the Congress to make the embassies safer, to relocate some of them and so forth. With Powell's bona fides, he was the first secretary able to get this kind of money. For example, we beat Secretary Albright by about eight to one in terms of embassies built or refurbished every year. It was because he was able to get the money out of the Congress to do it.

We were not fearing an attack on the United States. It was not Powell's portfolio, but he was the only one who really was seized of any threat from Al-Qaeda, and it was not a domestic threat. There were others in the administration who downgraded Dick Clarke from cabinet status to below that. They made statements like Deputy Secretary of Defense Wolfowitz did, that Al-Qaeda was not something he was interested in. He was interested in Iraq. There was no emphasis on Al-Qaeda despite what we said. But for the 9/11 Commission we gathered every little morsel that we could to make it look like there was emphasis on Al-Qaeda before 9/11.

9/11 was a shock not just because it was Pearl Harbor-like, —more casualties as a matter of fact — but because there was the psychological backdrop of, “Oh my God, it happened on my watch. It was deadly. I was not really focused on it.” That psychological angst permeated the White House. It permeated the vice president's office in particular and colored a lot of what happened afterwards, which was, in essence, “it cannot happen again.”

It cannot happen again for all the reasons you would suspect, but also for the underlying psychological reason, “It cannot happen again because it is my watch still.” As Ron Suskind said in his book, “It became sort of Cheney's mantra with this one percent solution where if there is a

one percent chance that Americans are going to die again, then I am willing to do anything. I am willing to go to the dark side. I am willing to take the gloves off. I am willing to do anything we have to do in order to prevent that.” The lesser evil, if you will. I normally do not do psychoanalysis, but I saw so much of this. It was this idea that “the American people will throw me out. I will be impeached if it happens again,” so you have to stop it. You have to stop it because it is the right thing to do, but you also have to stop it because it is your watch. This began to color and texture things that happened.

Rumsfeld, on the other hand, goes outside and rolls his sleeves up and pitches in. He becomes, as I said, a secretary of war very vividly. You also have this unholy alliance at that point between some characters in and out of the administration amongst whom you would never expect such an alliance. This is not unlike what I was talking about with regard to the opposition to UMT during Truman and Marshall's attempt to get it, where you have some conservatives and some liberals and some independents and moderates who all of a sudden find common ground. They find common ground on everything from Israel and the security thereof to the unilateralism that they like the most — if they are a hyper-nationalist like Cheney — to exploiting whatever is necessary to get whatever they want. 9/11 presented them with a cornucopia.

Rumsfeld, for example, wants back in the Philippines. He has been kicked out of the Philippines. America has been kicked out of the Philippines. What does he do? He immediately associates Abu Sayyaf — a bunch of thugs who capture people for ransom — with Al-Qaeda. They are not Al-Qaeda. Suddenly, we are back in Balikatan exercises in the Philippines with special operating forces looking for the thugs in the Philippines. It is a minor example, perhaps, but Rumsfeld

exploits 9/11 to get boots back on the ground in the Philippines. He also comes up with this construct that asserts that we are at war across the globe. In many respects, that was antithetical to Powell's construct, which the president had bought on September 12, post 9/11. Anywhere there might be a lurking Al-Qaeda lookalike or even Al-Qaeda. Jemaah Islamiyah in Southeast Asia was thrust out, probably the closest to being an Al-Qaeda-like organization. They did Bali, for example. Lashkar-e-Taiba was talked about in Kashmir. Al-Qaeda, of course. Even Saddam Hussein with respect to his funding Palestinian terrorists and so forth. This is a really broad tapestry that Rumsfeld is painting.

What Powell had painted to the president was a matrix that essentially said, "Here are the countries, here are the tasks, and we know you want to take care of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Here is the left side and here is the top. The top says everything from overflight rights to troops on the ground in Afghanistan. Here are the countries that might provide these overflight rights or troops on the ground and everything in between. Here is a little footnote for each that says Pakistan will be mine, secretary of state, and perhaps yours, Mr. President. Uzbekistan will be yours, Rumsfeld, with our political military affairs to get airfield use and overflight rights. You go down this matrix and that is what it is." It is an international diplomatic approach for using a moment of international solidarity that Powell saw from Tehran to Havana. Everyone was with us. The French newspaper *Le Monde* ran a headline that said, "We are all Americans now." This was a marvelous moment to break the unilateral mold and to get out there and to cooperate and to do what we needed to do at the same time, and to bring enough help into Afghanistan so that we did not have a problem with the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan.

That was how Powell saw it and that was how the president blessed it. Rumsfeld at that time saw it, as I said, as a much wider conflict. Not a wider diplomatic effort, but a wider conflict. Get into every country to train their indigenous forces against terrorists. Give them counterterrorism training. Gain all kinds of new money in order to do that. Maybe even gain authority over the State Department's previous authority to expend that money the way you want to expend it, rather than the way those funky, commie, pinko dogs at State tell you to expend it. He will make a major run on our appropriations to that effect. The appropriations that come to State for strategic determination and then go to Defense to spend for things like military training. Rumsfeld was seeing this in a very different light than Powell was seeing it, and I think — in honesty and truth to the president — in a different light than the president saw it. Dick Cheney saw it in the same light Rumsfeld did, and in an even wider perspective than perhaps Rumsfeld did in terms of doing pretty much whatever Dick wanted to do. Now I have to backup for a moment.

Q: Can you clarify something for me?

Wilkerson: Yes.

Q: Then feel free to back up as you like. You also mentioned the one percent threshold, which is a very, very low tolerance.

Wilkerson: If one American is going to die, I am willing to imprison eight hundred innocent people.

Q: That's right. That is different from strategically using 9/11 to broaden American interests.

Which do you think was most in play?

Wilkerson: That is an excellent question. Even though my students deal with this too, on both campuses, I am not sure that my students who do these case studies or I could give you an answer to that question. We would probably be different on Monday than we were on Tuesday. At times it appears that the strategic purpose is dominant. At other times it appears that — and I think underneath this one is that fear of having it happen again on your watch and being unseated because of that, and that fear of Al-Qaeda, in particular. Al-Qaeda with a very sophisticated weapon, either nuclear or dirty bomb or whatever.

I am told by reputable interlocutors that at one point, Cheney actually said something like, “If you think 9/11 was bad, wait until a real sophisticated, highly technological attack occurs — meaning a nuclear attack and we lose our republic. Martial law will be enacted and we will not come back from it for twenty-five, thirty years. It will be so nice we will not come back from it.”

I had trouble hearing that at first because I was thinking, that is exactly what Cheney probably would have preferred — tyranny. I have to give him his due, though. He is probably right. If we had a nuclear weapon go off in New York or Washington, for example, I am pretty sure we would do what we did after the Civil War with Reconstruction, at least initially. We would have regional martial law, if not national martial law. I know my army was studying it at the time. It is still studying it. I have to give him his due on that. Perhaps there was some real fear there that if

you did not stop this attack, you were going to be not just in trouble in terms of the American people throwing you out of office, but you were also going to be in trouble in terms of sustaining the republic. Well, not the republic necessarily — a republic can be tyranny too — but the democracy that goes along with our republic.

Q: There was open talk of sustaining democratic values in the administration?

Wilkerson: At least from the people who have back-briefed me or told me what was discussed in meetings that probably there are no minutes or no summaries of conclusions. They are not formal NSC meetings. Cheney preferred to take the last bite of the apple, as Richard Haass eloquently said, alone, usually, in the Oval Office. Andy Card, the chief of staff, would be there from time to time. Condi Rice would be there from time to time. Others from time to time. The ground swell of opinion that I got was that Cheney moved between these different realms of fear for the integrity of the White House, the integrity of the Executive Branch, the integrity of the entire constitutional system, which is why we did so much for continuation of government, for example. I have never been involved in such an intense — I cannot talk about that much further. It was a more genuine effort than during the Cold War when arguably there was a much greater threat to continuity of government. Much bigger threat.

Q: In the event of a catastrophic attack?

Wilkerson: Yes. We had found out, for example, things like you cannot evacuate Washington. We tried to countermand 300 miles. We tried to take every aircraft and just say that is ours. We still could not evacuate Washington.

Q: To fly people out of the cities?

Wilkerson: Yes, because that was the only way to get the leadership out — the Congress and others — on a timely basis. Then you are letting other people smolder. If it is a nuclear weapon or whatever, you really have a problem.

Q: Were the exercises largely focused around an attack on a single city, or were they more dispersed than that?

Wilkerson: They were focused on an attack on Washington. It was the continuity of government that we were looking at. That had been there all along. Reagan put a lot of emphasis on it during the Cold War. We spent a lot of money building alternative sites, underground shelters and so forth. I once was whisked away as the secretary of state by the Secret Service. Powell did not want to do it, so he turned to me. I did it in his place. I was decontaminated. I was put in an alternative facility and everything. A Supreme Court justice swore me in as president of the United States.

Q: I realize that you cannot talk too much about those details, so instead I would like you to say something about the effect on you as a human being of going through that kind of an exercise.

Wilkerson: First of all, it is run by the military and the Secret Service. It is very disciplined. It is very formalized. It is very necessary, I think, in terms of what might happen in a crisis, an emergency. The Constitution and the follow-on agreements to the Constitution that make the chain of command go down a long way is good. That way we are sure that if we do have a catastrophic attack or a natural disaster — a tsunami, for example, or something like that — we assure continuity of government. At the same time, it is very sobering because you get some insights into just how desperate those times are going to be, and how little your disciplined exercise is probably preparing you for that desperation. It looks like it is, but it is going to be orders of magnitude more intense and difficult when it actually occurs. Can you maintain leadership? Can you maintain democratic leadership in a catastrophic situation like that? It is a sobering exercise. It is a comment on principals, I think, that they do not want to participate. That is what the military wants. The military wants the principals to participate because after all, they are the ones who are going to have to do it. It is Colin Powell who is going to be president of United States, not me. They generally do not like to do it. They beg off and say, “It takes too much of my time. I am too busy,” and so forth. They do not want to even contemplate that it might happen.

Q: Is that because of human qualities or because of the professionalization of the military and wanting the boundary between —?

Wilkerson: It is human qualities. No one wants to think about it. No one wants to consider that that might happen.

Q: Incidentally, where were you on 9/11? What are your reminiscences and memories?

Wilkerson: I had just come back from an eight o'clock breakfast talk to a group of people on "knowledge management," a new phrase at that time. I was getting out of a taxi at the C Street entrance to the State Department and the radio was on in the taxi and I said, "Can you turn that up?" I was just about to close the door and pay him. I said, "Can you turn that up? I think he just said a plane hit a tower somewhere." He turned it up and we listened to the broadcast as the second plane hit the tower. Then, as I recall, I was headed into the building, and I looked back and there was black smoke looming over the river. I did not know what it was. When I got inside someone said the Pentagon has been hit. I did not even get to the elevator up to the seventh floor to the secretary's office and someone from diplomatic security said, "We are evacuating the building. Everyone go to the areas designated for your office." I reversed and went back out of the building to the designated area, which was across C Street. Then everyone began to come out of the building. People were talking about a bomb had gone off on D Street. There had been a car bomb explode over on Virginia Avenue. It was just total chaos.

Most of the people were dismissed to go to their quarters, their home, wherever it was because there was fear that there were going to be subsequent attacks and they were trying to get people out of the areas that were probably going to be hit as much as possible. I remember Richard Haass assembled a team and went back into the building and began building that matrix I was telling you about for Powell.

Q: On September 11?

Wilkerson: To hell with the bombers.

Q: What were the days after like at work? Were they largely Afghanistan-focused or were you —

Wilkerson: At least once a day, I would look over my shoulder out at that 360 take off from [Ronald Reagan Washington] National [Airport], which was about eleven seconds away from my window. They did not open it for a long time for that very reason — because you could take a plane off and hit a building just like that from National. It was a sobering time for all of us. We worked around the clock to build the kind of coalition we thought we were going to need in Afghanistan. We were somewhat alarmed by the president's rather disdainful attitude towards NATO and their having activated Article 5 — an attack on one is an attack on all. I subsequently learned this attitude was probably on the advice of the vice president. We were a little bit concerned about how we were seeing things develop with regard to our traditional allies, everything from Rumsfeld declaring that there was an old Europe and a new Europe, to Rumsfeld doing almost everything he could to emphasize this unilateral aspect of American power as the world's hegemon. The developing mantra seemed to be that it is better to be feared than to be loved or respected, even.

The National Security Strategy came out in 2002 with Section Five, which essentially said preemption was now a policy of the United States. As John McCain said, it had always been there under Article 51, the right to self-defense. The idea that you would articulate it with such a

precision in terms of it could really be preemption. Richard Perle put it this way. If you saw someone putting a rocket up and you thought they were going to shoot it at you, you would knock it down. If you saw someone pointing a gun at you, you would shoot them first if you could. That is all Richard Perle wisdom. What we are talking about is intelligence telling us that there is a threat somewhere and going after that threat before there is any imminence to it at all. That is really how some people were interpreting that, not least of which was the White House. This was quite a move away from publicly articulating it. It was quite a move away from what it had been in the past. There was some concern developing, and then as we moved through this build-up to war with Iraq, that concern deepened and became more profound to the extent that there were people who were actually thinking, “Why am I associated with this government?”

Q: You would subsequently become very critical of the administration and the handling of a number of things — intelligence, Iraq, the detainee issue. I am trying to figure out where you and Powell sat. When did you, speaking only for yourself, become uneasy and realize that things were going in a direction that you did not like, or that was not, in your estimation, appropriate for the country?

Wilkerson: When you go down to see the deputy secretary of state on a Tuesday morning or Wednesday morning, early in the morning — he was the only one who got in about the same time I did, five o’clock, five thirty AM— and he is referring to the vice president’s office as that “group of Nazis” or “the Gestapo,” you have some insight that you would not otherwise have earlier. You first think he is joking and then you realize he is not joking. He is deadly serious.

Q: What was the context?

Wilkerson: The context would simply be something that had happened vis-à-vis North Korea or China or whatever. It could be almost any subject, and that is the explanation he would give you for why this untoward event or this bad policy seemed to be developing or had happened. It got to the extent that I started turning my head, if you will, more to trying to figure out what was going on in terms of its potential to damage Powell than I would have otherwise. I had been given a warning — and to this day I regret not having heeded it more swiftly — by a fellow who used to be head of the FDIC [Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation] and ran the RTC [Resolution Trust Corporation] for Reagan.

Q: What is the RTC?

Wilkerson: RTC was the trust corporation that fought the savings and loan battle that bought people, sold them, bankrupted them, and so forth. Bud Seidman. He was eighty at the time. He invited me to lunch, and I did not know why. I went.

Q: What was the year?

Wilkerson: This was before 9/11. This was this summer of 2001. We sat there and we had a nice lunch and he talked and chatted and I realized at eighty he was still lucid in his mind and everything. Then he gave me this warning about Rumsfeld. He had served in the [Gerald R.] Ford administration with him. He said, “I do not know if you will convey this to your boss or

not, but be very concerned about Donald Rumsfeld. He lies as a matter of course. He maneuvers to unseat people. He will use any manner of deceit and deception to do so.”

I am just sitting there thinking to myself, “Why is he telling me all this about another cabinet officer in the administration?”

But I will tell you that I revisited that lunch a couple of times later on as I thought about some of the things that were happening. Two Sundays ago, Al Kamen from the *Washington Post* called me and said, “Confirm or deny whether Powell called Rumsfeld,” in open court as it were, “deceptive and delusional —and I can prove both.”

I said, “Wow, he said that?” Powell comes back to me after I had checked with him. He says, “Yes. It is in a transcript.”

Al came back to me in a minute or two in an email and said, “I found the transcript. Don't worry, no confirmation necessary.”

Q: What a position to put you in to have someone come and tell you in the summer of 2001.

Wilkerson: This happens. I did not know what kind of axe Mr. Seidman had to grind. I did not know if he was grinding that axe with me, if he was trying to get back at somebody who had done something to him. He gave me specific examples of Rumsfeld undermining cabinet officers in the Ford administration. That was how he said he got to be secretary of defense. He told me

about an occasion where Ford, having figured at least an aspect of this out, called Rumsfeld into the Oval Office and chewed him out only to have Rumsfeld go outside, close the door, and contemplate his next victim. How he knew all that was beyond me. Probably the same way I know some of the things I know — his principal debriefed him. I always ask myself, “What is Powell's motive in telling me what he just told me? Did he really say that to the president of the United States, or is he telling me so I will report in whatever I write or say afterwards is what he said?”

Bob Woodward does this all the time with his books. I know Bob has misquoted people in an office because I was in that office when that person said those words. Bob is not lying as Bob. What he is doing is reporting on what that principal told him he said religiously, putting it in quotation marks. That principal is spinning it afterwards to make himself look better in that scene. I know that happens, so I am always asking myself when people debrief me, “Are they really telling me what happened or are they telling me what they wished had happened or what they want me to say happened?” I am looking at Bud that way to a certain extent, too. I have to say today that everything Bud said about Rumsfeld I found out in spades was true.

I characterize Rumsfeld this way. He has a slide rule and he pulls it out. Here is the center of the slide rule. If the scale goes that way and it increases his personal power, it is good. If it goes that way and it decreases his personal power, it is bad. He is the most amoral person I have ever encountered in government in my life. There is no calculation other than personal power. Increase my personal power, good. Decrease my personal power, bad. That is just a characterization of him. Cheney is not that amoral. Cheney has a very similar view about power,

but it is power orchestrated, in his view, for the benefit of the country. I have to give him that. I do not think Rumsfeld gives a hang about the country. Rumsfeld's whole world is his bureaucratic fiefdom and increasing his power and decreasing others. He delights in it. One person said to me, "Well, it is his wrestling at Princeton. That is the best metaphor for it." I said, "That is a pretty good metaphor." He always has to defeat his opponent no matter how you do it, and you lose sight of the bigger picture. You lose sight of the background even. You lose sight of the ring. You are just focused on your opponent and defeating him.

Q: In that kind of a context, what was your bigger picture in 2001 and 2002? What were your goals? What were you trying to preserve? What were you trying to accomplish?

Wilkerson: After I became chief of staff in 2002, I was trying to protect my boss as best as I could, and at the same time do other mundane tasks for him — figure out how to change the foreign service to get it more risk-taking, to get it less process-oriented and more objective-oriented and willing to take risks to achieve those objectives.

Q: What do you mean by that? Could you give me an example?

Wilkerson: Yes.

Q: Make it a little more specific for listeners.

Wilkerson: It appeared that the primary ethic in the Foreign Service was exactly the opposite of what we saw as the primary ethic in the military. The primary ethic in the military is to get the job done, and if you have to take risks in order to get the job done, you are willing to pay the piper if you fail or if you have a problem getting it done. What we saw were Foreign Service officers sitting comfortably around the world in their embassies writing cables and delighting in it. Not moving out to advocate for America. Not moving out to advocate for the particular policies that were applicable to their country. Not executing the strategies that they themselves had sent back to the State Department and said, “this is a strategy for Egypt. This is a strategy for Japan,” and so forth. It was ages in the making. We had lost the kind of foreign service officer that permeated the whole apparatus earlier — the Harvard graduate, the Yale graduate, the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant if you will who was inspired to go work for his country after being in the military first, usually because of World War II and Korea, and would then go work for the foreign service for the rest of their life and therefore know about the two worlds and be able to deal in the two worlds and to have more or less the ethic of the two worlds that was similar. It had become a process-oriented machine.

Powell wanted to change the education system. He wanted to hire more Foreign Service officers. He got the money. We hired 1,107 new Foreign Service officers — one fifth of the Foreign Service. It was eaten completely by Kabul and Baghdad, so we did not do anything. We just sort of treaded water. He wanted to change the education system. He wanted to do like we do in the military. For example, turn to a foreign officer and say, “Would you like a PhD? Would you like to go to Princeton and get a PhD?”

“Absolutely,” the military officer says. Look at Petraeus. Look at Crowe.

“No,” the Foreign Service officer says, “No. I cannot. If I leave for that long I will be murdered. I will never be able to rise any higher.” Further civilian education was an anathema in the Foreign Service. He wanted to change that. He wanted to change the rating system so that the things I am talking about would be better incentivized. He wanted to change the career ambassador program so that we really got the very best to be career ambassadors.

We did a little bit of that in four years, but I think — if he were being honest with you — he would say we put our finger in the sucking bottle of water and pulled out finger out again. He did want to do those kinds of things and he put me to studying it. I found out, for example, that the GS9 and below workforce in the State Department was probably the most abominable workforce in the federal bureaucracy, if not in the world. It was a jobs program.

Q: For the record, what do you mean by GS9 and below? There may be people unfamiliar with the ranks.

Wilkerson: That is your low to just below the middle of your workforce in the civil service. Rumsfeld discovered the same thing in the Pentagon, although I do not think it was quite as bad as it was at State. He tried to change the entire personnel management system for the Defense Department. He tried to get rid of the old program — the civil service program — and make a special national security program that would populate the Defense Department with civilian workers.

I would find, for example, that there were people who were on the payroll for \$45,000, \$50,000, \$60,000, \$65,000 a year. Had seventeen, eighteen years in the civil service and they had been gone from the job for a month on a health leave. I would ask, "What is this all about?"

"Well, we are not worried about it."

"Why are you not worried about it?"

"Because we have young foreign service officers filling in for them." Young Foreign Service officers arranging airplane tickets for their bosses, arranging itineraries for their bosses? This is what the civil servants should be doing. Foreign Service officers were doing it. We had a problem with young Foreign Service officers saying after a year or two, "This is bull. This is not what I wanted to do. I am leaving." We were losing a lot of good young Foreign Service officers. These are some of the reasons he put me to looking into this and trying to come up with some solutions for it.

I was doing building things, as I called them, within the State Department. I was also at the same time trying to help him with the press, trying to help him with relations in the interagency process, and trying to help him with problems like North Korea, which became a huge problem and was a major battle between us and the vice president's office. Trying to help him with Iran, which was a major battle between us and the vice president's office. Trying to help him with China, Taiwan, which was a major battle between us and the vice president's office. With China

and Taiwan, Rumsfeld or Cheney would dispatch someone to Taipei and they would essentially assure Chen Shui-bian [CSB], who was then the president of Taiwan, that the alliance was back on. CSB could say just about anything he wanted to — declare independence even — and everything would be okay because the United States would be right there behind him. We would then send someone like Doug Paal, our representative in Taipei, over to disabuse CSB or his people of that. It was an ongoing struggle. Cheney wanted China to be the new Soviet Union, the new “other.” We wanted a relationship that hedged itself. The official policy was to help China grow up to be a regional stakeholder, a global stakeholder, and a responsible stakeholder but at the same time to hedge our bets in case things went wrong — in case it were a more traditional great power rise and we had to do something militarily.

In the vice president's office, they said, “the hell with that strategy. That strategy is no good. We want to hedge, period. We want a relationship with India. We want a relationship with Taiwan, and we want those relationships to be just like an alliance because we want to fight China someday, and we are going to fight her with all these powerful entities that are arrayed around her, like Japan and India.”

Q: Did 9/11 in the Middle East figure into this China calculus?

Wilkerson: It back dropped everything the whole time we were there working. We also had Powell climbing out on a limb periodically with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian and the wider Arab situation — a limb that, invariably, when Powell would get to Ramallah, for example, and

be sitting down with [Yasser] Arafat and with Arafat under siege, literally, Cheney would just clip that limb right off and Powell would go tumbling into Arafat's lap, virtually. It was horrible.

Powell was the only person in the administration that wanted to continue to deal with the problem, that is to say, try to find a solution. We all knew that Clinton had been that close to a solution at Camp David II and then later at Taba, and we felt like the ingredients were still there for a solution. Cheney's principle position on this, and I think he talked the president into this, was that we were just going to do hands-off. The Israelis were going to be allowed to do whatever they wanted to do, whenever they wanted to do it, however they wanted to do it, and we were just going to stand back and not make any objections. Bush even called [Ariel] Sharon a “man of peace” in the Oval Office. We knew how deadly that kind of phrase was in the world of Palestinians and Arabs in general. They saw him as the massacerer of the refugee camps in the 1982 invasion of Lebanon by Israel. These were difficult times on almost every policy front. The one account that Powell virtually owned — and this is kind of interesting based on what I have just said — was the U.S.-China account. Not so much the U.S.-Taiwan account. We had to constantly play with that in order to work the other one right and not cross any Beijing red lines.

I think that happened because one, in April 2001, the EP-3 and the F8 collided, and our plane went down on Hainan Island and we had to get the plane back. Powell dealt with Qian Qichen, who was probably the Chinese individual who knew most about America, and tamped down that crisis. He did it before Rumsfeld and Cheney could weigh in in a significant way, even to the point where the Chinese offered to Rumsfeld to send the EP-3 back intact if he would just send the proper envoy. We had sent Joe Prueher, who was a former ambassador and four-star Navy

admiral. They sent a lieutenant, so China chopped the plane up and shipped it back COD [cash on delivery]. I think the reason Powell owned that portfolio even over the vice president's machinations was because the president understood intuitively how important China was to the standard of living of the average American — Wal-Mart. You could not advocate exacerbating that relationship if you had that understanding, so Bush was always siding with Powell with regard to China.

On almost every other issue, from Iran to North Korea to Israel-Palestine to the Arab world, we were fighting the vice president's office all the time. On one occasion, when Powell was able to get the president formally to assure him that Jim Kelly, our negotiator in the Six-Party Talks, could go to Beijing with his straight jacket removed — that is to say, he could actually do some negotiating even offline bilaterally with the North Koreans, as well as within the six-party format — that was a major achievement. We dispatched Jim Kelly to go to Beijing to the latest round of Six-Party Talks only to have the vice president go into the Oval Office, and reverse the president. By the time Kelly got to Hawaii, we had to call him and tell him he was back in his straight jacket.

These are some of the things that I was involved in and that Powell was far more substantively involved in at that time trying to work Asian policy, particularly China policy vis-à-vis Taiwan and Taiwan vis-à-vis China, and develop an Iran policy, which we could not do because the vice president simply did not want an Iran policy. He did not want to talk to evil. No negotiations, no talks. That was his policy.

Q: Sure. There are two things that border each other literally and I suppose substantively — Afghanistan and Iran. Your office is dealing both with post-9/11 Afghanistan, U.S. operations, construction efforts — I do not even dare to say reconstruction — but also trying to engage Iran next door. What were some of the things that you were doing and dealing with in 2002, 2003? This is before Iraq, with respect to Afghanistan and Iran.

Wilkerson: I think the most positive developments occurred when we hit the ground, finally, in Afghanistan. Most Americans have no conception of who really was initially in Afghanistan. It was the CIA, not the military. When the military does get there, it gets there more as an occupying force than it does as a fighting force. During this period of Northern Alliance warfare with the Taliban, supported by American air power and a few Special Forces on the ground, Iranians are cooperating. They are cooperating in almost every aspect of what we are doing in Afghanistan, whether it is trying to root out Al-Qaeda, whether they ran into Iran and they gave them back to us, or whether it is actual operations on the ground in Afghanistan — intelligence or whatever — the Iranians are cooperating. The Iranians are cooperating with the Bonn Agreement to create a government in Kabul and so forth.

Q: The Bonn Agreement was one of the more visible examples of Iranians being helpful, but you are also saying that the U.S. received good intelligence from Iran.

Wilkerson: Every report that I read and everyone with whom I talked, military or civilian, including Ambassador [James F.] Dobbins in Afghanistan said, “Yes, we were getting good tactical support from the Iranians.” It was to be assumed, I think, because we had gotten rid of

their number two enemy. Saddam Hussein was obviously their number one enemy, but the Taliban had rapidly made themselves an enemy of Iran.

Q: True. They were practically in a state of war. There was no love lost. I am going to ask you some questions about intelligence, both in theory and in practice, because it is one of the things that I know that you have a lot of thoughts on. When you get a country like Iran that gives you intelligence, or you get somebody informally extradited across the border from Iran to Afghanistan given over to the U.S., how do you assess that intelligence? How do you get good intelligence or good evidence out of that person about who they are, what they are doing, and what is being planned?

Wilkerson: When something like that happens, it is what the CIA calls a walk-in. It is information that just comes to you. The way it is evaluated normally is, "What does it produce?" If you act on that intelligence and you find three Al-Qaeda lurking in a sewer somewhere, it is good intelligence, and so that source has suddenly become a reliable source for you. If they actually walk in with a couple of prisoners and subsequently those prisoners are determined to be Al-Qaeda, that is good too.

You have to remember that most of this is happening with people who had been on the ground in Afghanistan for years — the CIA. They have been working with [Ahmad Shah] Massoud and the Northern Alliance. They have been working with the mujahideen before that. These are people who knew Afghanistan and were linguistically capable and tribally capable. They knew the different tribes and groups, Pashtuns versus Hazaras and so forth. The assessment of that

intelligence was immediate, swift, and if it was good intelligence, it panned out. If it was bad intelligence, it did not. You do not go back to the guy who gave you bad intelligence. There was very little time in Afghanistan at this stage, but if you had time, you might even explore why he did it and you might put a tail on him or you might start trying to figure out what happened. At this point, it was just battlefield stuff. If it worked, it worked, and you were happy. If it did not work, you were not happy.

Q: What kind of a CIA presence were we talking about with the Northern Alliance? Are we talking about dozens of people or hundreds of people?

Wilkerson: I am not sure the CIA even knows. If you read books like *Jawbreaker* and some of the stuff that has come out heavily redacted. I just finished one. It is going to be published in July. It was not a huge number of people, but it was not a CIA point of emphasis. There were people there and there were people who had been there for some time. Their primary focus was Massoud and the Northern Alliance because that was the only paramilitary element that was successful in any way against the Taliban. We were supplying them and Clinton had beefed up the supplies and the support and Bush came in and put another parcel of money against it. That was the one thing that we told the 9/11 Commission that I think was fairly accurate — prior to 9/11, we were in fact working with the Northern Alliance and we were trying to balance the Taliban and in the balancing of the Taliban, defeat them if possible and root out Al-Qaeda.

Q: When did you first become aware or what are your first memories of the detainee issues that came out of Afghanistan once Operation Enduring Freedom started?

Wilkerson: There are vivid memories of Pierre Prosper, who was our ambassador-at-large for war crimes, and others. Beth Jones, Eurasia assistant secretary. Jim Kelly, assistant secretary for the Pacific because of the Uighurs. Them all sitting in the morning meetings with Powell and having fifty-some-odd people arrayed around the table — undersecretaries, assistant secretaries, office heads and so forth — talking to Powell about these people in Guantánamo. Why were these people there? Why was this person there? Why were British citizens there?

Jack Straw was calling Powell apparently every day, sometimes multiple times in a day and saying, “Don't you trust us? Don't you think we have prison facilities? Don't you think we have interrogators? Don't you think we can handle them? We are your number one ally! Send us these people. Do not keep them in Guantánamo.”

Things like Pierre holding his hand up and saying, “We have a thirteen-year-old down there. We have a ninety-two-year-old down there. We have a person down there who is clearly insane — not faking it, he is insane. Why do we have such people under these conditions in Guantánamo? When are we going to repatriate? When are we going to send the thirteen-year-old home?”

Later I learned we had a thirteen-year-old, a fourteen-year-old, and a sixteen-year-old, and there was no apparent reason for us having them there.

Q: In Guantánamo or in the facilities in Afghanistan?

Wilkerson: No, this was in the facilities at Guantánamo.

Q: Guantánamo. When people like Pierre were asking the question, why do we have them there, it was rhetorical I suppose, right?

Wilkerson: Powell asked them the questions and then they would come back with their responses, which were usually an equivocation or a shrug of the shoulders and, “We are trying to find out from Secretary Rumsfeld.” Then the next week it would be the question again and they would say, “We are trying to find out from Secretary Rumsfeld.”

Powell would get frustrated and say, “Do I need to call him? Do I need to call Condi? What do I need to do here? This is frustrating. Why can't I give the people back to Britain who are UK citizens? This is frustrating.”

Then Powell began making calls to Condi and to Don. Occasionally he would let me know the gist of the conversation, but not often because I think they were probably pretty angry conversations with both individuals — Condi and Don. Condi did not seem to have any control over Rumsfeld.

Q: I have a few questions about the things you just said. Why do you think that Powell held back from telling you some of these things? Was it personal discomfort?

Wilkerson: I am not sure that it was a matter of that substance with him at the time. It was just frustrating and he figured that it was as much bureaucratic as it was anything else. How he came to think about it later, I cannot say. I have been somewhat frustrated by his lack of willingness to talk about it now. I am being very candid with you. At least maybe up until the remarks I just cited to you, I think that comes from his continued belief that he may have served in a somewhat unique administration. It was, after all, a U.S. administration. They were, after all, elected by the American people. They were, after all, appointees of those elected by the American people. Though it was maybe somewhat unique, it was not that unique, and he won some and he lost some. He wants history to look at his four years in that administration in a similar light, not as, "How in the hell did you, a sane man with a decent character, tolerate those fools?" Because for him that is not a very pleasant thing to contemplate.

Q: Your view is very different in that respect?

Wilkerson: My view is that it was a very unique administration, but not so unique in its fundamentals. Henry Kissinger, after all, usurped presidential power, particularly during Watergate. Kissinger was making decisions that, for example, set the defense condition after the Yom Kippur War, but what are you going to do? Dick Nixon is drinking a bottle of Jack Daniels every night. By nine o'clock he is bloated. It is not like someone has not taken on these kinds of powers before, but this is a very unique situation in my view, both as an academic teaching it and as a person who saw a little bit of it. To have a vice president who really wants to be president and to have a president who is not steeped in much of anything. At least for four, maybe five years, Cheney is successful in being president in most of the fundamental issues confronting the

country, particularly those of national security import. It is very unique in my sense. I am tarring myself with the same brush. We are somewhat guilty of not having recognized what was happening earlier and either stood up and said, "I will have no more of this" and left or worked a lot more aggressively and successfully at thwarting some of what was happening, particularly that which now looks as if it was not only outside our realm of values, but also was illegal.

One of those disturbing moments for me was when ABC's investigative team called me a year or so ago and told me they had a transcript with Powell and Condi and George Tenet and George Bush and Rumsfeld, if I remember right, all discussing with Tenet — who was really, obviously from the transcript that they shared with me, pushing hard to cover his own ass — talking about torture techniques, including waterboarding for a group. I am now convinced the president had set up — if not under a presidential finding, which he should have done, but probably under a presidential letter handed to Tenet — a high-level enhanced interrogation outfit at the CIA. This group was the group that would question people who are determined by this group to be high-level Al-Qaeda operatives, like Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. They would use pretty much any method they needed to use to include waterboarding. They later sought OLC's [Office of Legal Counsel] legal position that would justify all this, which makes it even more heinous because they were doing it and then they decided — because Tenet was putting so much pressure on them — that they needed legal justification to backdrop it. They went to OLC, and Bybee and Yoo and that host of characters — David Addington in the vice president's office was the real legal mind behind it — and they crafted this position that became the notorious Bybee Memo, that torture was just short of organ failure or death. That became an ex post facto legal justification for doing it.

When I saw that transcript and I saw that Powell was there, I knew damn well why he never told me anything about it. It was need to know, period. That is the way a finding always is or something like that. Clandestine. You never tell anybody that does not need to know. The second thing that bothered me was that he was there and they were actually talking about things like waterboarding and apparently he interposed no objections.

Q: What was the year and month of that?

Wilkerson: I believe it was some time in 2002.

Q: Fairly early on.

Wilkerson: Yes. The other thing that bothered me was there was the hint there that some of the impetus for this intelligence collection technique was not just stopping a subsequent terrorist attack on the United States, but it was also trying to ferret out connections between Al-Qaeda and Baghdad. They were trying to build a better intelligence case for war with Iraq.

Q: This is very sobering. How do people continue to do their jobs in situations like this when they do not agree with a policy?

Wilkerson: You have two courses of action. You exercise your right to object and dissent to the extent that you think you have worn yourself out and you have been non-persuasive, and you

resign. Or you stay around in the hopes that perhaps later you can be persuasive or perhaps that issue is not significant enough that your not being persuasive warrants resigning. Those are the only ways to deal with it.

I have to remember too — this is a creature of the executive branch, as am I, much less so than he in terms of responsibility. This is a man who, as a member of the executive branch in the field — a member of the armed forces who had been accused of being negligent with regard to the My Lai massacre in Vietnam. This is a man who had been right there at Weinberger's side. In fact, he was almost indicted. I had an FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] agent tell me the only reason he was not indicted was because he flipped a coin. He could go for Weinberger or he could go for Powell over the Iran-Contra affair. He did not feel like he could go for both, but he could go from one or the other, so he flipped a coin and he told me the coin landed against a book. So he said, “Wait a minute. The notes were right here that Weinberger said he did not have that he did have. They were right there and Powell was never closer than over there. Powell was not as close to the notes as Weinberger was.”

I do not know if that is true or apocryphal or what. Powell was very worried about it. Even during his secretariat, there were still hints that he was going to be debriefed again and maybe there might still be an indictment looming with regard to Iran-Contra.

I am not saying that he was guilty of any of these things, but this is a man who has been very close to the abuse of executive power on more than one occasion. Perhaps you develop this attitude that, “Hey, this is going to happen.” I have studied everything from the Bay of Pigs

invasion to Nixon and Kissinger's attempt to overthrow [Salvador] Allende in Chile and maybe complicity in the assassination of René Schneider, the army chief of staff who would not go along with Kissinger's desire to get rid of Allende. I have looked at our operations in Africa. I have looked at Laos and Cambodia. I have looked at the CIA all over the place. Plenty of presidents have abused power, in my view. To say that Powell participated, if he did, in these kinds of conversations about this sort of thing in a very limited, select sort of way is not all that unbelievable. Personally, it bothers me because we are both soldiers, and we both know how contaminative this sort of thing is.

Q: Tell me about that. What is the effect of things like Guantánamo or the detainee issue? What is the effect on the military as an institution, both at the level of the recruit and at the level of the officer?

Wilkerson: Let's back up just a little bit. It is interesting to see how the incredible bureaucratic fight that always occurs and the jealousies that emanate there from between the CIA and the Pentagon. How did this happen that the CIA, if this is all accurate, was asked by the president to do this with a select few detainees, only those who might have imminent knowledge or some kind of knowledge of an imminent attack on the United States, or maybe contacts with Baghdad? How did that get in the Defense Department? I think the answer to that is this bureaucratic jealousy — “I own 80 percent of the defense assets. I, secretary of defense, own about that percentage of the intelligence budget, which at that time was probably close to \$60 billion. I own the NSA [National Security Agency], I own the NRO [National Reconnaissance Office], I own

the DIA [Defense Intelligence Agency]. I own most of the intelligence. The only thing I really do not own is the CIA.”

By the way, I do not like the CIA at all. Thirty-one years in the military and let me tell you, the Defense Department does not like the CIA. Norm Schwarzkopf screaming in the desert during Desert Shield, Desert Storm, first Gulf War, “CIA should be blown away! It is giving me nothing I can use.” There is this antipathy between the two.

Rumsfeld says, “I have to do my own intelligence gathering. Meanwhile, I have tons of assets out there. Not only that, I have Delta and I have the Rangers and I have the Navy SEALs. I have SEAL Team Six. I have all these wonderful assets out there.”

One of the things we discover early is that these assets are being deployed around the world. Rumsfeld did not bother to tell the secretary of state, for example. We had an ambassador call us and say, essentially, “Who are these six-foot-four white males with nineteen-inch biceps walking around my capital city? That is a rhetorical question. I know who they are. Why are they here and why don't I know about it?” Powell had to call Rumsfeld and ask him what was going on. We even had an incident in South America where one of them got drunk, shot and killed a taxi driver, and we had to get him out of that country in South America.

You have this going on and you have Rumsfeld taking that legal opinion developed in the OLC – – shifting it through [Stephen] Cambone and [Jim] Haynes and others — down to the forces in the field . Especially that notorious memo that went A through double D on the things that you

could do. He wrote that note about, "I stand for so long, why can't they stand?" You had the military then getting involved in this. I think Rick Sanchez has lately been more forthcoming than I ever thought he would be. Now that he is running for Congress he will probably shut up about his own culpability in passing this stuff on down to places like Abu Ghraib and other facilities in Iraq. Iraq was always under the Geneva Conventions. It never was not under the Geneva Conventions.

So it gets to the field. What that does is it takes the ultimate tools that that lieutenant or that captain has on the battlefield to control those people I was talking about earlier — those people who are often your best killers, but who are always on that fine line. You could say that they are masochists waiting to be masochists. They are the kind of people who will go out and rape, pillage and plunder at will if you do not keep them under control. You have these tools to keep them under control. Occasionally, you have one of them cross a line and you do use a tool. You court martial that guy. We have done that, but if you suddenly say, "I am going to turn my eyes away from you. Maybe I do not agree with the policy so I am not going to aid and abet you, but I am not going to punish you. I am not going to watch you do it. Go ahead and do what you need to do." I think that happened all across Afghanistan and Iraq.

You add to that the fact that we sent people there who were ill-trained in the first place, National Guardsmen and Reservists in particular, and the fact that the vice president of the United States has articulated publicly that "the gloves are off and we are going to operate on the dark side." I think that kind of advice was going straight out from Cheney to places like General Stanley McChrystal at the Joint Special Operations Command at Fort Bragg. You get this policy

imprimatur over what is happening. Even as I discovered later, there were quite a few junior officers that stood up to this and said, “I am not doing that.” Even when they do that, you get them shuffled off to the side, and you get somebody in there who will do it — either a contractor or another military officer or whatever.

Before you know it, you have Abu Ghraib. It is not just a few bad apples. Of course, there are a few bad apples. Those are the ones you are trying to keep in check. One of the reasons those few bad apples were not kept in check and one of the reasons a lot of not few bad apples joined them, or at least turned a blind eye, is because you gave it a policy imprimatur. Everybody could do it, so it was done. Not only did you unleash those people I am talking about who are always looking to be unleashed, but you also aided and abetted them with lots of people standing around with their hands in their pockets, or perhaps, even on occasion, joining in. We will all do it given proper incentive and circumstances and so forth. Every experiment I have ever looked at conducted by academics in this regard says that we will all be cruel. I should not say all. There are probably some people who could withstand the Nietzsche-like drive, but it happens and it is going to happen if you do not keep the checks in place.

Q: You have given us a really fascinating testimony and analysis of the situation. I wanted to follow up with a question because on the one hand, you are expressing that these things were very unique to this administration. On the other hand, in the previous session some of your experiences in Vietnam about leadership and keeping the ranks in control sound an awful lot like what happened on the ground in Afghanistan.

Wilkerson: There are some similarities in policy, too.

Q: Tell me about the similarities and the differences between the two eras in terms of top to bottom.

Wilkerson: I think the biggest difference is I never saw anything in Vietnam that seemed to be coming from the White House or seemed to be coming from civilian leaders, period. What I saw in Vietnam was an occasional tactical leader. I would have to say it probably, in terms of turning a blind eye to it, occasionally got up as high as MACV [Military Assistance Command, Vietnam] to [William C.] Westmoreland and the crew in Saigon. What I saw there was free-fire zones and tactical measures that essentially served as policy and promoted the kind of acts that we are talking about and the kind of people that I was talking about. When you say this is a free-fire zone without having the capability — technologically or just human-wise — to scour that jungle and that zone to make sure there are no innocents there, you have just told people that they can shoot anybody, anything that moves.

I have heard those words given to me by infantry battalion commanders on the ground in my ear through my radio — “It is a free-fire zone. You can shoot anything, Centaur one-one.” I did not shoot anything, normally. I had to see something before. I did recon by fire on one occasion and we killed a thirteen-year-old girl. I will never forget that. It will live with me as long as I live. She was an innocent. She was not guilty of anything. After that, I tightened up my own rules of engagement about when I would listen to a battalion commander on the ground, because I was

normally talking to the company commander or the battalion commander as I recon'd in front of them in the jungle or rice paddies.

When you declare something a free-fire zone like that, it is a tactical measure, but it becomes a policy escape for that free-fire zone for soldiers operating in it to shoot anything that moves — tigers, pigs, buffalos, Vietnamese. When you further inculcate the idea of the gook, the slopehead, the nigger, the kaffir, whatever epithet you want to use, whatever pejorative you want to use, and that becomes a matter of speaking about the other side, that become a policy escape too. You do not have someone stepping in and saying, “What did you say? That is your enemy out there who puts his pants on or his skirt on the same way you do and has a heart that beats and a mother and father and brothers and sisters and all that kind of crap. You are an instrument of your nation at war right now killing people for state purposes. That's it, buddy.” You do not have people telling you that. Instead you have this acceptance that grows and grows and elevates to the very highest levels.

Difference. I never saw it in the White House. I did not hear Melvin Laird saying that or Richard Nixon or Lyndon Baines Johnson. It is very different when you start articulating this stuff from the highest office in the land and when people in the field actually know that this is the case. You have serving officers as high as, for example, Sanchez, the commander in Iraq, who essentially bless it and send it on to Abu Ghraib, “This is what you can do. This is how you can do it.”

“What about the Army Field Manual? What about what I was trained to do? What about what I was educated to do? What about my rights as a citizen as well as a soldier?”

“Do what I tell you to do.”

It is a very different environment. The one will always be with us, and it is helped by tactical commanders in the field who turn a blind eye.

The other is unique, I think, for us. I do not think in our earliest days — certainly not Washington. Washington was adamant about not treating British soldiers the way British soldiers treated us. [Alexander] Hamilton may have written some of that for him, but I think it was Washington's idea that if the British are hanging our men, if they are torturing our men, we will not reciprocate. Who are we if we reciprocate? Isn't this part of our struggle?

Q: These are incredibly personal thoughts and I very much appreciate that you are willing to share them. Why did you leave the administration?

Wilkerson: I would like to say because I was fed up. I wrote my resignation letter out in late 2003 — maybe it was January 2004 — and put it in my center drawer of my desk. I pulled it out and looked at it every now and then, tweaked it a little bit, but I never had the courage to submit it. When we left, we left in a huff.

Q: Why 2004? That was the first time you sat down and wrote it.

Wilkerson: The February presentation at the United Nations Security Council really just set me back. After Powell gave the presentation I went out in the cold air in New York City and walked up and down the street in utter frustration trying to figure out what I had done, why I had done it, for whom I had done it. That was the first time I had ever seen it without interruption in the very seven frenetic days and nights. I slept about two hours on a couch in George Tenet's outer office, then flew up to New York to do the presentation. The first time I had seen the presentation without any interruption — without anything at all — was on the floor of the UN Security Council. I kept looking at the Iraqis and I wanted to see something in their face that said, “How do they know that?” I never saw it. What I saw was consternation because, probably, he did not even know some of the things we were putting up there. If he did, he did not know, one, about them or two, that they were contrived.

Q: You are speaking right now about the presentation that Colin Powell gave at the UN where the discussion was about the extent to which Iraq had weapons of mass destruction.

Wilkerson: I was not clairvoyant. What I saw was a circumstantial case, and it was not a very airtight circumstantial case. For example, what I thought were some of the most effective things were the intercepts from NSA, some of which we could not use because it would reveal sources and methods. I knew there were other intercepts that were even better than the ones we were showing, but these intercepts would say things like, “Captain Ibrahim is talking about the Kindi factory and the Kindi factory has an unauthorized vehicle. He needs to get rid of it and his general tells him to get rid of it.”

I had multiple translations made from the Arabic because I was afraid I would get a translator who was biased or prejudiced or giving me the wrong look at it. I knew these were conversations that were independently corroborated in terms of independent translations and so forth, and I am listening to this and it suddenly struck me for the first time that he could be getting rid of that vehicle because it is unauthorized. He could be conforming with the sanctions. It is not necessarily so that he is getting rid of the vehicle because he has lots of them.

Another one was taking nerve agent out of their Communications Electronics Operating Instructions [CEOI]. Clearly a general talking to a captain, as I recall. "Take that out of your CEOI. Eliminate it from your CEOI."

Q: What is a CEOI?

Wilkerson: That is what you look at when you talk on the radio so you can secure it. You put it in a certain crypto form. He is taking nerve agent out of there so he will not ever have to talk about it. Okay, that means he has nerve agents. No, maybe it means he does not have nerve agents and they are administratively eliminating that from their instructions. All these things had multiple interpretations, like most circumstantial evidence does, so I began to think to myself, "That is not a very powerful case."

Candidly, my first reaction was that we are going to be unsuccessful. Then it began to sink in on me that we might go to war over this. It was also sinking into me that we had gotten a 15 to 0 vote in the UN in November on UN Security Council Resolution 1441. We had been rather

euphoric about that. Then we had been ambushed by the French and the Russians to a certain extent about a veto and we could not get the second resolution. So I am beginning to think —

Q: For the record, 1441 is the resolution that used very strong language telling Iraq that it had to give it all up.

Wilkerson: Powell's lawyer, Will Taft, and Condi's lawyer, John Bellinger, and others all agreed that we did not need a second resolution if we were going to go to war. [Tony] Blair wanted a second resolution because he did not think he could get his Parliament to agree unless he had a second resolution. It turned out it was a very close vote. At the same time, I have to say — naïve or otherwise — my boss and I were still thinking that we have a diplomatic track and that the inspectors are going to find something at any minute. Once the inspectors find something of significance, it is going to start to unravel and then we will not have a war. We will not need to go to war. I really was not convinced that the president was going to. He never did make a decision to go to war, as far as I can tell. We just inexorably marched towards it.

As late as late January 2003, I was still convinced that we might avoid one. I am not sure about my boss. People who were talking to him at the time about it have told me that he was pretty much convinced after the failure of the second resolution that we were probably going to go to war anyway. It would have been a different situation internationally had we had the second resolution rather than simply going off basically with the Brits and doing it. That should have told me something too — that we did not have the international legitimacy, if you will. Why was I thinking that anything was going to work? I think there was a reckoning for me in February and

March where I just asked myself, “Who am I serving? Why am I serving them, and why am I still here serving them?” My rationalization of it was that I really loved the man I worked for and if I left, part of his armor would be gone. I did not want to do that. That is a rationalization to be sure, but it is the truth.

Q: What was it like between the time you wrote the letter and the time that you left?

Wilkerson: Hard. We grew further and further apart. The team that worked for me from the White House, from the inner agency group, and from State Department out at Langley accomplished the impossible in my view. Some of it was accurate and some of it was false. The three pillars — the chemical weapons, the biological and mobile labs and the active nuclear program — were all false. Some of the reasons it was false still trouble me. I think John McLaughlin and George Tenet actually lied to the secretary of state and to me, but that team did spectacular work.

If you remember, on that Saturday, the shuttle went down. I almost got the team taken away from me because the president was planning on going to Houston and doing a thing down there that required his technical team. Condi stepped in and kept that team from being taken away from me. Long story, but I got the secretary to give them all letters and little plaques, including the White House group because they had done such a spectacular job. He comes into the office and he says, “And what do you want?”

I said, “Not a goddamn thing.”

He went into his office and came back a few minutes later and he had written me a handwritten letter on his personal secretary of state stationery commending me for heading the team and doing the job in such a short time. He walked back in his office. I tore the letter into about twenty shreds and threw it in a garbage can. I really felt bad about the whole thing. I did not have the courage to resign. As I said, I rationalized it as, if I leave that will be one less person to protect him.

Q: You finally left — ?

Wilkerson: We left together, but as I said, in a huff. That was bizarre. I had been working with the cabinet secretary and the chief of staff and the head of White House personnel for a month for his outcall — just formality protocol for his outcall on the president. Chief of Staff Andrew Card had been trying to get these talking points out of me. I kept saying to him, “The president of the United States needs talking points for an outcall with his principal cabinet officer after four years? Give me a break.” So they went after my deputy to get them. She came in and talked to me and I said, “Do not give them anything.” Finally it came to a boiling point, so I typed them out — China, Japan, Iran, North Korea. Those were the talking points, and I shipped them over there.

Q: Were they more detailed than that?

Wilkerson: No.

Q: That was it?

Wilkerson: I knew that they knew that Powell was making his outcall on January 13. I knew they knew. Everybody — cabinet secretary, chief of staff. Powell gets over there and the president says to him, “Why are you here, Colin?”

Powell said, “Mr. President, I am here for my farewell call with you as president of the United States.”

He screamed, “Andy, get in here.” Card comes in and the president chewed his ass out for not knowing that Powell was going to call on him on the 13 of January. Then they sat down and had an hour and a half conversation. I do not know whether Card did that on purpose on Cheney's instructions to embarrass Powell — it did not embarrass Powell, it embarrassed the president — or whether it was just a screw-up, but I know they knew because we had been going through this the whole time.

He was really not a happy camper. He was angry. He even stayed at home for several days and Rich had to call him and tell him, “Look, this is unconstitutional. I cannot be the acting secretary of state when you are in town. You have to get your ass back in here.” He was so angry with the White House. They very summarily called and asked him to submit his resignation. He typed it out himself, sent it over there and a phone call came to the deputy chief of staff that said, “You

have to get him to do it over again.” He made a typo. He was furious. He was absolutely furious. He will deny all of this today, but he will have a hard time denying it when my book comes out.

Q: Before we were doing this interview, you were actually saying that you had e-mailed with Colin Powell. You have stayed in touch. Have you somehow remained friends?

Wilkerson: It is pretty touchy. Every now and then we will send something to one another. It is mostly over youth programs or tutoring programs or boys clubs or a death, or whatever. We do not talk much about substantive issues anymore because he thinks he is on a different sheet of music than I.

Q: I have one final question for this session, if you will indulge me, and that is your hat that you wear as a professor. You talk about such issues all the time with your students, both about the nitty-gritty of strategic decision making, of intelligence failures, of national security policy and so on. I take it that you must have students that debate you and disagree with you.

Wilkerson: In one graduate course that I teach, they take a case and they analyze it and then give a presentation on it using a format for analysis from David Rothkopf's book *Running the World*. I have gained numerous insights into some of these cases from my students' expertise and from their views developed during the course of analyzing the different circumstances prevailing in different decision-making environments. I learn a lot from them about details and also the insights that they get into things like torture. I run a torture exercise where my students

essentially form the NSC and they deal with the issue on the agenda for that day, which is, how do we manage detainees in the global war on terror?

It has been somewhat of an eye-opener for me to see that, almost invariably, regardless of the different political views amongst the students and regardless of their different characters, they will almost always come up with exactly what George Bush apparently came up with — that is a special group in the CIA that can do just about anything it wants to do to high-level detainees. They will keep the armed forces clear. They will usually debate endlessly in the three-hour exercise over who decides who participates in the CIA's program. Will it be the DCI or the DNI? Who determines who goes into that process? Who is a high-level detainee and on what criteria? They will do all this counting angels on the head of a pin and everything, but they will almost always agree to have this small, elite unit that is going to do anything it needs to do.

Q: That is something that repeats in these exercises?

Wilkerson: Yes.

Q: Is that human nature or —?

Wilkerson: I think it is human nature, plus they are trying to deal with 3,000 dead Americans. Last Tuesday, the student playing the secretary of defense, who is very liberal in his views, says to me, “I usually poo-poo these exercises. I do not think they are worth much, model UN and all that kind of crap.” He says, “This one was different. I really felt under pressure.”

I said, "Why did you feel under pressure?"

He said, "These are serious issues, and even though I am not the secretary of defense, I feel these issues in my bones."

I said, "Good. Now do you have new insights into them?"

He said, "Yes, especially that one you brought up at the end during the after action hot wash up."

"Which one was that?"

"Final disposition."

I have a practicing lawyer play the attorney general. This happened to be a practicing lawyer from the Constitution Project who is an expert in the Convention Against Torture, Geneva, the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution, and so forth. She played a great attorney general. She sensed the liberality of most of the other members and so she played a harder attorney general than she would have had she been at the Constitution Project. She essentially kept saying things like, "The DNI has said we need actionable intelligence and I am trying to give you more tools to get that actionable intelligence." She was playing off against the reluctance of this group to do anything in the way of expanded or enhanced interrogation techniques.

He says to me, “Well, I never thought of it. What do you do with them? If you detain these people and you cannot try them, what do you do with them? Do you keep them in jail forever?”

The vignette I told him was when Will Taft turned to Rumsfeld and he said, “What is final disposition? Do you understand you might keep some of these people in jail for fifty years? What is final disposition?”

Rumsfeld said, “We will cross that bridge when we get to it.” We got to it.

Q: It sounds from the exercise that the students were going the path of least resistance in terms of what societies do when they are under crisis.

Wilkerson: I think that is true. I spoke to a group of Europeans — Turks, Romanians, Bulgarians, Swedes, what Rumsfeld called the new Europe — at the request of the State Department earlier last week. I was struck by their comments that essentially said to me, “You speak about liberty and freedom as if its essence were Patrick Henry, Nathan Hale.”

I quoted the Declaration of Independence to them. I said, “Those final words were, ‘And to these ends, we pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.’ These people knew when they signed that document that they were going against the greatest naval power in the world, arguably the greatest military power in the world. They knew that odds were they were going to hang from somebody's yard arm. They knew that. That is the greatest protection for liberty and security — people who feel that way who are willing to die for it. Not torture people.”

The pushback from these new Europeans — the Bulgarians, Romanians, Lithuanians, Estonians — was, “You cannot have security unless you are secure, you cannot have a powerful economy unless you are secure, and you cannot have a prosperous life unless you are secure.”

Again, the best assurance of liberty is the willingness to keep the liberty, not surrender it. I quoted Benjamin Franklin to them, “Those who give up their liberties for security shall have neither.”

They pushed back at me hard that you have to do some things sometimes. You have to do some things. “Security is the first essential!”

“No, liberty is the first essential, not security. Liberty is your greatest assurance of security in the long run.”

They would not buy that.

Q: Just one final question.

Wilkerson: They just came out of this mess. You would think that they would be excited about it. You would think that they would be less tending to want to give up their newly gained and precious liberties, but no. Maybe it is part of the old fabric that wore off on them. Dictatorship, tyranny — that is the way to assure security.

Q: My final question is the following. We have had five, six years go by since you left the State Department, if I am not mistaken. How do you feel today looking on these events versus how you might have felt a year after the fact?

Wilkerson: In some ways, I feel sadder for my country. As John Yoo, whom I thought should have, at a minimum, been disbarred, said in a recent *Wall Street Journal* op-ed, “Welcome to the world of Bush, President Obama.” He then went on to say how President Obama has done almost nothing to surrender the extra-constitutional powers that President Bush under Vice President Cheney's guidance assumed, the so-called unitary executive powers. What is Libya right now? The president's willingness to exercise the war power anywhere, anytime, anyplace without anybody else checking it.

Q: Is that assessment correct, as you see it?

Wilkerson: It is close enough to make me concerned. Two weeks ago I spent about two hours with seven Republican Congressman very much opposed to this kind of exercise of the war power. They made clear to me that if it were a Democrat or Republican, it would not make any difference to them. I was convinced that these seven are pretty honest guys — few and far between these days. They were furious about using the war power. They were furious about Iraq and they were furious about Libya now. They do not understand it. I told them, “You do not understand the War Powers Act. You guys abdicated. You guys abdicated over presidential veto, as a matter of fact. Nixon vetoed you, and you passed it over his veto. You abdicated the

constitutional war power, in part at least. You did not reinforce it. The president thinks he can go to war any time he wants to as long as he tenders his reports in accordance with that legislation to you, which President Obama is doing diligently and every president since Nixon has done diligently. We have used the Armed Forces more since the end of the Cold War than we did during the Cold War.”

Guess what? Get ready for more.

Q: Colonel Wilkerson, thank you very much. This concludes our second session. We hope to have more sessions with you in the future as the Oral History Project progresses and unfolds. Once again, thank you very much for talking with us about your many hats in the military, as a professor, and your service to the government. Thank you so much.

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