

Interviewer

So Senator, welcome. This isâ€”

Bob Kerrey

Thank you.

Interviewer

Today is February 16, 2012, and weâ€™re in the studios of the Center for Oral History at West Point. And thank you for coming by to sit with us.

Bob Kerrey

Youâ€™re welcome.

Interviewer

You were a Navy SEAL.

Bob Kerrey

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer

What prompted you to want to go into service to begin with?

Bob Kerrey

Well, I was about to be drafted, so when I graduated from college in 1965â€”actually, technically I graduated in â€™66â€”I finished a five-year program in fourâ€”my draft classification went from 2F to 1A. And in those days, there were some exemptions, but for most of us in that era, you knew that if you passed your physical examination, which I did in December of that year, that shortly thereafter youâ€™re going to get drafted.

Interviewer

Why did you choose the Navy?

Bob Kerrey

Well, I was practicing pharmacy at the time, in Sioux City, Iowa, and I just finished reading a book called *The Caine Mutiny*, by Herman Wouk.

Bob Kerrey

And, you know, a land-locked boy from Nebraska, life at sea sounded pretty exciting, so I volunteered for the Navyâ€”went in the Fleet Reserve.

Interviewer

You tell the story in your book that you had an uncle who was lost in World War IIâ€”

Bob Kerrey

Right.

Interviewer

And that story was very powerful to you. Can you tell that story first, and then give us a sense of what impact it has upon you as you enter the service yourself?

Bob Kerrey

Well, actually it had a bigger impact on me later in life than it did when I was going in the service. I became aware of who he was by accident. My father had an extremely difficult time talking about him. He was a couple years older than my dad. My father's mother died giving birth to him in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and in those days—in 1913—in those days, you either went to an orphanage or some family member raised the kids. So he got a older sister to agree to help raise the boys.

Bob Kerrey

Then he died shortly afterwards, so they were orphaned, raised in Chicago, and my father was quite close to his older brother. But they came of age as the Depression started, and, you know, it was “he went off and was sort of gone and back and gone and back. And I think my dad always thought that he would come back from the Philippines, ’cause he deployed in, you know, 1940, and was there when the—”

Interviewer

He was Army. This is Army, right?

Bob Kerrey

Army—Army Signal Corps. And he was there when the Japanese invaded. He was actually on MacArthur's staff, so he was taken prisoner, and up the Bataan Peninsula he escaped, and was killed in October, just before the U.S. forces came back into Leyte Gulf in 1941—1944. So that's—most of what I just said I acquired much later in life, because I got an interest in honoring my own life, trying to understand it.

Bob Kerrey

But in order to understand it, I had to go back and try to get some detail on my mother and father, and their lives.

Interviewer

And your father was no source of information for you on this.

Bob Kerrey

Well, he was a source of some information, but I would say my father had almost no interest in what we would call genealogy, so.

Interviewer

But it was also that this episode was so painful, I take it, right?

Bob Kerrey

Yes, it was, I would say, painful for him. And most of the examination that I've done

occurred after my father died, so I didn't have the opportunity actually to interview him to see what he could provide me. I went to the survivors of Corregidor and Bataan, and talked to many of those people, and tried to find and found some people who knew my Uncle John. So most of the contact that I made to my uncle's life came through, you know, those connections.

Interviewer

And did you ever learn the circumstances of his death?

Bob Kerrey

Well, there's three reports, so it's, you know, it's like you were saying earlier, with oral history, you never know, so I've got

Interviewer

And the reports differ.

Bob Kerrey

One report is that he was drowned. He was but all three reports are the same in one respect: he was going out to a submarine to deliver a packet of intelligence, and was going to be taken back to Australia. And he either died because the surface conditions were rougher and he drowned, he died because he was shot by the Japanese, or he was he died because he was shot by a Filipino that they were working with, with whom he had not a very good relationship, so.

Interviewer

But the body was never recovered.

Bob Kerrey

The body was never recovered.

Interviewer

And you say you developed a more powerful interest in this later in life than the time when you first entered the Navy.

Bob Kerrey

Right.

Interviewer

Why was that, do you think?

Bob Kerrey

Well,

Bob Kerrey

if you're and I was, and still am trying to understand who I am if you're trying to do that, it's important to try to get some understanding of what came before

you, because it matters. Not only is there a genetic transfer, but there's behavioral passes that occur from people that you never had any contact with whatsoever. So I mean the fact—for just as an example—that my father was an orphan had a big impact on me and my life. The fact that my mother was a farm girl from Iowa had a big impact.

Bob Kerrey

And trying to understand that was the purpose of going back. And then I was struck by the story. It's an interesting story—I fell in love with a woman who ends up working in the Army, Army Intelligence, for the purpose of trying to find out where my uncle was. Evangeline Mella was her name, and she worked, she volunteered, ended up working for O.S.S. and then worked for C.I.A. for a career, and fell in love.

Bob Kerrey

And met another guy after she confirmed that my uncle was dead, and he was killed under mysterious circumstances in Berlin, also.

Bob Kerrey

He was Army Intel, but I didn't actually penetrate that veil and go back any further. But it's an interesting story. It's like so many others from World War 2, where a separation occurs because of a death of two people who are in love, and they go on—you know, the story goes on in some fashion, so. But I have learned characteristics of my uncle that feel similar to my own, you know.

Interviewer

Well, that was where I was going with this. I'm wondering whether there's some association for you with the fact that he was a combat veteran and you were a combat veteran.

Bob Kerrey

Yeah. Although I'm much more—I feel much more interested in personality characteristics, and my uncle tended to resolve almost every conflict with a fight. And I don't resolve every conflict with a fight, but I like a good argument.

Bob Kerrey

And I don't know for certain—there's no way of knowing these things for certain—but I see that kind of a characteristic as probably passed on in some mysterious fashion.

Interviewer

Did your father have any military experience himself?

Bob Kerrey

Yes—my father—both my father and my uncle. My father was in the Army Air Corps. Also, in Signal Corps he was being trained to be a part of the invasion force and went there as a part of the occupation force, and he was also on MacArthur's staff by coincidence, so. But then the rules at the time were that if you had a brother who was killed, you could get out early, so he came back to the United States more quickly than his tour of duty would've normally allowed.

Interviewer

What did he do for a living, your father?

Bob Kerrey

Well, heâ€”

Interviewer

After the war.

Bob Kerrey

Right. He was stationed in Florida.

Bob Kerrey

I think I was actually conceived in Florida, and then he was reassigned to the Army Air Base in Lincoln, Nebraska. So we came to Lincoln, and I was born two or three days later, so I mean thatâ€™sâ€”what happened was he fell in love with the community. Started going to church and met some other people and he told a friend of his, â€œIf you ever see a business opportunity.â€ My father was an engineer. â€œIf you ever see a business opportunity while Iâ€™m gone,â€ and he left him \$1,000.00.

Bob Kerrey

So when he comes back, gets out and comes back, he discovers that he owns a lumber and coal business, so thatâ€™s what he did. He started as a lumber and coal business, expanded it, had hardware, and then he built houses and buildings. He was a builder.

Interviewer

What was your upbringing like?

Bob Kerrey

Well, it was I would say dominated by a large, very large family. My father, orphaned, that was his desire in life, to have as many children as my mother would allow him to have.

Bob Kerrey

So they stopped at seven, and so thatâ€™s, you know, thatâ€™s the big thing is that weâ€™”it was a big family. And you know, again, the circumstance here, birth matter, so, you know, Iâ€™m born in â€™43, and the first time I saw television was 1953â€”came home from school to watch the coronation of Queen Elizabeth.

Bob Kerrey

So, you know, we grew up around a dinner table, and there was no television to watch, and even when television appeared, weâ€™”you know, the evening meal, the Sunday experience. We went to church every Sunday, and you know, family was the dominant thing in my life. I got very close to my brothers and sisters, and very close to my parents, and, you know, itâ€™s like a friend of mine says, â€œI feel like I won the ovarian lottery.â€ [Laughs]

Interviewer

What about the SEALs? Did you know you wanted to be a SEAL once you hadâ€

Bob Kerrey

No. No. I mean I hadâ€”you know, as I said, I joined the Fleet Reserve. I volunteered for Officer Candidate School, went to Newport, Rhode Island, and I was intending to be a Line Officer. I mean when I came in, they inspired me to want to be a Line Officer, and they come around and, you know, I became friends with another guy, and we were both going to go to flight schoolâ€”that sounded exciting. And he was, it turns out, had two things that were a bit of a problem for him.

Bob Kerrey

One was his eyesight was a little off, so then these guys came around with underwater demolition, so we volunteered for UDT. And my friend, Gary, was also an engineer, and Admiral Rickover I think scoured the records of everybody at OCS, and called him down to Washington for one of his famous interviews.

Bob Kerrey

And he got selected for the Nuclear Navy, so I went off to UDT on my own, and, you know, that wasâ€”I got out there in Coronado and, you know, after going through OCS in 1967.

Bob Kerrey

I get out there in the summer, and there was, you know, it was the moment when the Vietnam war was being ramped up. And at the end of that 18-week programâ€”during which, by the way, the instructors had permission to try to get as many of you as possible to quitâ€”we all went to the back door of, you know, the compound where the training occurred, where they had the assignments, and I was assigned to SEAL Team 1, so. That wouldnâ€™t happen today. It would be a much longer training programâ€”then went to Army Airborne and Ranger School, and relatively short training program before we deployed.

Interviewer

Whatâ€™s yourâ€

Bob Kerrey

So I didnâ€™t go in with the intent of going to SEAL training.

Interviewer

Right. What did you know about Vietnam at the time, and did you have an attitude about the war itself?

Bob Kerrey

Not much of any attitude, other than I was Administrative Officer of the teams, and I visited men who were injured at the hospital, so I had an opportunity to talk to them. And their accounts werenâ€™t glowing at all, and I remember vividly when LBJ announced he wasnâ€™t going to run for reelection in 1968, and now said he was going to negotiate with the North Vietnamese for agreement. And, you know, Martin Luther King was killed shortly

after that.

Bob Kerrey

That, to put it mildly, the riots that occurred after that kind of threw the chances of LBJ getting any kind of an agreement for a loop. You know, I would say it was pretty clear to people at the time, I think, that the chances are weâ€™re going to finish second, because youâ€™re negotiating for a peace with your enemy, and we knew what they wanted.

Bob Kerrey

They werenâ€™t going to stop until they had a unified country, so. I mean I had a pretty good understanding that I had a duty to go, but that itâ€™s not likely that we were going to â€“ that this was going to have a happy ending.

Interviewer

Were you scared?

Bob Kerrey

Oh, probably. You know, probably somewhereâ€™certainly wouldâ€™veâ€™all in, I wouldâ€™ve preferred not to go. It wasnâ€™t like I wasâ€™this was a dream in life, to go to combat, or a dream in life to go into SEAL Team. Iâ€™m proud of the service, and benefit enormously from it. Thereâ€™s hardly a day goes by where something that Iâ€™ve learned in the service isnâ€™t applied in decision-making or behavior that I have still today. But I didnâ€™t start offâ€™I mean Iâ€™look, I was a pretty good student in college.

Bob Kerrey

The only course I had difficulty with was Naval ROTC, and, you know, I justâ€™I was telling my friend Jack as we were upstairs earlier that I donâ€™t think Iâ€™d have done very well here.

Bob Kerrey

I donâ€™tâ€™not very good at taking orders. And, you know, so itâ€™sâ€™I didnâ€™t envision myself at an early age with a military career.

Interviewer

Your first deployment to Vietnam happens when, then?

Bob Kerrey

Well, the platoon is formed up in the fall of 1968, so we trained together for a couple months before we went over in January â€™69.

Interviewer

In January of â€™69.

Bob Kerrey

January of â€™69.

Interviewer

And tell me about, now, the episode in Thanh Phong. Tell me the story.

Bob Kerrey

Well, I've told the story before, so I'm not—you know, I don't know how far I want to go into it here this afternoon. I mean it was—it was a mission that was brought to us, and the context becomes important in this, because we were assigned to the swift boats.

Bob Kerrey

And the previous—normally, what a SEAL Team Platoon would do is come over and replace another platoon that had been operating in a particular area, and accumulate as a consequence of that six months, and we were all TDY.

Bob Kerrey

So that six months would give them a substantial amount of information about what's going on in our little area of operation. We were assigned to the swift boats at Cam Ranh Bay, meaning we had the whole coast, and had no grounds for, you know, understanding what it was that we were supposed to be doing. And I think the Officer who was in charge of us was a little bit confused about it as well, and as a consequence, most—you know, this is after the fact as well.

Bob Kerrey

We discovered that most of the intel that we were getting in the operations that we were assigned came out of a program that was known as Phoenix. That was—I don't know when it was started. You mind if I take a break and drink?

Interviewer

Not at all.

Bob Kerrey

I don't know exactly when it was started, but it was I think '65 or '66. And it was—I'm not sure that did any good. Don't know I can get through this. Story isn't choking me up—it's a physical reaction to something. I mean we were—Phoenix Program, the whole object was to take out what was considered to be the middle-level Vietcong and their supporters, so the rules of engagement, to put it mildly, were very loose.

Bob Kerrey

And, you know, Thanh Phong was an operation to go in and get some individuals who were a part of a group of Vietcong that were operating in what at that time was called a secret zone—an area where the government of Vietnam and the U.S. Forces weren't typically operating. So we went in, and again, the object was to try to find these guys and pull them out.

Bob Kerrey

And we were not able to do it.



Interviewer

What went wrong? Was the intelligence bad?

Bob Kerrey

Oh, Godâ€”no, I think what went wrong, right from the beginning, is, you know, we had operation procedures who were inappropriate for the situation. They just were. I mean it wasâ€”and so we ended up in a situation where, first, we were killing people who were guarding this area. At least that was what the guys who were operating up at the front of the platoon were sayingâ€”and that was standard operating procedure for us on an operation of that kind, in order to make certain thatâ€”â€”cause thereâ€”only seven of us.

Bob Kerrey

I say platoon, but thereâ€”onlyâ€”itâ€”more like a small squad. And we had no helicopter support or no real, you know, fire battery support at all.

Bob Kerrey

I mean it was just us. So when you find yourself in that situation, the operating procedure was to reduce the chances of anybody compromising the mission. So I would say the biggest mistake is just the operating procedures that we had in place, â€”cause it led, in the end, to an excessive use of firepower. We took some fire, and we returned fire, and we ended up killing people that we shouldnâ€”t have killed.

Interviewer

This would be the women and children that ended up making this a devastating story, for you personally, as well asâ€”

Bob Kerrey

Right.

Interviewer

Iâ€”m struck in the telling of the story, both by you here now and also by what Iâ€”ve read about it, by the phrase â€œfog of war.â€ I mean it just seems as though one of the things that was operating then was that there was no clarity to the rules or to the science that you were having toâ€”

Bob Kerrey

Oh, my point is, actually, that the rules were quite clear. Itâ€”s the rules that, in this particular case, that were the problem.

Interviewer

Rules itselfâ€”you mean that the rulesâ€”

Bob Kerrey

Oh, yeah. You got toâ€”basically, in a secret zone like this, a free-fire zone, with rules of engagement that would almost inescapably lead to this kind of engagement. And you can really see it in the numbers. You know, itâ€”s a part ofâ€”at that time, it was a part of a

counterinsurgency strategy that, in my own view, had an insufficient amount of control attached to it. Probably way too much civilian control and way too little military control, particularly thinking this isâ€”you know, I now see the value of many of the changes that have occurred since Vietnam.

Bob Kerrey

And probably the most important one is Goldwater-Nichols, where jointness is created, and much more unified command between Special Operations soldiers and the mainline force.

Bob Kerrey

Whereas we were disconnected, and as a consequence, our rules were coming more from the civilian side than they were from the military side, and I think the rules wouldâ€™ve been much different. Although Iâ€™ve had occasion now to talk to many people who were in the Army, and they at times were operatingâ€”particularly the Navy and the coastal boatsâ€”were operating with similar kinds of rules of engagement.

Interviewer

Would you think that this kind of experience was repeated in many other places, and just not as well-known?

Bob Kerrey

In Vietnam?

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Bob Kerrey

Oh yeahâ€”I think thatâ€™s exactly right, yeah.

Interviewer

Because of these rules.

Bob Kerrey

Sure.

Interviewer

Uh-huh.

Bob Kerrey

Right. And by the way, we were fighting an enemy that had similar rules, so itâ€™s not like we wereâ€”

Interviewer

I understand.

Bob Kerrey

Right, so. But itâ€™sâ€”yeah, I would say it contributed to many incidences of this kind.

Todd Brewster

Besides Goldwater-Nichols, though, do you think weâ€™ve learned something about fighting insurgency since you mention this about an enemy fighting with different rules than we would normally attach our name to?

Todd Brewster

Have we learned something from this in what youâ€™ve seen in how we fought Iraq?

Bob Kerrey

Well, I think we have. I mean there was a very famous book that was written called Dereliction of Duty in I think the early â€™90s. I think the guyâ€™s still on active duty, so.

Interviewer

Thatâ€™s McMaster, I think.

Bob Kerrey

McMaster.

Interviewer

Heâ€™s actuallyâ€”heâ€™s often a colleague who comes in hereâ€”yes, yes.

Bob Kerrey

So I think that was the most important lesson, although you look at Iraq and say that, with the exception of General Shinseki, you wonder how long that lesson survived. The first Gulf War, where Colin Powell, having had the experience of I think Generals unwilling to tell the civilians exactly what the likely outcome is going to be, and what the force was going to beâ€”what force was going to be required.

Bob Kerrey

I think Johnson made a terrible mistake, and, you know, found himself in a military situation with a military commitment way beyond what he expected it to be, and way short of what was necessary to actually get the job done, so.

Interviewer

Itâ€™s a classic American problem, though, isnâ€™t it, because we built in this civilian control of the military for reasonsâ€”

Bob Kerrey

Itâ€™s a classic military problem, and itâ€™s also driven by very understandableâ€”even during Vietnam, and particularly the early days of Vietnam. There wasâ€”thereâ€™s this rush of patriotism to support the war effort that oftentimes makes it difficult to have the kind of honest debate that you need to have. Itâ€™s difficult, because itâ€™s, you know, itâ€™s on the one hand, you want people to feel love for and respect for and support for the men and women who are serving. You want that in place.

Bob Kerrey

But if it becomes sort of blind and caught up with, you know, I would say sort of unthinking patriotism, it can be a problem.

Bob Kerrey

It can be a real big problem. And particularly coming out of World War II, you know, we had an attitude that said that we can accomplish anything. And in spite of many witnesses, including Eisenhower, advising against engaged in a land war in Asia, you know, the next thing you know, weâ€™re engaged in a big land war in Asia, and the exitâ€™there was no way of getting out, other than trying to negotiate and get a sufficient interval between the negotiations and our full departure.

Bob Kerrey

So yeah, I would say thereâ€™s a lot of lessons at the senior level of the military that are likely to still be there, probably deepened from the experience of Iraq. I think thereâ€™s much better training and preparation, but youâ€™re going to get these momentsâ€™even if the rules of engagement are perfectly aligned with Geneva.

Bob Kerrey

Youâ€™re going to get these moments where a 22-year-old boy knows heâ€™s just killed somebody, and even if heâ€™s carrying a weapon on the other side, I know how that feels. And in the moment, itâ€™s not a big deal.

Bob Kerrey

But the older you get, you know, moreâ€™you know, the more you realize that youâ€™ve buried something and youâ€™re living with it, and itâ€™s affecting your behavior in some time.

Interviewer

You mentionedâ€™several times Iâ€™ve seen you quoted as saying that the scariest thing really is not being killed, itâ€™s killing someone else.

Bob Kerrey

Yeah.

Todd Brewster

How have theâ€™how has the memory of Thanh Phong been something that youâ€™ve coped with? How have you dealt with that as a combat veteran?

Bob Kerrey

I actually donâ€™t know, other than, you know, just realize the only thing I can do is live my life as fully as possible, and serve when I get the opportunity to serve, and bring as much honesty as I can to other decisions that are made, particularly when it relates to going to war.

Interviewer

Did you suffer any kind of what we now call PTSD, but was probably not even given a medical diagnosis back in the '60s on this "did you suffer any" and now you talk about waking up with memories, and"

Bob Kerrey

Well, yeah, I would say I'm one of the fortunate ones that have not suffered from the trauma. I don't feel like I've got post-traumatic stress. I'm, you know, apparently one that genetically is not prone to addiction, for example, which is a blessing, particularly growing up in that era. I mean that era, I mean among the things I learned how to do is drink in the service. I mean they were "you know, if you didn't have a story about something you did while you were drunk during that time, you really hadn't done what you're supposed to do, so.

Bob Kerrey

But fortunately the military's learned there. It's a tremendous positive thing that they've done "probably the most pro-family thing that the military's done is diminish the alcohol abuse. So fortunately I don't have an addictive gene, and that kept me from doing anything that could've put me in a position, particularly early on, where I'd just go off the edge. "Cause you get these moments, with or without a military trauma, you get these moments where you say, you know, you know, you suffer a loss of some kind.

Bob Kerrey

Or even if you haven't suffered a loss, you get up and say, you know, "Is it worth it, " you know "what am I going to do next, " so. And I don't care how deep your religious belief is, and how, you know, whether you believe in Jesus Christ, as I do, or whether you "whatever your belief system is, you've got this moment that when you're awake, and you say, "Am I going to go on?"

Bob Kerrey

You know, I remember vividly getting off the phone with Lewis Puller, Jr. I was in the hospital with Lewis. His father, Chesty, came in and saw me.

Bob Kerrey

And I said to him "I said to myself, and I said to Lewis, actually, at the time, "Man, that has to be a bitch to have Chesty Puller as a dad. " You know, try to live up to that man? Five Navy Crosses, every single one of them could've been a Medal of Honor. I mean oh my God "I can't live up to this. You know, it's a lot easier to live up to a guy that ran a lumber and coal business than Chesty Puller.

Bob Kerrey

Well, I remember hanging up the phone with Lewis and thinking, "Man, this guy's in trouble, " and 24 hours later "less, you know "learned that he had hung up the phone from me, or maybe one or two people afterwards, and put on Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Fortunate Son " and blew his brains out.

Bob Kerrey

I think alcohol contributed to that. His disability contributed to that. But one of his neighbor friends said to me, "He made a good choice. " Stunning "you think, "What do you

mean, he made a good choice?â€

Bob Kerrey

Well, sometimes itâ€™s the right answer. And itâ€™s actually, in my conversations with menâ€”and Iâ€™ve had many since thenâ€”I never take it lightly since Lewis Puller, when somebody sounds kind of down and out, and particularly as they go into that cycle of self-pity, which is hard to get out of when youâ€™re in it. You know, my typical response is, you know, â€œI know youâ€™re thinking about suicide, and it is a choice, and it might be the right choice. But you really ought to size it, â€™cause thereâ€™s no do-overs if thatâ€™s the choice that you make.â€

Bob Kerrey

And all of us, as human beingsâ€”and I think all of us that have gone to warâ€”will have those kinds of moments.

Bob Kerrey

Or maybe more frequent. I just have never suffered the trauma that Iâ€™ve seen other guys suffer, where itâ€™s almost impossible for them to function. I mean the anticipation in Iraq and Afghanistan had to be doubly difficult than Vietnam, â€™cause of the IEDs and the likelihood that something terrible could happen to you, you know. And the good news of saving peopleâ€™s lives increases the chances that you could end up with brain damage and not dead, and plus the multiple tours.

Bob Kerrey

You know, all kinds of things probably contribute to the higher than we certainly want of individuals who are suffering trauma of one kind or another.

Interviewer

But are there recommendations you have for combat veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan, given what you went through?

Bob Kerrey

Wellâ€”

Todd Brewster

How to live with that?

Bob Kerrey

The thing that I got that was really important was I got wounded, and I spent eight months in a hospital, and I learned something in that hospital, andâ€”that my idea of what it meant to be a man, and what you had to do to become a man, was wrong.

Interviewer

What was your idea of what it meant to be a man?

Bob Kerrey

Tough guyâ€”do it all on your own. Donâ€™t complain, you know? Thatâ€™sâ€”you

know, you don't complain. Just do your job. And you don't complain after the job. You had something bad happen you just get back at it. Don't if you're in trouble, you figure out how to get it done and get out of it. And what I learned in the hospital, when you're horizontal and you can't do a simple thing like go to the bathroom that you got to ask somebody for help. And what I learned there and it's not easy again, I think it's harder for men than it is for women. That's why they live longer.

Bob Kerrey

You got to let somebody love you, and that isn't easy. I remember talking to a kid when I was Governor who'd been burned in a oil fire on a oil rig in Wyoming, and his face is gone. And he's just "I don't know" 20, 21 years old "hard to tell with that kind of burn. And the burns had healed, but they kept him in the hospital that was before they threw people out of hospitals before they were really well. And he was pissed "he was angry "he was bitter " "cause he knew what had happened to him. And I said to him, I said, you know, "You're "you've got to accept that your face is "by hard definition, it's ugly.

Bob Kerrey

"But you're making yourself really ugly by the way you're acting."

Bob Kerrey

Because, you know, ugly is something I want to get away from, and you can be beautiful on the outside, and if you're ugly on the inside, nobody wants to hang out with you. I mean you cannot expect to have, you know, your life saved by somebody who's constantly going to drive past that ugliness, so you got to let somebody love you, and you got to, you know, you got to trust, and you got to find somebody that you trust, and you got to talk.

Bob Kerrey

And, you know, and then I think it makes it a lot easier to make those decisions in the morning when you get up wondering whether or not you're going to make the effort, it makes it a lot easier to make the effort. You know, I remember "I remember "I hope a little bit of profanity isn't a problem on this thing. I remember when I was Governor, and I had really particularly bad moment "I don't know what, I can't remember actually what it was. And I called a friend of mine, a woman out in San Francisco, and I said, "Nancy, I just "I just feel like a bag of shit."

Bob Kerrey

And she said, "Well, you are a bag of shit," and all of a sudden, my mood brightened. Hell, that's that's part of our challenge, you know, to get over the realization that we're not perfect. That we're not that beautiful thing that we've created in our heads, you know, and to ask somebody for help. I mean it's not easy to do. It's not easy to do, to say, you know, "I'm confused. I'm lonely. I'm sad. I'm angry." And that's the only declaration I need to make to somebody I trust enough to let love me.

Interviewer

Tell me how you were injured. Tell me the story of that.

Bob Kerrey

Well, this was actually a good operation, because we had good intelligence, and this came from the Navy and from the Special Forces originally, that were operating up in Nha Trang. And they had some guys who were—“who were sappers, who were running explosive operations against the civilian population in Nha Trang.

Bob Kerrey

Some military targets as well, and we knew exactly where they were. There was a guy who had participated in a program called Chieu Hoi.

Bob Kerrey

We were trying to recruit VC to leave and tell us, give us intel. And it was remarkable, and this guy had been fighting for six or seven years, and we interrogated him—“put a little light bulb on him, and oh my God, you know, I—“m over here TDY, the Army—“s here 13 months. This guy stays till the war is over or he—“s dead, and he wanted to go back to his family. That was the only motivation. He could have cared less about the American Open Arms Program, and he knew he has to provide us with some information, and he provided some information, and probably a personality problem—“probably angry—“of where these guys were.

Bob Kerrey

And we made him—“he said, “œWell, I—“m not going to go back in unless you—“re with me. So he went back in with us, and we scaled up the back side of the island, and he—“he was able to locate the first sleeping group. And unfortunately, the second sleeping group awoke and were moving, and we ran into them. It was night. It was sort of coming into first light. And it was a firefight, and rather than pulling them all out, we ended up having to kill all of them, and then I was injured in the first blast. It was a explosive device of some kind, and I was injured in the first blast and medevac—“d out.

Interviewer

And the injury was?

Bob Kerrey

Well, it was essentially a traumatic amputation of the right leg below the knee, but it was—“it didn—“t actually—“I went into a sort of what you call almost like a hurdler stance, where my right leg stuck out over the—“over a rock, in a firing position like this.

Bob Kerrey

And the blast sheared the leg and hit my hand, and fortunately, the rock protected my chest and most of my face, so there was no lethal injuries that occurred. But it was night—“I couldn—“t really tell. I knew I was injured. I could feel the damage—“

Interviewer

Sure.

Bob Kerrey

So I tied off a tourniquet, and there wasn—“t—“you know, the body goes into a little bit of shock. It—“s night, so I was able to continue to direct fire till things were safe. And by the time I got to Philadelphia—“which is where they sent me, the Philadelphia Naval



Hospitalâ€”the first time they broke open the cast, I could tell the thingâ€”thatâ€™s the first real look, conscious look, that I had was I could see that they had tried to save as much as they could, but there was no saving it. So they did surgery that day and cut the rest of it off.

Interviewer

And that was the end of your Navy career?

Bob Kerrey

Well, yeah, that was the end of my Navy career. It was interesting, â€™cause I went back out to San Diego after I got out of the hospital.

Bob Kerrey

Actually, thatâ€™s notâ€”Iâ€™ve got it inaccurate. I went out there on one of the leaves that I had, andâ€™cause they informed me I was going to be the recipient of the Medal of Honor, so I actually went out there for a couple reasons. One, to have the conversation about whether or not it was going to be possible for me to stay in the Navyâ€”and it was clear I couldnâ€™t.

Bob Kerrey

I mean theâ€”it was anotherâ€”it wasnâ€™t until 1978 that I was really done with surgery. So maybe in todayâ€™s environment it wouldâ€™ve been possible to recycle me, but there was a dirty enough injury that there was justâ€”there was a lot of healing that had to go on.

Interviewer

Still give you problems now?

Bob Kerrey

Yeahâ€”you know, so. It keeps you awake.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Bob Kerrey

And itâ€”you know, it gives you cause to remember that itâ€™s not a bad way to be in the day, to feel grateful about, you know, having the chance to still live, so. It couldâ€™ve been the other side, so itâ€™s not â€”I donâ€™t consider it to be a burden. Thereâ€™s lots of things that I canâ€™t do.

Bob Kerrey

And again, itâ€™s one of the things that I would say Iâ€™ve had occasion to visit with both civilians and military people who have suffered similar kinds of injuries, and among the worst things that is said, was ever said to me, was, â€œYouâ€™ll be able to do everything you could do before. Youâ€™ll be as good as new.â€

Bob Kerrey

Well, it isnâ€™t true. And so I always say to people, â€œYouâ€™re not going to be able to

do everything you could do before. There are real limitations. Youâ€™re going to be able to do a lot, but youâ€™re a different person.â€ In a lot of ways, the guy thatâ€™pre-injury is not the guy post-injury. I mean you can see things you didnâ€™t see before. Youâ€™ll have compassion. Youâ€™re going to be able to do things that you werenâ€™t able to do before, and it mostly centers on understanding what pain is, and understanding and being able to see when somebody else is hurting or suffering. Not a bad thing.

Interviewer

Do you think that that attitude informs your life as a politician?

Bob Kerrey

Oh, not always, I mean, â€™cause, you know, probably my problem isâ€™I mean I actually have multiple problems. Probably the biggest one is I get about 2,000 ideas a year, and only 3 or 4 of them are any good, but they all feel the same when they come on me, so Iâ€™ve got to get somebody to talk me down when I get excited about somethingâ€™

Interviewer

What I mean, though, is that I mean you were saying thatâ€™

Bob Kerrey

Oh, itâ€™

Interviewer

Helps you feel some compassion forâ€™and maybe thereâ€™sâ€™

Bob Kerrey

Yeah. Look, I mean I donâ€™tâ€™Iâ€™m not Gandhi or anything like that, â€™cause I can be and behave like an asshole, like anybody else does. But yeah, first of all, it taught me that I ought to be grateful living in the United States. Iâ€™d be selling a lot of pencils on a street corner in lots of countries, because I didnâ€™t write any checks to get the V.A. and the Naval Hospital to save my life and take care of meâ€™the volunteers that came into the hospital in Philadelphia, and the V.A. where I got some care in Lincoln.

Bob Kerrey

I didnâ€™t have any right to claim that. I got it because of, you know, a generous nation, so it produces gratitude. Thatâ€™sâ€™you know, itâ€™and also, itâ€™s made me very passionate about health care, because, you know, Iâ€™m sitting here right now, Iâ€™ve gotâ€™I have a literalâ€™under Federal law, I have a claim on both your incomes, any health care needs Iâ€™ve got. As I said, Iâ€™m not lazy as a result. I donâ€™t have any illegitimate children. You canâ€™t say that itâ€™s produced bad behavior, and itâ€™s made me passionate about wanting to do the same thing for 308 million legal residents and citizens.

Bob Kerrey

We should have a claim on all of our incomes, so one big happy group, as far as Iâ€™m concerned. Yeah, and I think itâ€™s less so in the policy side than it is just I can see myâ€™if I see somebody limping, if I see somebody grimacing, if I see somebody move their shoulder or their hand, if I see a scar, I canâ€™I know what that tissue looked like before it

scarred up.

Bob Kerrey

And so I can see things that I just couldn't see before.

Interviewer

Where were you on 9/11?

Bob Kerrey

With my wife in a hospital in Hackensack, New Jersey. We had "I was living in New York. Henry was born on the 10th of September of 2001, and I went for a run that morning. We'd lived in New York. I went for a run down to the World Trade Center and came back, and cleaned up and drove with a friend of mine, who actually worked for the New York Fire Department, over to Hackensack, 'cause my baby came, had to be delivered C-section 'cause he had started to breech.

Bob Kerrey

So they took him to Hackensack, and so we arrived just after the first plane hit the tower, and we saw the second plane hit the tower from that hospital.

Interviewer

Wow. What a way to welcome a child into the world, huh?

Bob Kerrey

Well, that's "that's the glory of it, you know. But yeah, no, it's "you know, that and all "and he, you know, he grew up with it. It was more impactful for somebody who was four or five and would have an actual memory, 'cause you don't have any memories until you're two, three, four years old, so. Yeah, that whole generation grew up with it.

Interviewer

And you were asked to join the 9/11 Commission. Tell me about that.

Bob Kerrey

Well, I mean first of all, it began when Tom Daschle called me and said, "Max Cleland's in trouble." And Max, as you probably know, lost both legs and an arm above the elbow in Vietnam, and Max and I are extremely close. And he lost his election for "his reelection campaign in 2002.

Bob Kerrey

This is 2003, and so I called Max, and I'm thinking Lew Puller when I'm talking to Max Cleland. And he "I kept saying, "Max, what do you need?" And he said, "Well, I just need my friends and the good Lord," and he kept saying that.

Bob Kerrey

I said, "Max, the good Lord is not getting you through this. What do you need?" And what he needed was a job where he could get a couple people to help him, because he

needed help. And heâ€™s a phenomenally brave man. I mean after he was elected, when I campaigned for him six years earlier down in Georgia, his campaign manager called me the day before he came down. He says, â€œYou going to help Max?â€ I said, â€œYeah, Iâ€™m coming down tomorrow.â€ He said, â€œDamn, heâ€™s just getting fatter and fatter,â€ he says, â€œheâ€™s eating himself to death.â€

Bob Kerrey

So I went down there, and we had an event in Atlanta and an event in Macon, Georgia, and then I flew out and, you know, Max probably ate ten thousand calories in that seven hours I was with him.

Bob Kerrey

Well, turns out he had sleep apnea, and he was loading carbohydrates in order to stay awake. And when Iâ€™ just by coincidence, I ran into somebody in Washington and was describing the situation and Max, and he said, â€œHeâ€™s got sleep apnea.â€ I said, â€œReally? What is that?â€ And he said, â€œWell, you know, you can cure it, but youâ€™ve got to put a device on your face that goes partially down your throat.â€

Bob Kerrey

Well, when Max was injured, his trachea was cut, and he came up and tried to scream, and all it was was a hiss, and he wouldnâ€™t let anybody put anything down his throat ever again. Well, after he hadâ€”you know, after the campaign, and he knew he had to do it, he went through this extraordinarily brave process where he lost weight and he put the device on it and he got healthy again, and it was really quite a recovery. But the loss of the Senate campaign was devastating, so I was running the New School. My board now knows it, but I didnâ€™tâ€”I just did it without telling anybody.

Bob Kerrey

We had a lobbying firm in Washington, and they plussed up our bill and hired two guys, and Max, you know, got that position.

Bob Kerrey

And he then gotâ€”President Bush appointed him to the Export-Import Bank to that board, and there was staffâ€”because they didnâ€™t have any staff in the 9/11 Commission. He was onâ€”the detail, I apologize, I left outâ€”Max was on the 9/11 Commission, so we got that all done, and now heâ€™s on the Export-Import. And then I get a call from Senator Daschle and said, â€œYou got to take Maxâ€™s place.â€

Bob Kerrey

And I said, â€œTom, Iâ€™m running a university in New York. I hardly have time to do that job.â€ And in the end, I said â€œyes.â€

Interviewer

And what did the 9/11 Commission do, for the viewers, and what was your part in it?

Bob Kerrey

Well, I came late to the proposition, so I think my first day wasâ€”I know exactly when it wasâ€”it was late, sometime late in December of 2003. And itâ€™ you know, I almost said

â€œnoâ€ to it after saying â€œyesâ€ to it, because itâ€™ what we were charged with is answering the question â€œwhat happened?â€

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Bob Kerrey

â€œTell us the story.â€ And what youâ€™re dealing with is a conspiracy. There was a conspiracy to attack the United States that was atâ€™ you know, it was at least 20 years old, however long you want to track this thing down. But we had beenâ€™ we were identified as the enemy of a extremely conservative, radical religious groupâ€™ in this case, a Muslim groupâ€™ who felt grievances going all the way back to the end of the Caliphate in 1920 within Turkey.

Bob Kerrey

And they chose a religious path, and we became the enemy, in part because of Desert Storm, in part because of just who we areâ€™ the most successful liberal democracy on the planet.

Interviewer

But the Commission was charged with understanding what happened, how it happened.

Bob Kerrey

How didâ€™ how couldâ€™ yeah, â€™ cause you think, â€œHow could this happen?

Bob Kerrey

How couldâ€™ and because it was a conspiracy, it made it more difficult. Thatâ€™s why so many alternative conspiracy theories have sprung up. But we had to answer the question, â€œHow did it happen?â€ Congress had already investigated it. I think the American people trusted Congress slightly more in 2003 than they do today, but they didnâ€™t trust their results. So they put together this Commission.

Bob Kerrey

It was opposed, I think, by the White House in the beginning, and some other leaders thought it was unnecessary. They put this Commission together in an extremely partisan environment, and we got lucky. We, the American people, got lucky, because we got Tom Kean and Lee Hamilton chairing and co-chairing the group, andâ€™ because we were five Democrats, five Republicans, selected in an extremely partisan environmentâ€™ again, probably less so than today, but that isnâ€™t saying much.

Bob Kerrey

Extremely partisan environment, and managed toâ€™ because of Tom and Lee, managed to produce a report that I think in general is seen as a answer to the question, â€œWhat happened?â€

Interviewer

And what surprised you about what you learned about what happened? Whatâ€™ I mean

you were a Governor, a United States Senator, aware to some degree to the threat to the United States, I would think, in the 1980s, 1990s, leading up to your time when you departed for the New School. What did you learn about the threat, what we did wrong, what we shouldâ€™ve done, what we didnâ€™t do?

Bob Kerrey

Well, the first thing is not so much learning, but one more time, relearning how easy it is to see mistakes when youâ€™re looking back on them. Every single mistake that we made, we madeâ€™pick a numberâ€™five or six mistakes that allowed these nineteen guys to hijack four planes simultaneously and kill three thousand people. You look at those mistakes, and any one in isolation, youâ€™d say, â€œHow could you do it? How could you not put the airports at alert?

Bob Kerrey

â€œHow could you let these two guys that you tracked and that were living in San Diego, talking back to a safe house in Yemen, plotting against the Unitedâ€™how could you allow these mistakes to occur?â€

Bob Kerrey

But thatâ€™s the way we are as human beingsâ€™we make mistakes. And it accumulated into a disaster, right, so thatâ€™s the first thing: itâ€™s easy to see things when youâ€™re looking back and ID mistakes. Second is the intensity and clarity of the thinking of the individuals who have identified the United States of America as an enemy.

Bob Kerrey

The sentencing statement of Ramzi Yousef, who planned the attack on the World Trade Center in 1993â€™his uncle, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, is the one who organized theâ€™you know, he was the one who persuaded bin Laden to use planes and attack the United States. His sentencing statement is not the statement of a madman, and if youâ€™my view, you characterize these mad, you know, whatever qualifiers you put on them, you make a mistake.

Bob Kerrey

Because thereâ€™s a clarity and a passion behind what it is theyâ€™re trying to do, and you can neither reduce the threat by ignoring that clarity or passion, nor can you reduce the threat by failing to engage them in a way that allows them to know â€œyou can disagree with our foreign policy if you want toâ€™you can say whatever you want to about the United States. We donâ€™t care. But the moment you make a decision that youâ€™re going to try to target and kill us, weâ€™re going to do the same to you.â€ And we didnâ€™t do that. We, you know, theyâ€™re over in Afghanistan, heâ€™s not a big problem.

Bob Kerrey

Youâ€™re inâ€™you know, we allowed dangerous people to remain at large longer than we shouldâ€™ve, so. Itâ€™s a terrible story on both sides, because again, theâ€™not againâ€™the response, our response, is in some waysâ€™the global response to terrorism, in some ways, is very similar to the Vietnam War.

Bob Kerrey

Youâ€™re trying to identify individuals inside of where they live. Well, theyâ€™re living in

Kabul, theyâ€™re living in Fallujah, theyâ€™re livingâ€”God knows where theyâ€™re livingâ€”but theyâ€™re living in a city.

Bob Kerrey

And you know, if youâ€™d had seen Mohamed Atta in a cafÃ© in Hamburg, Germanyâ€”he was the guy who planned the attack on September 11th, was the guy who led itâ€”if youâ€™d seen him in Hamburg, Germany, in a cafÃ© in 1998, planning this thingâ€”if you and I were having coffee, and I said to him, â€œYou see that guy over there? Heâ€™s dangerous,â€”youâ€™d look at me like I was mad. Because there was nothing about his physical characteristics, nothing about his biography, that would make him appear to be dangerous.

Bob Kerrey

He didnâ€™t look like Clint Eastwood. He didnâ€™t look like, you know, Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Bob Kerrey

He didnâ€™tâ€”his head wasnâ€™t shaved bald and he wasnâ€™t on steroids. He was a failed student, and didnâ€™t look dangerous at allâ€”but he was. And he was shopping for the best prices on flight schools in Hamburg, Germany, soâ€”and that makes it doubly difficult to, you know, to try to engage in a war, because thereâ€™s suchâ€”

Interviewer

Well, whatâ€™s the lesson of that, then? Is it much more foresight and imagination about where our enemies may be, and what they may be plotting for us? And are we up to that?

Bob Kerrey

Look, I think you got toâ€”are we up to that? I think we are up to that, but thatâ€™s whatâ€”I just got back. I took three weeks, took my family over to India, and Iâ€™ve been to India before, but this is the first time Iâ€™ve been there socially. And as a result of being there socially, I did a fair amount of reading before I went over. Met the Indian Ambassador to the United Nations, Ambassador Puri, and he recommended a book called India After Gandhi, all right, so.

Bob Kerrey

And I knew this, but I didnâ€™t know it in the way that I now do. The braveness of Gandhi in 1947, and Nehruâ€”Nehru became sort of a demon in lots of ways â€”cause he was pro-Soviet and pro-China. And the bravenessâ€”what he did was he said, â€œWeâ€™re not going to create a Hindu nation. Weâ€™re going to create a nation where all religions are protected.â€”And he was killed by a Hindu who believed he was pandering to Muslims. So if youâ€™re toâ€”again, you have to conquer this understandable tendency to go too far with patriotism, and not allow alternative religions and alternative points of view.

Bob Kerrey

And you know, we canâ€™t just say that weâ€™re protecting ourselves.

Bob Kerrey

We have to recognize that we have toâ€”we actually have to be the people that Khalid

Sheikh Mohammed and others are saying that weâ€™re not. And we have to be that, and itâ€™s not easy, â€™cause you have to simultaneously go after people that are dangerous and clear and present danger to the United States. Itâ€™s not an easy thing to do. You know, Iâ€™ll give you an example where Iâ€™m justâ€™I think, â€™Oh my God.â€™

Bob Kerrey

I mean some of the conversation about immigration isâ€™I understand that we have a right to have a law that says, â€™You got to come into the United States in the following way.â€™ We have a right to limit the number of people that we allow in the United States, particularly as popular a destination as we are for the rest of the world. And I understand that we have a right to enforce those lawsâ€™I mean I get all that. But God, sometimes the language is such that you think, â€™This is justâ€™weâ€™reâ€™we donâ€™t want to create a place where weâ€™re not welcoming other people.

Bob Kerrey

And as I said, itâ€™s not easy to do. It is not easy for us to do, so I mean, itâ€™sâ€™cause you canâ€™t send these guys off to kill and die for us, and then, you know, and then not behave in a manner that makes you feel like you deserve to have them do it for us. I mean every time I go down and visit the SEAL Team guys down at Dam Neck, Virginia, I come back and say, â€™Jesus, do we really deserve to have these people working for us?â€™ I donâ€™t know. And Iâ€™ve seen evidence that we donâ€™t. And if you donâ€™t behave like, you know, like youâ€™re worthy of it, youâ€™re not going to be worthy of it.

Interviewer

You supported the war in Iraq.

Bob Kerrey

I did.

Interviewer

Tell me what prompted you to support the President in thatâ€™

Bob Kerrey

Well, it was an oldâ€™it was an older effort.

Bob Kerrey

I mean I got very much involved with the effort to maintain the no-fly zone, and soâ€™and I followed, â€™cause I wasâ€™

Interviewer

Back in the 1990s, you mean.

Bob Kerrey

Back in the â€™90s. We had â€™we had a unique Security Council Resolution imposed on Iraq. And I voted against the first Gulf War and said that we ought to allow sanctions to go, and so I was on the Intelligence Committee at the time, and I followed what we



didâ€”precisely what we did. Itâ€™s now public knowledge that ourâ€”that we wereâ€”all the time from that moment in 1991 to 2001, we were attempting to kill Saddam Hussein, you know.

Bob Kerrey

So my own view was you had to square up the open and the closed policy, so I wrote the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998, which said if youâ€™re going to try to kill this man in private, you ought to say publicly that the Iraqi people can govern themselves.

Bob Kerrey

And I believe they can. Itâ€™s notâ€”we get in these arguments and people say, â€œWe canâ€™t impose democracy on somebody else.â€ Thatâ€™s a false choice. Itâ€™s not an imposition of democracy to merely start off by saying you believe that the Iraqi people can govern themselves.

Bob Kerrey

That theyâ€™re not condemned to have a dictatorship because thereâ€™s something genetically impossible for them toâ€”whatever their constitution looks like, whatever their self-governing structure looks like. So lâ€”yeah, I supported the President â€™cause lâ€”I didnâ€™tâ€”I never did buy into the weapons of mass destruction argument. I trusted in certainly there was evidence. All he had to do was provide evidence he didnâ€™t have weapons of mass destruction when the sanctions came down, so you sort of think, â€œWell, God, he must have them, or he wouldnâ€™t want these sanctions to remain.â€

Bob Kerrey

Then we discovered later that he was shoveling all kinds of money to himself in the Oil for Peace program, and actually was doing quite well under the sanctions, so.

Interviewer

But the weapons of mass destruction was not, to you, the motivation for war. It was planting the seed of democracyâ€”

Bob Kerrey

Right. Right. Not planting the seed, but supporting those who were both arguing for, particularly the Kurds in the north, but also Shiâ€™a in the south, that believe that Saddam Hussein was a threat to them. They didnâ€™t like the fact that he was throwing many of them in prison. That he attacked them after the Gulf War. They were making an argument that they could govern themselves. They were making the argument that a dictatorship was unnecessary.

Interviewer

Do you still feel support for the war in Iraq, now we came back?

Bob Kerrey

Well, if youâ€”you have to alter the question, if you donâ€™t mind me falling back into my political mode ofâ€”

Interviewer

Itâ€™s all right.

Bob Kerrey

Being able to change whatever questionâ€™s asked to suit me.

Bob Kerrey

If youâ€™d have told me that the Powell Doctrine was going to be thrown overboard, told me that they were going to shut down the Iraqi Army and kick everybody that had any Baathist connections out, and create the environment for sectarian violence, I probably wouldnâ€™t have done it. Probably wouldâ€™ve said, â€œLook, what we ought to be doing is ramping up the support for indigenous forces, locally. They will eventually get the job done.â€

Bob Kerrey

Because once you bring a couple hundred thousand people in a violent environment, then have to provide their security at the same time, because the Iraqi Armyâ€™s been, Police Force has been shut down, we become their police force as well. Again, itâ€™sâ€

Interviewer

So your answer would be that itâ€™

Bob Kerrey

I would say if you give me all facts in about how we were going to conduct this thing, I think Iâ€™d have voted â€œno.â€

Interviewer

But that it wasâ€™itâ€™s more because it was mismanaged.

Bob Kerrey

Yeah.

Interviewer

Not because of the originalâ€™

Bob Kerrey

No, Iâ€™yeah. On the other hand, I do think that, you know, for those who fought in it, I still believe it was a very good cause. I do think thereâ€™s a liberation that occurred. I donâ€™t buy the argument that the Iraqi people were better off with Saddam Hussein. I donâ€™t buy it at all, and believe that weâ€™ve ignored that negative impact of these dictatorships in the Middle East for a long, long time, and, you know, so I think the men and women who served in Iraq fought a good cause. It was â€œit was a fight for freedom.

Interviewer

Do you think it has a relationship to the Arab Spring thatâ€™s happened in the past couple of years?

Bob Kerrey

Maybe.

Interviewer

In other words, did the warâ€”

Bob Kerrey

It didâ€”

Interviewer

Unleash some sort of forces thatâ€”

Bob Kerrey

It wasâ€”our success inâ€”I mean in Iraq, our initial success in Iraq, was humiliating for our opponents, because we crushed them.

Bob Kerrey

You cannot getâ€”you canâ€™t ignore that. You have to stop and say, â€œOh my God.â€ As excited and enthusiastic as we are with Shock and Awe, those who are being shocked and awed donâ€™t feel excitementâ€”they feel humiliationâ€”and my guess is, for a short period of time it actually made things worse in terms of getting people to say, â€œWe can do this on our own.â€

Bob Kerrey

Because theyâ€™re not doing it on their ownâ€”somebodyâ€™s doing it for them. I think that the biggest driver in the Arab Spring is likely, by the time itâ€™s all sorted out, to be technology.

Interviewer

Much like it was for the end of the Cold War.

Bob Kerrey

Much like it was for the end of the Cold War. Yeah. I think itâ€™s apt to be just this technology. Youâ€™re able to organize and put hundreds of thousands of people into rear without much difficulty.

Bob Kerrey

And you can sustain it, so I think that is apt to be seen as the, you know, the most important factor. But, you know, the fact that youâ€™ve got an election in Iraq. You know, neighborhoodâ€™s a big deal, so if Iâ€™m living in Egypt, and I can say, â€œI hated what the Americans did, and I dislike them, but damn, they just had an election in Iraq, and you know, theyâ€™re in control.â€

Interviewer

A real election.

Bob Kerrey

A real electionâ€”theyâ€™re controlling their own destiny, you know. I think Obamaâ€™s speech in Cairo probably had a big impact. If Iâ€™m sitting in that audience, Iâ€™d say, â€œWait a minute. I look just like this guy. Heâ€™s President and Iâ€™m unemployed. What the hellâ€™s wrong with this picture?â€ And he couldâ€™ve just stood up there and said nothing, and apt to have had a big impact. And heâ€™s Barack Hussein Obamaâ€”President Barack Hussein Obama. Thereâ€™s something wrong with what people are telling me about the United States if the United States can elect Barack Hussein Obama.

Bob Kerrey

â€œTheyâ€™ve been telling me how bad America is, and how bad democracy is, and, you know, it canâ€™t be, you know.â€ So I think probably there were a number of factors that led to Arab Spring.

Interviewer

One last question: since leaving the service, youâ€™ve ended up leading a life of leadership, andâ€”

Bob Kerrey

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer

One of the things that we teach here is leadership.

Bob Kerrey

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer

What did you learn as a leader of men in the Navy SEALs that you draw upon in your role as a Governor, as a member of the U.S. Senate, as the President of a major university?

Bob Kerrey

Well, I mean first of all, I still think in five-paragraph patrol orders, soâ€”and I got that from Ranger School, and Iâ€™ve never forgot it, you know? Paying attention to detail, Iâ€™ve never forgotten. Learning that you canâ€™t delegate responsibility, Iâ€™ve never forgotten.

Bob Kerrey

You know, I would say the experience of following people and learning howâ€”you know, how it feels to follow, â€”cause, you know, I was in a school the other day, â€”cause of this new job that Iâ€™ve gotten. And this really remarkable principalâ€”

Interviewer

What is your new job, just so we know?

Bob Kerrey

Iâ€™m managing an education technology company.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Bob Kerrey

So this teacher says to me, she said, â€œI hate managing adults.â€ Sheâ€™s the principal of the school, high school. 60 percent Title Iâ€”tough kids. 95 percent graduation rateâ€”sheâ€™s moved the needle, all right? So Iâ€™m saying so sheâ€™s a success. â€œI hate managing adults.â€ I said, â€œWhatâ€™s that mean?â€ She saidâ€”and I got this from the service as wellâ€”as much as we have chain of command and you got to follow chain of command, a good leader wants people that donâ€™t have to be managed.

Bob Kerrey

And thatâ€™s all she was saying. She manages, but she manages better if youâ€™ve got people that are taking initiative and trying to figure out how to solve the problem on their own.

Bob Kerrey

And you got to acknowledge in that kind of an environment that every now and then, youâ€™re going to make mistakes. You canâ€™t get a batting average much over 500, and myself, you know. And I think and try to enjoy yourself while youâ€™reâ€”whatever it is youâ€™re doing. Taking pleasure from life all the way along the way is not a bad thing, either.

Interviewer

Okayâ€”thank you very much.

Bob Kerrey

Youâ€™re welcome.

Bob Kerrey

[End of Audio]