

John Abizaid  
Interviewer

Okay, today is October 16, Tuesday, October 16, 2012. We're in the studios of the Center for Oral History at West Point with General John Abizaid. General, would you spell your name for us, please?

John Abizaid

A B I Z A I D.

Interviewer

All right, good. And that is a Lebanese name, is that right?

Interviewer

Yes, it is Lebanese.

Interviewer

Tell me a little bit about the family's story.

John Abizaid

The family showed up around 1878 came into the Northeastern part of the United States, settled in the Boston area, primarily. Parts of the family came in and out. They'd go back to Lebanon to try to find somebody to marry, and sometimes the rules would change on immigration. Some of them had to end up going to Brazil and Mexico and other places. So the Abizaid family showed up in the 1870s. The part of my family didn't stay in the Northeast.

John Abizaid

It ended up moving all the way across the country in search of work, as you can imagine, and so we're the Western clan. And I was born in California, and my father spent most of his life out in California.

Interviewer

You did.

Interviewer

Did you grow up with a sense of identity as a Lebanese-American, or did.

John Abizaid

Yeah.

John Abizaid

Yeah, but not

Interviewer

It was spoken in the home, and

John Abizaid

No, no language wasn't spoken.

Interviewer

I didn't mean language. I meant in the home.

John Abizaid

The culture.

Interviewer

There was a pride of being that.

John Abizaid

Yeah, everybody's screaming and yelling at each other around the table, and you know, typical ethnic American sort of life.

Interviewer

Was your mother also Lebanese?

John Abizaid

No, my mother was born in Bozeman, Montana, in 1912, and her last name was Williams, which was very un Lebanese.

Interviewer

Yes. So she was the quiet one at the dinner table.

John Abizaid

Yeah, well, there was a clash of cultures when the two families would come together. You know the staid Williamses and the un staid Abizaid, so you can imagine.

Interviewer

How did they meet how did your parents meet?

John Abizaid

After World War II in San Francisco. My dad was out of the Navy. My dad was on sub chasers in World War II, and he enlisted. He's a very interesting guy. He served around the world in a lot of different places. He had been working on the Panama Canal.

Interviewer

Really.

John Abizaid

He was a mechanic. He was very good. He did

John Abizaid

He was a mechanic. He was very good. He did

John Abizaid

Yeah, before I was born. This is in the '30s. He did not graduate from high school. Neither did my mother. She didn't graduate from high school, either. And so he was a very good mechanic. World War II happened. He had been in Panama, just got to San Francisco. Had just landed a job in a shipyard and tried to join the Army. The Army wouldn't take him because he was too old, and the Navy said, "Well, we'll take you as a mechanic," and he became a Chief Motor Machinist Mate.

John Abizaid

Served in the Solomon Islands he was also on convoy duty for a short period of time in the Atlantic. Then they went through the Panama Canal, interestingly enough, in his small sub chaser, and they went out into the Solomons. He served in Guadalcanal, Bougainville, spent a lot of time in Fiji, the Philippines, etc. But most of his combat experience was down in the Philippines, where they would try to interdict Japanese barges that were coming into Guadalcanal to reinforce the garrison there, or feed the garrison. Get it food, fuel, whatever.

John Abizaid

And so there was the big Navy war of cruisers and battleships out in the Sound, Iron Bottom Sound off of Guadalcanal. And then there was the small patrol boat war that was going on all around, and he was part of that. And they would he had some very, very interesting experiences out there.

Interviewer

He told you all the stories about the war growing up?

John Abizaid

He told me a lot of stories about serving in the Navy. He enjoyed his time in the Navy. He enjoyed the adventure of it. Very hardly ever talked about the combat actions, but he did talk a lot about how interesting it was to be part of a big adventure. And he's the kind of guy, him and my uncles had an uncle in the Army, an uncle in the Marines, an uncle in the Army Air Corps. All of them had fought in the Second World War. And then sitting around the table telling stories about their military experience certainly had a lot to do with me wanting to be a soldier.

Interviewer

Inspired you, huh?

John Abizaid

Yeah, you'd say so.

Interviewer

Your mother died young.

John Abizaid

She died young she did. She died when I was young, and she died when she was young, yeah.

Interviewer

Tell me that. How old were you when you lost your mother?

John Abizaid

Oh, it was in I was eleven years old, ten or eleven years old, and she passed away from cancer. She had had a very tough medical time because she suffered from multiple sclerosis as well. And so it was my sister and myself and my dad and my mom my mom passed away, and like normally happens after a big, traumatic event in the family, we moved. And we moved from the San Francisco Bay area up into the Sierra Nevadas, and got settled up there, and Colville, California, Bridgeport, California, commonly known as the Waziristan of the United States.

Interviewer

That must've been something of a trauma for you to lose your

John Abizaid

Well, you don't know how much of a trauma it is. You deal with the problems that you're presented with early in life, and whatever the problem may be.

Interviewer

What did you father do after the Navy? What was his.

John Abizaid

He was a mechanic. He worked in service stations.

Interviewer

Uh-huh.

John Abizaid

Very smart guy, very capable guy, had a great interest in the world, and he was also very interested in making sure he took good care of the family, which he tried to do quite well.

Interviewer

So the move was to just change the scenery is that what it was?

John Abizaid

I think so, yeah.

Interviewer

Did he marry again?

John Abizaid

No.

Interviewer

Is he alive today?

John Abizaid

No.

Interviewer

Good. And he raised you and your sister.

John Abizaid

Yes.

Interviewer

All by himself.

John Abizaid

Yep.

Interviewer

That's tough, 'cause he had to go to work, of course, right?

John Abizaid

Yeah. Well, I mean, look, he was an extraordinary guy, and he was interested in making sure that we had opportunities. Life for him was about opportunity. He always thought that he had opportunity, despite the fact that he hadn't graduated from high school. He figured out how to educate himself. He did well in the Navy. Every time he had a chance to do something, he would figure out a way to make it work. And he was determined in particular to make sure that my sister could go to college. It was a very big deal for that to happen.

Interviewer

She was older, is that right?

John Abizaid

Two years older. She went to Chico State College, and she became a teacher.

Interviewer

You said Waziristan.

John Abizaid

Yeah.

Interviewer

What do you mean?

John Abizaid

Have you ever been up there to that part of California?

Interviewer

No, Iâ€™ve never been there.

John Abizaid

The California Nevada border area is a lot like the Pakistan Afghanistan border area.

John Abizaid

Really.

John Abizaid

Everybodyâ€™s heavily armed.â They donâ€™t like the Federal government.â Thereâ€™s a certain amount of drugs that go back and forth across the border.

Interviewer

Itâ€™s like the Bo Gritz area, is that right?

John Abizaid

Yeah.

Interviewer

That kind of

John Abizaid

Yeah.

Interviewer

Yes.

John Abizaid

And if youâ€™re a retired General, itâ€™s the perfect place to live, so.â And I met my wife out there when I was in high school, and so we started dating.

Interviewer

You were high school sweethearts.

John Abizaid

Yeah, and she survived West Point. And I did.â We got married after West Point, and weâ€™re still married, which is surprising to me shows how tolerant she is.

Interviewer

West Point, for a mechanic's son, is a pretty big deal.

John Abizaid

West Point, for a mechanic's son, who went to a school that had a graduating class of 24, is pretty good.

John Abizaid

Yeah

John Abizaid

And it was a struggle when I first came here to West Point, because Colville High School, for all of its positive attributes, did not have what I would call the world class high school education that you might find in San Francisco or Los Angeles or New York. It was a very small, rural school, where you got through whatever you had to get through, and you pretty well went to work, and used to work on the ranches and stuff. Worked for the Forest Service.

Interviewer

Academically, you think.

John Abizaid

Well, you know, yeah. I mean math in particular was very hard. To come into the calculus of West Point as a plebe was startling to come into the military arena you know I worked on ranches. I worked on a cattle ranch. I worked on a sheep ranch. I worked for the Forest Service. So when I was growing up, I used to work I had to work in order to have any money to spend. And I think it prepared me well for the military part of the Military Academy, but it didn't prepare me well I could also shoot, by the way.

John Abizaid

But it didn't prepare me very well for what I would call the academic part of the Military Academy, and so I'd say in the initial stages of being a new Cadet, and then being a fourth class Cadet, being a plebe, it was a challenge to get through mathematics when you really hadn't been given the background in high school. It's not that it had to be given to you, but it was interesting. And you know, I knew I had to take a foreign language, and so I took German by correspondence. By the way, everybody.

Interviewer

In high school you did.

John Abizaid

In high school, yeah. And by the way, everybody in my high school I had determined early on that I wanted to go to the Military Academy. And so I was determined to do that, and people were determined to help, and the amount of support from the local community was pretty good. And I played sports, and I was involved in student government, but of course it's easy to be very important in a 100 person high school.

Interviewer

I was going to say, itâ€™s not hard to make the football team then.

John Abizaid

No, and then you have to play both ways, which is hard. And youâ€™re in the Nevada B school league, which included Gerlach, Nevada, Gabbs, the Gabbs Tarantulas Gerlach, Gabbs, Smith Valley. I mean these are household names all over Nevada. Most Nevadans donâ€™t know where these places are.

Interviewer

Your father mustâ€™ve been very and your uncle as an Army veteran mustâ€™ve been very proud of your coming to West Point, Iâ€™m guessing.

John Abizaid

Yeah, I think they were proud, and they were surprised. I mean it was I think unexpected. As a matter of fact, I wouldnâ€™t have gotten into West Point had the class not expanded in 1969. It was the middle of the Vietnam War. The war was very unpopular. The demands on the Officer Corps were high. I was working for the Forest Service and I was in Las Vegas, Nevada. Thereâ€™s an area around Las Vegas called Mount Charleston. And there was a forest fire up there, and my little hot shot crew had been deployed up there, and we were working on the fire.

John Abizaid

And I had not been accepted to West Point I had applied. I had gone through all the procedures. I had a scholarship to go to the University of Idaho in Moscow as an NROTC, Naval ROTC Cadet.

Interviewer

That would be Moscow, Idaho, of course.

John Abizaid

Yeah, absolutely. And I thought, well, this should be a lot of fun, to and I wanted to be a Land Officer. So my plan then was since I obviously hadnâ€™t gotten into West Point, I was going to go into the Marine Corps. But they expanded the class, and so they appointed people that are called additional appointees. And two days before the class started, I was in Las Vegas fighting the forest fire, and my forest fire supervisor came to me and said, "You have been accepted to go to West Point. They need to know whether or not you accept." And I said, "Yes, I accept, but how am I going to get home and get all my stuff, etc.?" He said, "Weâ€™ll take care of that." So they took me down to the Las Vegas bus station. I got on a bus. We drove towards Reno. My dad lived between Reno and Las Vegas, and he was out there waiting for the bus with my suitcases packed according to the West Point packing list. And then I went to the airport and I got on the first airliner Iâ€™d ever been on. Iâ€™d been on a small plane before because of the Forest Service, but never an airliner and I flew to West Point.

Interviewer

And clearly, youâ€™d never been to West Point before, either.



John Abizaid

Oh, I'd certainly never been to New York, and I realized that I wasn't in Kansas anymore. No, I mean it was quite a shock to move that quickly.

Interviewer

Yeah.

John Abizaid

And I was having breakfast, and I kept thanking the waitress for my breakfast as she'd bring me, you know.

Interviewer

This is in New York City?

John Abizaid

In New York City, yeah, near the Port Authority. She'd bring me my orange juice, and I'd say, "Thank you." And then the toast, and I'd say, "Thank you." And so I mean I know you can't use this on the tape, but at one point she said, "Hey, let me tell you something you need to quit thanking me." I'm just doing my fucking job. And that's when I realized that I'd left California.

Interviewer

What were your first impressions of West Point when you got here?

John Abizaid

Well, I mean, look, I had read about it. I knew I wanted to be an Army Officer. I knew that I wanted to be a Land Force Officer. I was prepared to go in the Marine Corps if I had to, but I really wanted to go to West Point. That was my first goal. I had read an awful lot of military history. I loved reading military history, and I read a lot about World War II. My family had fought in World War II. Uncles had served, here, there, and everywhere else. My dad did. And so I thought it was very important to learn about it, and so in reading about World War II, you can't help but read about West Point Officers. And I was also interested in the Civil War everybody that fought in the Civil War was a West Point Officer. Not everybody, but you know what I mean.

Interviewer

And who did you admire in your reading? Who did you want to sort of follow in the footsteps of?

John Abizaid

Well, I never really necessarily thought of myself as being a General. I always thought of myself as being a Company grade Officer as being a Lieutenant or a Captain. And it was my goal to get to West Point, become an Army Officer, see what the Army was like, and then determine whether or not I was going to stay in. I thought I would probably want to stay in, but I didn't know that for sure. And I got to West Point, and I have to admit, had we not done summer training out in the field occasionally, I'm not sure that I would've stuck around.

John Abizaid

I mean I found beast barracks to be a very demeaning sort of a training opportunity. It was one where, you know, you sat at the end of the table and upperclassmen screamed at you, and you didn't eat, and you had to recite meaningless information. And I mean I understood what the purpose of it was, but I didn't appreciate it, and I didn't think that that's really the way to educate Officers. I always thought it was quite interesting when I became a Second Lieutenant, with my Platoon Sergeant out in the field, and my Platoon Sergeant and I would wait until every one of the men had been fed.

John Abizaid

And we had to make sure there was enough food. We had to take care of them. I mean they came first. But at West Point, the fourth class Cadets came last, and I always ask myself what was it about the real Army that said you had to take care of your troops, vs. West Point, which said you had to abuse your troops? And it served me in good stead to keep that in my mind as I went through the ranks and eventually came back as the Commandant, because I think West Point demeans itself by not teaching inspirational leadership. It demeans itself. It needs to be hard, but it needs to be hard in a physical, military way, not in a demeaning, sophomoric sort of a way. And I don't buy the notion that just because it was good for the class of 1802, it's good for the class of 2002.

Interviewer

Sounds like it's also important to the.

John Abizaid

By the way, I didn't do badly as a plebe. I mean I did quite well as a plebe. But I didn't think it was right, but it took me a while to realize that that's not the way you deal with human beings. You try, first and foremost, to try to inspire them, if you are a leader.

Interviewer

Just to skip ahead, because you referenced it, and so when you were Commandant, did you institute any or push for any changes in the beast barracks system so it wasn't in a demeaning.

John Abizaid

Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. I worked very hard to try to get some of what I thought the sophomoric antics of the fourth class system out of the system. I worked very hard to bring hazing to a minimum that I could very hard to do. I mean cultures are deeply embedded here. I think I was successful because I knew I wanted to do it from the first moment that I arrived here as a Commandant, and I didn't waste any time on it. And I was fought not only by the Cadets, but I was fought also by the graduates, who believed that we were going soft. And I assured them we weren't going soft, and I assured them that they could not pass the military training that we conducted at West Point, because it was much harder than anything they ever went through.

Interviewer

What year was it were you a Commandant?

John Abizaid

I think it was 1998 to 2000, but weâ€™TMII have to check our dates, right?

Interviewer

Sure, weâ€™TMII check them.Â Weâ€™TMII check them weâ€™TMII annotate it.Â But when you arrived here, it was â€™TM69.

John Abizaid

Yep.

Interviewer

So the war was raging.

John Abizaid

Yeah.

Interviewer

What was it like to be at West Point in the heart of the Vietnam War?

John Abizaid

Yeah.Â Well, one thing that was bad about being at West Point, all my friends, of course, were off in college. And they were able to actually see the opposite sex, and you know, talk to them, and see them.Â And those of us at West Point, of course, we were in an all-male environment, and it was a very austere, Spartan sort of environment.Â But it was also clear that the country was very, very solidly trending against the war, and it was not unusual to be in your uniform, and someone would say something to you that was derogatory about the war, about the military. Â Iâ€™TMd see Officers and soldiers in uniform that were abused by our citizens.Â Iâ€™TMII never forget when I was a Cadet Company Commander.Â We were the Color Company for a march on going into Boston College, and we had to practice a drill to protect the colors of our country from our countrymen. I mean those were the kind of days that they happened to be.Â Iâ€™TMII never forget marching into Boston College and this isnâ€™TMt to say that Boston College was any different than anywhere else, but.

Interviewer

Every campus was probably the same way.

John Abizaid

I mean there were students lining the rails, shouting, â€™Sieg heil,â€™ etc.Â There were supportive students.Â I mean thereâ€™TMs nothing completely black or white about that time, but it was a violent time.Â It was aggressively anti military.Â It was one where your future profession was called into question every day.Â The Superintendent, General Koster, was accused of complicity in the cover up on My Lai.Â I mean it hit you every day. Â Youâ€™TMd have debates in the classrooms with your instructors about the moral standing of the war whether what we were doing was the right thing.Â I mean we were young people.Â We were affected by what other young people were doing.Â We were affected by the times.Â We were somewhat rebellious.Â But on the other hand, we were also all

committed to join the Army to be a part of it.

Interviewer

Well, I was going to ask you, "cause your generation, of course, is going one way, and by your choice of profession, almost, you're going the other way." On the other hand, what you're saying is that you could even, even within the classroom here you could see this kind of rebelliousness appearing in order to challenge some of the assumptions of the war, is that right?

John Abizaid

Well, it certainly was nothing compared to what my sister went through at Chico State University, I can assure you.

Interviewer

What were your own feelings about the war at the time?

John Abizaid

I was very much in support of continuing the war through to a successful conclusion, and it was because that's how I believed the United States fought its wars. That even with the Korean War as a model of kind of an inconclusive result, I believed that there was an opportunity for successful conclusion if we would just stick with it. I didn't know what the method was. I wasn't competent enough to understand what it might be. But I thought that there could be a successful outcome to it. But on the other hand, I would also say that the pain that it was putting the country through, you had to ask yourself every now and then whether it was worth it. Of course, the Army that I graduated into was an Army that was wounded. It was wounded by the experience in the Vietnam War. It was proud, but not nearly as capable as when it had started the war. It was unpopular. It was ill disciplined. There were problems that I saw when I was a Cadet.

Interviewer

I want to get to that, but before we leave your West Point years, when you look back now at the war, what is your attitude towards it? Was it a winnable war?

John Abizaid

I think the war could've been that we could've had a better outcome had we developed a strategy that was one that allowed for negotiated settlement early on. I don't think I think it's not unlike my own experience in commanding at the CENTCOM level, where you have a notion of war on the World War II model, and it falls well short of that. And so the outcome could've been better. The lives lost were great. But every great power goes through these tests. The test of the Vietnam War for the Army was whether or not it could hold together. The Army nearly failed that challenge, but it was the outcome of the Vietnam War that allowed us to build the Army that we have today, which is a superb and capable tactical instrument.

Interviewer

You know the Bob Sorley thesis about Creighton Abrams and Westmoreland.

John Abizaid

Yeah.

Interviewer

His notion that Westmoreland lost the war.Â Abrams would, if he had been Commanding General from the start, would have won it.Â And that's oversimplifying it, but you know the thesis.

John Abizaid

Yeah, I read Sorley's book. I read it when I was getting ready to look at having to move into a different phase in the Iraq conflict, and it made a very important impact on me. I mean here's a Commander struggling with coming up with a solution, when civilian leaders have already come to different conclusions. And so reconciling this civil military friction point is one of the toughest things senior Commanders have to do.Â But more importantly, reconciling the civil military friction point as a young Officer is just as important. Â You have to be able to get your troops to do what they have to do, which is the toughest thing of all, which is fight somebody risk your life.Â And young Officers have got to be good enough to be inspirational even when the political underpinnings of the mission may not be what you would wish them to be. And that's what leadership's all about causing people to do things that they might not do otherwise. And that's what this institution's all about preparing people to be able to meet those very tough challenges.

Interviewer

What did you take away from the Sorley thesis that you could apply to the situation in Iraq?

John Abizaid

Well, what I took away from it and I believe it actually solidified my conclusion. My conclusion going into Iraq is that we had to turn it over, the conduct of the war and security, to the Iraqis, as fast as we possibly could.Â And that was the single most important thing that we could do.Â And that Iraq would only be won by the Iraqis, not by the Americans. And so preparing them for the challenges that they would face was hugely important. I don't think we moved quickly enough, because of a lot of different political and military reasons, but Sorley's book showed me that Abrams was on to something that there was a way ahead that there was a way ahead in partnership that would've allowed for a better conclusion, if it had been started earlier. But that's not what happened there, nor is it really what happened in Iraq.

Interviewer

We'll come back to that, of course.Â So what you were starting to describe was the Army of the 1970s, popularly known as the hollow force, isn't that right?

John Abizaid

Well, the Army of the 1970s was a mess, and it was a mess because of years of difficulty in Vietnam, and then years of resource starvation immediately after Vietnam. I was a young Cadet.Â We had what was called the AOT, Army Orientation Training, and I went to the 14th Armored Cavalry in Fulda, Germany, the Fulda Gap one of the most important places in the world.Â This was an elite Armored Cavalry unit.Â Sauve moi was their Regimental motto.

Interviewer

Fulda Gap being, just for our viewers, the point at which.

John Abizaid

The most important point in the American sector, where the Eighth Guards Army would smash through on its way to the Pyrenees. And quite frankly, what was there to stop them, I was shocked to see, was an undisciplined force of troops that were tired from the Vietnam War, that were drafted they were there unwillingly. The discipline of the force was bad. Drug usage was rampant. Racial tensions were high. Officers were afraid to do their duty, in some respects, because the Army was just falling apart. And to a certain extent, a lot of people had come to the conclusion that not just the Army was falling apart, but that society was falling apart. And it was just one of these times that you go through in your life where you question everything. You question authority, you question institutions, you question whether or not what you're doing is really making sense or not. And when I went to that unit, I saw race riots, I saw drug usage, I saw the troops sabotage their own vehicles when they were alerted to go to the field. I mean I was starting to think, "This is really a serious problem." And you know on the other hand, there were great young Officers that were trying to get the job done.

Interviewer

How do you get the job done with that kind of challenge around you?

John Abizaid

Well, the way you do it.

John Abizaid

Were people trying to stop the drug abuse people trying to intervene in racial conflict?

John Abizaid

Yeah, absolutely.

Interviewer

They were.

John Abizaid

Absolutely. There were always pockets of excellent leadership, trying to do the right thing day after day after day. And it was hard, and it was discouraging, but it wasn't breaking down completely. And the reason it didn't break down completely is because there would be officers that would walk into the middle of the race riot, and either draw their weapon, or collar the particular person that was leading the problem, and get him under control through personal inspirational leadership.

Interviewer

Do you recall seeing any real incidents yourself?

John Abizaid

Absolutely.

Interviewer

Can you describe any of them?

John Abizaid

Yeah, I recall the Regimental Commander of the 14th Armored Cavalry Regiment walking into a riot with his Officers that were armed, because the MPs had refused to respond to the call to get the riot under control. And he personally threatened the ringleader and brought him under arrest.

Interviewer

This was a race riot a racially based conflict?

John Abizaid

Yeah, it was a racial conflict. I mean you can't even imagine these sorts of things today, but that's what was going on in that Army.

Interviewer

With drug use, you saw that personally also?

John Abizaid

No, I didn't see it myself.

Interviewer

You heard a lot of stories.

John Abizaid

I mean it was clear that it was going on. I mean people would come to work completely screwed up. And so look, this is not to dwell on how bad it was. It's to say that the Army was a mess, and that there were good Officers and good Non Commissioned Officers that knew that they could make it better, and they stuck with it. They weren't afraid of it. They stayed with it when others said, "We've had enough of this. I'm not going to stick around." And then there were guys like Creighton Abrams, who became Chief of Staff of the Army, who said, "We're going to fix it." So maybe one of the the only time I've ever been in the Army where it was in bad shape was when I was first commissioned. And throughout my career, we were always on an upward glide path towards being better trained, more ready, more capable, more disciplined, more professional. And it was very, very important to me throughout my career to ensure that that trend continued. Matter of fact, I think in many ways one of the most satisfying things I ever did was serve in the Army that was broken, and serve with it while we knew we were fixing it.

Interviewer

"Cause you'd seen the other side, in a sense, right?

John Abizaid

Absolutely, and you know, in 1973 I can remember, after I'd been commissioned, we were on a REFORGER exercise or maybe it was '74, but it was in that period where

you're in Germany, and you know that you're starting to fix some of the problems. You still haven't gotten at it, but you also know that if the Russian Army comes across that border, you're in real trouble. You know it. Ten years later, standing on the same place, I couldn't wait for them to come across that border, because I knew we would kick their ass. Isn't that amazing? So I mean this is how I kind of think of my Army. The Army that constantly improved from the time that I was commissioned till ten years later, I was confident that if the enemy of my country came across that border, that we would destroy them in a way that they couldn't imagine.

Interviewer

Now, to what do we owe that repair, that transformation?

John Abizaid

The professionalization of the Non Commissioned Officer Corps, number one. The professionalization of the Officer Corps, number two. The adoption of standards that people actually enforced was number three. And then the stick to it iveness of people that had remembered how the Army used to be before Vietnam and were actually very, very steadfast in their desire to regain those standards of professionalism.

Interviewer

To what do we owe, though I mean the all volunteer Army starts in '73, right? So what was the.

John Abizaid

Well, we had a lot of bad steps in there, too, right?

Interviewer

Well, but is this really were the problems in the Army really mostly related to conscription the fact that you had people there who didn't want to be there.

John Abizaid

Right.

Interviewer

By the time you had the Army transformed to an all volunteer, you had a professional force, by definition.

John Abizaid

Well, by 1983 the force is professional, and the force is also starting to get an influx of new equipment. The M1 Abrams tank, the Bradley fighting vehicle, the Apache helicopter, the amount of money that's being spent, especially during the Reagan defense build up, is making the Army an instrument of national policy again. It's no longer a liability. It's an instrument that can be fashioned in a way that's superb.

John Abizaid

Do you think if the Russians had struck in the late '70s we would've lost to them?

John Abizaid



No. I think what would've happened is that the calculations of the leaders would've resulted in nuclear war. I think if the Russians had come across the border, they might've enjoyed some initial tactical success, but we would've quickly devolved into a nuclear exchange, and none of us would be making films right now.

Interviewer

Because we wouldn't have conventional strength to rely upon.

John Abizaid

Absolutely.

Interviewer

Scary thought.

John Abizaid

Well, the other thought is scary, too. Let's say something had happened in that period during the meltdown of the Soviet Union, where we had decided to use military force to push it along. Then the weaker party would've resorted to some sort of a nuclear exchange themselves, perhaps. It's highly hypothetical. But I think our ability to have not only achieved a nuclear standoff with the Russians, but then gained tactical conventional parity, created a dynamic for them where they knew that they could not keep pace with the United States and its allies. And that accelerated the fall of the Soviet Union. I think probably one of the great unwritten stories of the history of our country will be how well we managed the default and demise of the Soviet Union in a way that was peaceful. It's kind of.

Interviewer

Without helping it along, you mean.

John Abizaid

Yeah.

Interviewer

Without stepping in and taking advantage of it.

John Abizaid

Well, I think we stepped in and took advantage of it, but in a very deft and capable way. And I think we were very judicious in the way that that was handled politically.

Interviewer

Let's come back to your personal story. You Branch what?

John Abizaid

Infantry.

John Abizaid

Where everyone should go.

Interviewer

Where to you go from your commissioning here?

John Abizaid

By the way, there's another interesting thing as I was a Cadet. My Cadet Company Tactical Officer was a guy named George Joulwan, who's also a Syrian-American. He's Lebanese Syrian. Joulwan is, this surname is the people that were in the Golan Heights. But also a lot of these people were from Lebanon, etc. So during that period, there was an awful lot of Palestinian and Arab terrorism going on, and so our Company got the nickname of Black September, as you can imagine. You know, two Lebanese, and Joulwan was just a great Army football player went on to be a four-star Commander. He was one of the guys that helped fix the Army of the '70s.

Interviewer

What did he do?

John Abizaid

Well, he.

Interviewer

What do you mean by that?

John Abizaid

He was committed to excellence. He was committed to making the Army better. He knew what had to be done, and he was a forceful, capable leader. But he was also an inspirational leader. He didn't demean people, he inspired people, and I think that type of leadership got the Army from its very difficult days in the early 1970s to its rebirth in the early 1980s. And by the way, there were all sorts of senior leaders. Max Thurman's one of them, Creighton Abrams another there's very DePuy is a theoretician who's thinking about these things. Of course, we also had the luxury of not being at war during that period. We didn't think we'd ever go to war again after Vietnam. But the adoption of training standards where you had a task, there were certain conditions to it, and then standards that had to be met. And the buy in of the Officer Corps and the Non Commissioned Officer Corps to achieve those standards, and a group of people that were joining the Army that wanted to be in the Army, created a dynamic where we really built a great organization.

Interviewer

Before we get too far away from the West Point years, tell me what you learned here that proved to be your most valuable lesson in your career.

John Abizaid

Yeah. Well, if you ask me tomorrow what my most valuable lesson is, I'll probably give you a different answer. It all depends on context, right? But I think it was a sense of history that West Point gave me, and I think West Point gives everybody a sense of

history. A What a place everywhere you'd look, there's history. A Something has happened here in the history of the Republic. Some Second Lieutenant who died in some far off battlefield on the plains of Montana, or North Dakota, or South Dakota, fighting in the Indian Wars, has got a marker where you happened to see it in some far off corner of this place. A Everywhere you look, it's Grant, it's Lee, it's Patton, it's Eisenhower, MacArthur. I mean these are people that have made the history of the country. A But it wasn't the people, per se, as much as it was the notion that the Army plays a huge role in the history of the nation. A The Army in peacetime builds the nation, it builds the people. It creates a dynamic that allows the nation to be a better place, if it's handled properly, etc. A And so the role of the Army in the values of the nation, and making this country a great country and keeping it a great country, I think just came home to me more and more. And then the History Department, in particular, and the study of our battles, our conflicts what's so interesting about the study of American military history is, contrary to popular belief, we spent almost as much time losing as winning. A And it's in these failures where you see the real character of people come forward.

Interviewer

Explain to me what you mean by that what are you thinking?

John Abizaid

Well, look at George Washington. A George Washington builds the nation, yet in terms of his won loss record, he loses almost every single battle he fights up until the end of the war. A But his courage, his dedication, his devotion, his inspiration to his troops, keeps the Army in the field, and because the Army stays in the field, the British lose patience. They decide that they just have to let this place go. A Sure, there were some victories, but the fact that he kept the Army in the field, despite all of its setbacks, is really a great story that every American should appreciate. A At least every American soldier should appreciate.

Interviewer

I asked you before whom you admire most in the pantheon of great American military heroes.

John Abizaid

Well, there's three for me that are unmistakable. A First is George Washington for the reasons I just mentioned. A George Washington made the Republic, for all intents and purposes. A Without him, we wouldn't have been successful. A The second is Ulysses S. Grant. A He held the Republic together. A And the third is Dwight Eisenhower. A He held the Coalition together against the only conceivable threat that we faced that could have destroyed us. So those are the three.

Interviewer

When you left West Point, you're commissioned and you Branched Infantry, where did you go?

John Abizaid

Fort Bragg, North Carolina, Eighty Second Airborne Division, First Battalion, Five Oh Four Parachute Infantry Regiment, devils in baggy pants a great unit, by the way.

Interviewer

You had a good time there.

John Abizaid

Good time, but it was a unit that was in trouble.Â If I were when I say to my son in law today, who happens to be in the First Ranger Battalion as a Major, and also served in units I've served in, and he's a West Point graduate, class of 1999.Â When I say to him the challenges I faced as a junior leader, after he gets through laughing, he can't believe it, because he grew up in a disciplined, capable, organization, where Non Commissioned Officers and soldiers were professionals in a way that you couldn't imagine in those days.

Interviewer

So let's go to some of those I mean the stories of the 82nd Airborne, then, is that right?

John Abizaid

Yep, America's Guard of Honor.

Interviewer

Tell me.

John Abizaid

Race problems, drug problems the same problems that I mentioned to you that I saw in the 14th Armored Cavalry in 1970 or whatever year it was that I went out there, I saw in the 82nd Airborne Division in 1973.Â But we were starting to attack them it was clear that the problems were being attacked.Â The most important thing for me in going to the First of the Five Oh Four, Charlie Company, was that I had the world's best Company Commander, a guy named Dick Malvesti.Â He was charismatic.Â He was professional.Â He was demanding.Â He was physically fit. And he wouldn't put up with the BS that was going on in the organization, and he would insist upon disciplinary actions being taken against people that were causing trouble, and rewarding people that were trying to be good soldiers.Â And so our Company it just was probably a miracle that I happened to end up in this particular point of the U.S. Army at that particular time, where this one guy and his First Sergeant were trying to make the Army a better place, one day at a time, one person at a time.Â And he was doing it, and I could see it, and I wanted to be part of it.Â I wanted to be as good as Captain Malvesti wanted me to be.Â And you know the next Company Commander I had after that wasn't necessarily the same.Â But it was fortunate for me that I had ended up with my first Company Commander, Dick Malvesti, as opposed to one of the later ones that I had.Â Because Malvesti showed me how good things could be if you were willing to really put your nose to the grindstone, roll up your sleeves, and try to make a difference.

Interviewer

What happened to Malvesti where is he now?

John Abizaid

Malvesti was killed in a parachute accident when he was a Colonel.Â He was one of the pioneers in the Special Operations field.Â He became my Company Commander a second time.Â I volunteered to go from the Rangers, or from the 82nd Airborne Division to the Rangers.Â Dick Malvesti had gone from the 82nd Airborne Division to the Rangers.Â

Weâ€™d just formed these new Battalions, which were great organizations. A Matter of fact, I believe that a lot of the renaissance in training and standards and discipline started with the formation of the First Ranger Battalion and the Second Ranger Battalion, which.

Interviewer

What year was this this wouldâ€™ve been when?

John Abizaid

This would have been 1974, 5, 6. These two Battalions were specifically directed by Abrams to be formed to provide a nucleus of discipline training.â€ The best Light Infantry in the world, he wanted them to be.â€ So Malvesti volunteered for the Second Ranger Battalion when it first formed, and he called me up and said, â€œI want you to volunteer to come out here as well.â€ So I did, and then I went from the 82nd, which I loved.â€ It was a great organization.â€ On the other hand, the Ranger Battalions, it was clear, were even a step up, and so joining with guys like Dick Malvesti to be able to build a Battalion that was even better than the Battalion Iâ€™d been in in the 82nd Airborne Division convinced me that we could really make the Army a great place. Not only an effective tool of whatever the President of the United States wanted it to do as long as it was legal, of course but also a place where people could learn discipline, training, professional behavior, values, etc.â€ It was possible.â€ It didnâ€™t have to be bad.â€ It could be good.

Interviewer

Did you ever think during these years that maybe the Army wasnâ€™t for you?

John Abizaid

No.â€ I mean I really like the Army.â€ I like being a soldier.â€ The parts of West Point I liked the best were the summer training opportunities.â€ Even the insanity of the 14th Armored Cav and the craziness of what was going on in Fulda when I was a Cadet and visited that unit for a short period of time really didnâ€™t discourage me.â€ I thought I was meant to be a soldier, and I wanted to be a soldier, and so thatâ€™s what I did. The question was whether I was going to be a good soldier or not.

John Abizaid

No.â€ I mean I really like the Army.â€ I like being a soldier.â€ The parts of West Point I liked the best were the summer training opportunities. Even the insanity of the 14th Armored Cav and the craziness of what was going on in Fulda when I was a Cadet and visited that unit for a short period of time really didnâ€™t discourage me.â€ I thought I was meant to be a soldier, and I wanted to be a soldier, and so thatâ€™s what I did. The question was whether I was going to be a good soldier or not.

Interviewer

So whereâ€™d you go next, after the Ranger Battalion?

John Abizaid

I went off to be an Olmsted Scholar, which.

Interviewer

â€ â€ â€ Explain what an Olmsted Scholar is for the viewers.

John Abizaid

Well, the Olmsted Scholar program is designed to send Officers abroad for cultural immersion and foreign language training. Â

Interviewer

Who was Olmsted?

John Abizaid

George Olmsted was a great leader of the Army in the Second World War, who was not only a great leader in the organization for the defeat of Nazi Germany, by applying his many business skills, but he was also a good business leader.Â He was a great business leader as well.Â And he believed right from the beginning of our engagement in the Second World War that it would be citizen-soldiers that understood foreign cultures that would enable them to be able to stand up to the pressures of Imperial Japan, Nazi Germany, and Fascist Italy. And so at the end of the war, he became quite wealthy and he endowed a foundation to send Officers of the three Academies the Air Force Academy, Naval Academy, and the Military Academy to go study abroad, and to learn a language, to be immersed in a culture.Â And you would do that for two years.Â And so that program was, had started several years before started in the very early â€™60s.Â It had graduated a good group of officers by that time.Â And I knew about the program because one of the instructors here at West Point had told me about it. And I thought, â€Well, that really sounds like something I would be interested in doing.â€

Interviewer

Is it your familyâ€™s immigrant past that encouraged you to think that way, or was it just that you liked the idea of it?

John Abizaid

Well, I studied my concentrations we didnâ€™t call them majors when I was a Cadet, we called them concentrations.Â And my concentration was in history and German, and I was very motivated to learn about different cultures from a military standpoint in particular.Â And of course, the German language allows you to do that.Â You know, the German military tradition is quite interesting.Â Itâ€™s very professional in its own right.Â Itâ€™s also very flawed extremely flawed. Hereâ€™s this brilliant tactical organization that is so morally flawed that it conspires against the Jewish people, along with the rest of the society, in conjunction with Adolf Hitler.Â I mean itâ€™s an amazing story when you think about it.Â But this notion of being able to go abroad really very much appealed to me. I canâ€™t remember exactly what I chose.Â I really wanted to go into Eastern Europe, but it was too hard.Â I wanted to go to Romania or Yugoslavia, and I also thought about the Arab world. In 1973 when I was at Ranger School, we went through the crisis associated with the crisis in the October War.Â I remember our instructors wanted to know who was in the 82nd Airborne Division.Â There was some thought that we might have to leave Ranger School early and report to our units.Â We thought that the 82nd might be deploying to the Middle East.Â That didnâ€™t happen.Â Matter of fact, the 82nd didnâ€™t deploy to anything.Â But it was very interesting to me to kind of look at the world and say, â€Well, where could I go that would be different from where most guys went?â€

Â

John Abizaid

Most people studied in Western Europe. They studied in Germany, or they studied in France, so the NATO aspect of it was covered.Â Others went into South America and learned Spanish, and there was a lot of guerilla activity.Â I mean the special Forces guys were operating down there, trying to stay apace of what was happening in that part of our history.Â A lot of there werenâ€™t very many Southeast Asian scholars, because we had gone down that road, and it was no longer a path to success.Â And I finally settled on the University of Jordan. The Olmsted Foundation said, â€œYeah, weâ€™d like you to go to the Middle East.â€ I think I said Egypt to start with.Â Egypt proved too difficult, so I finally figured out how to go to Jordan.Â I had to go to the language school.Â I never spoke a word of Arabic at home.Â But I wanted to go into that culture because that was part of my upbringing, part of my family tradition.

Interviewer

Did your father speak Arabic?

John Abizaid

No.Â He spoke a few words, but you know he.

Interviewer

â€™Cause your family had really been here several generations.

John Abizaid

Yeah.Â I mean they came in the 1870s, you know.

Interviewer

Yeah.

John Abizaid

Some of my older aunts and uncles spoke Arabic.Â And the other aunts and uncles would yell at them when they would speak in Arabic, and tell them, â€œHey.â€

Interviewer

Youâ€™re an American now.

John Abizaid

Yeah.Â â€œDonâ€™t use that language.Â Whatâ€™s wrong with you?â€

Interviewer

Right.

John Abizaid

They were very proud about their Arab Lebanese Christian heritage, and they would talk about that.Â Especially the we were Roman Catholic.Â That was a very important part of our tradition.Â And so I thought, â€œWell, it would be good to go over to that part of the world and see what itâ€™s like.â€ I.

Interviewer

What was it like what was Jordan like in what year are we talking about now? Late '70s, I guess.

John Abizaid

Yeah, '76? Well, let's see, what year no, '78.

Interviewer

But you were there I think during the Iranian hostage crisis, isn't that right?

John Abizaid

Yeah. Yeah.

Interviewer

So it would've been '78, '79 you were there, yeah.

John Abizaid

Yeah.

Interviewer

So what was it like in Jordan, and did you detect any of the sort of radical Islam extremism.

John Abizaid

Yeah.

Interviewer

There that was going on in other parts of the Arab world?

John Abizaid

Well, what's interesting, all this time at West Point, you never really other than there was a course in religion, right? You studied comparative religion for a very short period of time, and one of the core courses that we had, so you knew a little bit about Islam not much. You didn't really know much about the Arab world other than we almost went to war in 1973. We knew that the Soviet Union had certain clients, and we had certain clients, and that there was a very complicated relationship caused by the Arab Israeli conflict that brought us in in a very interesting sort of way. I had studied the '67 War, because it was a mark of tactical brilliance, and it was quite interesting to see how the Israelis had managed to pull off what they pulled off under such tough odds. '73 was a very interesting war to me as well. So I knew that that part of the world would be interesting. But the Olmsted scholarship doesn't have you go as a military person it has you go as a civilian.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

John Abizaid



So you go to the university, and I took history. And the first thing I discovered was how much history was taught in that part of the world through the lens of the religion. And that's.

Interviewer

You're being taught in English now, isn't that right? I mean it was.

John Abizaid

No, it's taught in Arabic. I mean it takes a while.

Interviewer

Did they teach you Arabic before you got to university, then?

John Abizaid

Yeah. I went to the Defense Language Institute at Monterey. Certainly wasn't fluent when I went there I gained language skill as I stayed there. And it was necessary for me the entire time I was there to continue to take Arabic language classes, because it's a very, very hard language, even when you're immersed in it. My wife took Arabic language also. She took it at an American university. So.

Interviewer

You started to say the teaching of history there you see the world and history through the prism of Islam. Explain what you mean by that.

John Abizaid

Well, we have a hard time understanding the concept of Islam in society, because our Western European notion of the world is a separation of church and state, which in the history of our civilization is a relatively new concept, by the way. But Islam is the state, and so the notion of religion being embedded into the affairs of the state, the affairs of the government true, King Hussein represented a secular government, but Islam was everywhere. Light in those days those were the days of Arab Nationalism, but they were also the days of Arab Nationalism being discredited. And in 1979, I remember going to the university, it was like a light had come on. The Iranian Revolution takes place. The whole demeanor of the society, in my way of thinking, changed. I mean things became more religious. People started talking about here's a people that have risen up against their secular rulers, and have embraced Islam, even though it's Shia Islam, which is not the brand of Islam of most of the Jordanians. And you could see that they were starting to question the premise of Gamal Abdul Nasser's Arab Nationalist concept.

Interviewer

Which had been around for 20 years or so, isn't that right?

John Abizaid

Yeah. And you know, the '73 war was considered by the Egyptians as a victory, but the Jordanians and everybody else still understood that they had been defeated militarily. And in particular, the way that the women addressed outwardly society, which is a sheer give away for the degree to which conservative Islam is present in a society in the Arab world, was remarkable to me. Women who would never think about wearing a covering,

that would wear lipstick, that wore Western clothes, within a period of two or three months, it was those women were hard to find, unless they were Christian. Or hard to see.

Interviewer

What did you think?

John Abizaid

It was quite remarkable, really.

Interviewer

Yeah, what did you think was happening? Why because we Westerners tend to think that progress is something everyone should want, and that there's a kind of progressive line that follows Western development, Western civilization.

John Abizaid

Yeah.

Interviewer

But they were doing a 180 degree turn, in a sense, because it was certainly happening in Iran, where they had done so much modernization, they reversed it. But the Jordanians, I suspect, were in the same situation. What was happening? What did you feel you could explain what changed?

John Abizaid

Well, I looked at the outward changes were very clear to me. People started talking in religious tones. When you said the Prophet's name, there were certain words in Arabic you had to use afterwards. And if people didn't say it in class, they were told to say it. And even though I was a Westerner, and people were always very friendly and very polite to me, and I made a lot of good friends over there it was also very clear that people would pull me off to the side, say, "Hey, look, our religion demands that you say these words after using the various names of our rightlyguided Caliphs or the Prophet."

Interviewer

And they were asking you to say those words as well.

John Abizaid

Yeah, absolutely sure. And I mean it was very interesting, because this hadn't been so present before the Iranian Revolution. To me and maybe I've built this in my own mind over the years, that it was less apparent. But to me, all of a sudden this conflict between religion and Nationalism started to churn in a way that I think had been forgotten. And people believed that religious feelings and adhering to the religion would allow them to move forward in the modern world more efficiently than to embrace false notions of statehood that were imported from the West. Separation of church and state, Napoleonic civil rules of.

Interviewer

And even this pan Arabism that Nasser was looking for.

John Abizaid

Yeah, it was very secular.

Interviewer

Mm hmm.

Interviewer

I'm curious because I'm wondering what you think. But do you think this was a reaction or a coercion in other words, reacting to too much pressure one direction, the kind of secular direction, too quickly. whether you think this was a shift of more permanence, that certainly we're seeing it last now these are the '70s you're talking about and we're in the 2000s, so.

John Abizaid

No. What was impermanent was secular Nationalism. That was what was not permanent, and that's what I hadn't properly understood. When I got to the Middle East, my view of the Middle East was an Arab Nationalist foundation for activity. And Jordan, of course, was the cockpit of all this, right? I mean it's Palestinian Nationalism. It's the.

Interviewer

And there are a lot of Palestinians in Jordan, right?

John Abizaid

Absolutely. Yeah, most of the population's Palestinian. And the Army, the East Bank Traditionalists, they're secular Nationalists working to support the king. But they're also deeply religious, and there's religion at a level in the Middle East that you don't feel in the United States. I grew up a Roman Catholic. My family wasn't strict, but I would say we were probably more religious than most families around.

Interviewer

That's just because I think there's a lot of Americans who look upon what's happened over the past 20, 30 years in the Arab world and think, "Oh, it's a phase."

John Abizaid

No, it's not a phase.

Interviewer

That the Ayatollahs in Iran will be overthrown because they'll want a return to.

John Abizaid

No. No.

Interviewer

The pleasures of the Western world. And this is just a kind of primitive reversion of the

society.

John Abizaid

Yeah.

Interviewer

And we're going to get through this. You don't think that.

John Abizaid

Absolutely not. No, look, their civilization is a great civilization in its own right. Islam is a great religion. I mean the standards that have been achieved in that part of the world are remarkable. When we were slogging our ways as Western Europeans through the Dark Ages, the knowledge of the world was kept by Islamic scholars. There were periods of great forward scientific movement that came out of the Islamic world in a period right after the rise of Islam. That went on for a long time. I mean, look, there are no straight lines, by the way. You said we believe in the progressive movement of human beings along this progressive path of straight lines. There's no straight line in my own life. There's no straight line in the life of the United States of America. There's no straight line in Islam. But there is a feeling in Islam that is a deep religious civilizational belief that they can conquer the problems of the world by adhering rightly. And of course, it's always in these interpretations of what right is how things move forward.

Interviewer

Well, yes. I mean so that leads me to my next question, which is if you also think this conservative or radical Islamic movement is an element of permanence in the Muslim world, or whether you're just saying that the adherence to a kind of religious framework is the permanence?

John Abizaid

Nothing is permanent, right? Things will change and move in ways that we can't expect. But the depth, the cultural depth of Islam within the Arab world in particular should never be misinterpreted. It's not Nationalist, it's not Communist, it's a way of life that is deeply held and is part of the culture of the people in the region. It's not radical Islam that's the cultural norm. Radical Islam is a manifestation of dissatisfaction, and it's also in some cases a manifestation of misinterpretation of the religion that moves towards terrorism. It's, you know, an ideology that is not evident in the teachings of Islam, but are evident in the misinterpreted teachings of Islam, that people have decided to move in a direction that not only the people in the region can't live with, but we can't live with.

Interviewer

What did you learn as an Olmsted scholar is that the term, Olmsted scholar?

John Abizaid

Yeah.

Interviewer

That.

John Abizaid

By the way.

John Abizaid

Well, I was just going to say by the way, it was very interesting. I mean this period that I was at the University of Jordan was tumultuous. There were periods I couldn't go to school because there were riots at the university with the Palestinian Nationalists demanding that King Hussein step down. The army had recently expelled the Palestinians from Jordan, and hence the Black September name that we talked about. They had moved up into Lebanon. Lebanon was in turmoil. There was all sorts of terrorist Nationalist movements going on. It was a very interesting time. And when the university was closed I'd go to the Jordanian army, and I'd go train with them. So there were probably three or four months at a time when I couldn't go to school, so I'd go to the attaché, and I'd say, "Can I go to train with the Jordanian Special Forces?" He'd say, "Yeah."

Interviewer

What did you learn from this that informed your life as an Army Officer going forward?

John Abizaid

Well, look, what I learned more than anything else is that there's a bigger school of life out there than the United States Army. I mean there are very interesting things that happen in the broader world that require study and reflective thought about. I learned that there's a culture that's very different from ours. I didn't think it was a dangerous culture. But I also learned that the notions of peaceful coexistence that we all like to think about are harder to achieve than you might think. When I was in Jordan I traveled all over the Middle East. I almost went to Iran the week before the fall of the Shah. I had permission that was revoked in the last moment, because the attaché there had come to the conclusion that it wouldn't be smart to have a student Officer over there to look around. But I went to Sudan, I went to Yemen, I went to Syria, I went to Lebanon. I mean I went everywhere I could possibly go in the region to get a better understanding of what was going on.

John Abizaid

And you know, one of the things I learned from that period is we shouldn't wring our hands too much about tumult in the Middle East, right? It's been a round for 5,000 years, and it'll be around probably for a long time. There are deeply held beliefs that are often at odds with one another that cause a certain amount of normal friction that we can't understand in the United States. That doesn't mean it's radical. Now, what has happened since those times I mean I would be hard-pressed to say that I saw in those days the beginning of radical Islam. I did see the Iranian Revolution, and the Iranian Revolution had profound effects throughout the region. But I didn't see the sorts of notions that you would kill people just because they were Christians. Or kill people just because they were Jewish. Or chop off the heads of your fellow Muslims because you considered them apostates. I mean that sort of behavior wasn't apparent then. It's not to say it didn't exist, but it wasn't readily apparent then.

John Abizaid

Terrorism, however, was endemic, and it was practiced primarily by the Palestinian

Liberation Organization, and it was very effective. So as religion became more a basis of thought patterns of people, and people came to the conclusion that if we only return to the right religion. And then they combined that thinking with the action of the Palestinian Liberation Organization and the PFLP and other organizations that employed terror as a weapon. You got to the point where people came up with the idea that radical religious groups could terrorize other groups to intimidate their way into power, which is one of the ways that we see the growing of groups like al Qaeda and others. Not to mention the Afghan civil war that started to move people into an even more radical way of thinking.

Interviewer

it sounds like I don't want to put words in your mouth. It sounds like one of the things you discovered that's hard for so many Americans to see is that the Arab world is a crazy quilt of all kinds of different passions and impulses, and that we tend to oversimplify it. That there are sectional rivalries.

John Abizaid

Sure.

Interviewer

There are religious rivalries. There are national rivalries. There are local rivalries. And there's all kind of things going on we shouldn't necessarily ascribe to one monolithic force, right?

John Abizaid

Look, there's all sorts of things going on over there. And by the way, there's all sorts of things going on over here.

Interviewer

Right, sure.

John Abizaid

Okay?

Interviewer

Yeah.

John Abizaid

I mean we have our own radical groups. We have our own various religious groups.

Interviewer

Well, you described Waziristan a minute ago.

John Abizaid

Yeah.

Interviewer

So there you go, right?

John Abizaid

I mean but look, the culture is a culture that's trying to come to grips with the modern world. And they haven't arrived at the point where they can sort their way through it easily, and there's a tremendous amount of violence. What's happening today is revolution. And by the way, it's not democratic revolution it might end up democratically, but it also might end up to be extremely violent for a long period of time. And we might have periods of time where whole societies move in the extremist direction. It's going to be a tough time for us as we sort our way through this period ahead.

Interviewer

Why don't we stop there, and thank you so much for your time. We'll pick it up.

John Abizaid

Stop. Yes, let's stop.