An Early Infatuation

Interviewer

General, tell me how you arrived at West Point. Â What was the decision that you were going to go to West Point?

Brent Scowcroft

It started when I was about 12 years old, and I read a book called West Point Today. Â And it soâ€”it was a romanticized version of West Point, but it so fascinated me that I determined from then on thatâ€™s where I wanted to go to school. Â And it wasnâ€™t that I had decided on a military career, it wasnâ€™t that; I wanted to go to West Point for its own sake. Â And my mother and father were not particularly enamored of that idea, but then along came World War II and it looked like a more attractive option. Â So thatâ€™s how I ended up at West Point.

Interviewer

So you were with the class ofâ€”

Brent Scowcroft

1947.Â

Interviewer

Class of 1947.

Brent Scowcroft

I was the last three-year class of the wartime period.

Interviewer

So you didnâ€™t serve in World War II, then?

Brent Scowcroft

Did not serve in World War II. Â I enteredâ€”well, I was drafted out of high school. Â And then when I got an appointment to West Point, they sent me to a West Point preparatory course at Lafayette University. Â

Interviewer

Indiana? Â The one in Indiana?

Brent Scowcroft

No, no, the one in Pennsylvania. Â Pennsylvania. Â And I spent nine months there and then was discharged from the Army to enter West Point in 1944. Â So I never served in World War II.

Interviewer

Where were you growing up?

Brent Scowcroft

In Utah. Â I was born and raised in Utah until I went into the Army.

Interviewer

Did you know anyone who had been at West Point before that? Â

Brent Scowcroft

I hadâ€”my sisterâ€™s husband, who wasnâ€™t her husband at that time, went to West Point, but that wasnâ€™t why I wanted to go. Â And I didâ€”when he was a yearling, we had a summer vacation and we travelled on the East Coast and he took me to lunch in a mess hall, and that simply confirmed what I wanted, but that wasnâ€™t the basis for my decision. Â

Interviewer

You say the basis was this book you read as a 12-year-old.

Brent Scowcroft

It was really this book.

Interviewer

What was it about the book that made you get attracted to the idea of West Point?

Brent Scowcroft

It was the idea of patriotism, of firmness of discipline, of being part of something bigger than you are.

Interviewer

When you arrived at West Point with your uncle, I guess it was then, is that right? Â You said he was yourâ€”

Brent Scowcroft

Heâ€™s my brother-in-law.

Interviewer

Oh, your brother-in-law, Iâ€™m sorry. Â What were your impressionsâ€”you said it confirmed yourâ€”what was it that you liked so much about the campus at West Point?

Brent Scowcroft

Well, first of all, it was beautiful, and I saw only the surface part of it. [0:3:09] It was a time in the summer when the new class had not entered, so I didnâ€™t see anything of the plebe system, or anything like that. Â But it just confirmed the impressions I had in the book: yes, this is the kind of environment that I wanted.

Beast Barracks: A Valuable Trauma
Interviewer

What was your Beast Barracks like? A Did you have a Beast Barracks experience?

Brent Scowcroft

Oh, I should say. It was, well, a bit like I imagined hell was. It was a really transforming experience. I had never gone through anything like this before, and I hardly knew what was happening. It was a traumatic experience, but I thought, in retrospect, a useful experience because it pulled me out of a privileged environment in which I had been raised with loving parents, and threw me into an environment where I was over-stressed constantly, and just struggling to keep my head above water. Â It was a fundamental change, but in retrospect I think it was a useful transition to a very different kind of life.

Interviewer

Describe if you could what the Beast Barracks experience was and then why you think in retrospect it was so important for you to have it then?Â

Brent Scowcroft

We were continually doing things, for example, like uniform changes. We would be in athletic uniform and they would say, â€œGo up and change to full-dress uniform in five minutes.â€ Â Or they would say, â€œWe want you to appear in full pack,â€ and then theyâ€™d say, â€œIn five minutes we want to see your tent pole,â€ which is right in the center of the pack. Or, get you out of bed at two oâ€™clock in the morning and say, â€œWeâ€™re starting a hike a 20-mile hike. Andâ€”get ready.â€ Those kinds of thingsâ€” constantly over-stressing, and nothing you did was ever just right. So it was a very humbling experience, but it was challenging in the sense, you knowâ€”â€œDonâ€™t let them get you down. You can do this.â€Â

Interviewer

You were being tested.Â

Brent Scowcroft

You were being tested. They were trying to break you. Â Itâ€™s kind of a blur; I remember little episodes of it, but it was really a shock.Â

Interviewer

Did you think of dropping out?Â

Brent Scowcroft

Oh, no, no. The one thing I thought is, â€œI cannot let them get me down.â€

Interviewer

Now why, in retrospect, was that a good experience? Looking back across your career, what did that teach you that has become so important? Brent Scowcroft:

Brent Scowcroft

It taught me how to think, how to maintain my wits when I was being yelled at, shouted at, told I was incompetent, couldnâ€™t do anything right; not to lose control. It was in self-discipline, it was a tremendous lesson, one of the most valuable. Â Iâ€™m not sure I would

recommend exactly the treatment that they gave us then, was a bit harsh. But that kind of soul-searchingâ€”who are you at your core? Strip away all the pretense, all the things you were growing up. You were good in school, you were doing this, and you were good in athleticsâ€”all of a sudden youâ€™re dirt, and you know youâ€™re not, but, can you get yourself through this?Â

Interviewer

So itâ€™s really a challenge to your identity.

Brent Scowcroft

Absolutely, and you come through it and you have a kind of confidence that you didnâ€™t have before.

Interviewer

Have you found yourself ever in situations professionally since then either in the service or afterwards in your distinguished career, where you found yourself confronted by a challenge that you said, â€œWell, Iâ€™ve been through this; I know what Iâ€™m doing,â€ and called forth that memory?

Brent Scowcroft

Clearly I have, many times. Sometimes actively and sometimes passively.

Interviewer

Can you describe one of the active or even one of the passive one?

Brent Scowcroft

Frequentlyâ€”sometimes in the White House, for example, thereâ€™s a crisis a dayâ€”sometimes two, sometimes threeâ€”more than you can possibly manageâ€”so you have to go through a process of triageâ€”what can you reasonably let go, what donâ€™t you have let go? Itâ€™s easy to say, â€œIâ€™m just overwhelmed; I just canâ€™t do it.â€ And then I think back to those days and say, â€œYou can do your best and thatâ€™s all you can do. So donâ€™t blow up, because that just reduces your ability to do things. Stay calm, think your way through.â€ Â Itâ€™s one of the most invaluable lessons that West Point taught me.

Class of 1947: A Distinguished Cohort
Interviewer

Tell me about your class at West Point: who was in your class? Who did you remain in touch with? Who became your friends? Who did you admire?Â

Brent Scowcroft

Well, we had an unusual class, in that in our Yearling Year, the class was split in half. And one half of the class graduated in three years and the other half in four years. And that was an unusual experience. And I was just about right in the middle. They did it basically by age, but you got to express a preference, and I was sort of right in between. So Iâ€™m one of the youngest members of my class. Had I gone the other way, I would have been one of the oldest members of the class of 1948.Â

Brent Scowcroft

But I had a very interesting class. When I was a plebe, I went out for track, and while Iâ€™d been good in high school, I wasnâ€™t quite so good in the big competitions. So I went over and became one of the football managers. As a result of that, some of my good friends were part of the football team. Blanchard and Davis, for example, that famous pair, was in my class. So I got broader experience within my class than a lot of other cadets did. Another close friend who has done very well was Al Haig, who became Secretary of State. Â We had aâ€”I think we had a very distinguished class.

Interviewer

Who was superintendent when you were there?

Brent Scowcroft

Youâ€™re stretching my memory. I think we had three, and I can fill you the names in but not off the top of my head.

Interviewer

Thatâ€™s quite alright. So when you completed your education at West Point, where were you assigned, where did you go?

Brent Scowcroft

Our class had another unique aspect to it, and that is we graduated just about the time of the National Security Act of 1947, which created the Department of Defense, which created the Air Force. So I actually graduated into the U.S. Army Air Forces, and before I reported to my first duty station it became the U.S. Air Force. Â I went to San Antonio, Texas, to Lackland Air Force Base, which was the Basic Training base for the Air Force for about two months before the next pilot training course started. So I started outâ€”we sort of helped out with the people at Lackland Air Force Base teaching Basic Training to recruits.

A Debilitating Accident
Interviewer

And from there? Did you serve during the Korean War then?

Brent Scowcroft

Shortly after I graduated from pilot training I was assigned to New Hampshire. And about three, four months later I had an aircraft accident and spent two years in the hospital. So thatâ€™s where I spent the Korean War.Â

Interviewer

Tell me about that accident. What happened?Â

Brent Scowcroft

I was flying F-51s, which is a propeller liquid fuel engine plane, and I had just taken off to go to our dogfighting area and one of my colleagues jumped my aircraft. In order to meet him, I pushed the propeller speed forward to give me more power, and the engineâ€” the governor overran, and the propeller went too fast. I didnâ€™t realize that at the time, but as soon as I saw it go past the redline, I pulled the power back, but I kept losing power, and I

didnâ€™t know what had happened. A But by the time I figured out I was not going to have enough power to get back to the base, I decidedâ€”I figured I was too low to bail out.

Brent Scowcroft

And so I looked aroundâ€”this was, as I say, New Hampshire; all forest. I saw a little clearing in the trees and headed for it and managed just to make the clearing. But in the forest landingâ€”it turned out to be a frozen swampâ€”I fractured some vertebrae. And they gave me bloodâ€”or plasma transfusion and I got hepatitis from the plasma. So between the hepatitis and a couple of back operations, I spent two years in the hospital.Â

Interviewer

What was it like in that planeâ€”you saw the clearing but were you scared that you werenâ€™t going to make it?Â

Brent Scowcroft

Yes, and the last thing I actually rememberâ€”by this time I had practically no power at all, and an F-51 glides like a rock without powerâ€”and the last thing I remember is looking off to my side and seeing the branches of the trees just under my wing, so I just barely cleared the forest. I donâ€™t remember the actual forced landing itself.Â

Interviewer

I was going to say, you must have sunk deep if it was a swamp, even a frozen swamp.Â

Brent Scowcroft

There are pictures of the accident, and it was rough because across the swamp was a little road, and the aircraft hit a bridge abutment going over the road; tore the engine right off the plane. Â Which was probably lucky because I still was trying to get whatever power I could, and it could have caught fire. So it didnâ€™t, but the people who got to meâ€”fortunately they knew where I was because I was trying to get back in, and when they got to me I was apparently conscious, but Iâ€™d also been hit on the head by a motor that came loose from behind me.Â

Interviewer

You were conscious but you donâ€™t recallâ€”Â

Brent Scowcroft

But I donâ€™t remember it. I had concussion amnesia for the next 12 hours.Â

Interviewer

Now that kept you out of the Korean War. Did you see any combat experience in your tenure with the Air Force?Â

Brent Scowcroft

No, I have never had any combat experience. I did get back to flying status. At first my orthopedic doctor said, â€œYouâ€™ll never fly again.â€ Â Well, I did fly again, but it was such a long period of time that I figured that I needed to change my career pattern. So I accepted an invitation to go back to West Point to teach and decided I had to concentrate

on strategy and planning rather than tactics and operations.

A Rewarding Return to Alma Mater
Interviewer

Which department did you teach in at West Point?

Brent Scowcroft

In the Department of Social Sciences.

Interviewer

And what were the kinds of courses that you were teaching?

Brent Scowcroft

Well, I taught a small course in Russian history, and that was my mainâ€"I was the only teacher in it, and I loved that, because I had the same cadets for a whole semester, so I got to know them and I got to bring them along, and it was a marvelous experience. Â I also taught European history and contemporary foreign government. Â

Interviewer

This was a heck of a time to be teaching Russian history. Â This was the 19, what, 50â€"

Brent Scowcroft

It was fascinating, yes.

Interviewer

What years would this have been?

Brent Scowcroft

This was 1953 to â€™57, right at theâ€"well, it was in theâ€"the Cold War had really settled in, but it was when Joseph Stalin died and the beginning of the evolution of the Soviet Union. Â So it was a wonderful experience for me and very valuable, because it allowed me to steep myself not just in the Soviet Union, but Soviet history and what made the Russians.

Interviewer

Now had Russian history been a focus of yours as a cadet when you were studying?

Brent Scowcroft

No, when I was a cadet, the only optional courses we had were whether you wanted to take French, German or Spanish. [Laughter] This wasâ€"

Interviewer

When you arrived to teach Russian history, had you had much experience studying Russian history yourself?Â

Brent Scowcroft

No, itâ€™s interesting, because I went back to Columbia to get a masterâ€™s degree to prepare me to go back to West Point to teach. Â And at that time they said, â€œYouâ€™re going to be in the economics side of it.â€ Â So I concentrated on international economics rather than on history. Â I did take some courses; but then they had a shift in personnel and they put me into the history side of it. Â And the man they had teaching Russian history was a civilian who was getting out ofâ€”I mean he was a temporary officer and was getting out to go back. Â So he tutored me and gave me, if you will, an individual course and readings to bring me up on Russian history.Â

Interviewer

Did you like teaching? Â

Brent Scowcroft

Oh, I loved it. Â Itâ€™s one of the most rewarding experiences that Iâ€™ve had in professional life. Â Usually, especially inside a big bureaucracyâ€”whether itâ€™s the military, whether itâ€™s the White House, whatever it isâ€”itâ€™s hard to see results from what you do. Â You work hard and you donâ€™t see any payoff. Â But when youâ€™re in a classroom and you make a point and you see a light go on in a mind out there in the students, itâ€™s a wonderful feeling. Â So I loved teaching.

Three Great Minds
Interviewer

Can we move to that question since weâ€™re on history. Â This is for the Center for Oral History at West Point, and I asked you before to think about: what if there had been an oral history center at the Academy from the beginningâ€”letâ€™s just fantasize hereâ€”from the beginning of the Academy in 1802 up to the present day. Â If you were to walk into that archive, whose interview would you pull down to listen to? Â Whose mind would you want to pick?

Brent Scowcroft

Thatâ€™s interesting. I think Iâ€™d take three. The first is Silvanus Thayer, who was for all practical purposes the first superintendent of West Point; who really formed West Point. It was his concept from which West Point developed. Iâ€™d like to know what he was thinking, what was going on in his mind? You can see the results of what he did, but what was his concept and why did he have the ideas that he had about it?

Brent Scowcroft

The second one would be Robert E. Lee. Â And this would be specially not only because he was a great general, but the agony he had when he was a general officer in the United States Army and he had to choose between that and his home state, Virginia, and what he went through; and did he regret it? And what happened there? Thatâ€™s one of the things that really try oneâ€™s soul and oneâ€™s sense of patriotism, which West Point inculcates.

Brent Scowcroft

And the third I think would be Eisenhower, because he was one of my heroes growing up; he gave me my West Point diploma. Â And to go through what he was thinking, both during the aftermath of World War I when the Army went through a period of 20 years of bad times, the Depression, then World War II mobilizationâ€”all of those things, then on to the

presidency, it would have been wonderful to read what he was thinking at different points of his life.Â

Interviewer

Did you know Eisenhower? Â Other than his giving you the diploma, did you spend time with him? Â

Brent Scowcroft

I really did not, and as I say, he was my hero model.

Interviewer

He was at Columbia when you were there? Â Or he was atâ€”

Brent Scowcroft

He was Chief of Staff of the Army and gave me my diploma when I graduated from West Point.

Interviewer

But then he did move on to Columbia.

Brent Scowcroft

He moved on to Columbia, yes. Â He had left Columbiaâ€”as a matter of fact, he became president about the time I went back to Columbia for my masterâ€™s degree. Â The professor of the Social Science Department was a colonel by the name of Lincoln, George Lincoln. Â And he had been on Marshallâ€™s staff during the war. Â He was really an outstanding person; had wide contacts and liked to monitor the careers of his teachers. Â So he helped me a lot.

Brent Scowcroft

[Break in audio]

An Ambivalent Interval in Yugoslavia
Brent Scowcroft

I had a chance, as I recall, to fly troop carriers in Japan, or to be an attachÃ©, and I decided that Iâ€”by this time was so far behind in flying that it was not the right thing for me to do, that I instead ought to pursue the course that I had decided on when I didnâ€™t think Iâ€™d be able to fly any more. Â So I asked about being attachÃ© to the Soviet Union. Â There wasnâ€™t a vacancy there, but they said, â€œHow about Yugoslavia?â€ Â Well, this was the time when Tito was a heretic as far as the Soviet Union was concerned. Â He was undertaking workerâ€™s counsels to try to develop a new kind of communism. Â So I thought that would be a useful thing to do. Â So I went to Yugoslavia. Â

Interviewer

And did you meet Tito?

Brent Scowcroft

Oh yes, many times.

Interviewer

What were your impressions of Tito?

Brent Scowcroft

A rough-hewn, tough, somewhat bombastic president who had a very cultured, sophisticated wife, who managed him very skillfully. Â That was my sense anyway.

Interviewer

What were the relations between America and Yugoslavia at the time, and what did you watch as the attachÃ© there?

Brent Scowcroft

Officially, the relations were good. Â We were providing Tito with military equipment, including aircraft, and we had a very warm relationship with him. Â So on the official level I was treated very well. Â But that didnâ€™t extend to life in Yugoslavia. Â The Yugoslav, the Communist Secret Police, interrogated the servants we had. Â Once a week they had to go into headquarters and say who had been visiting at the house. Â They harassed the servants and made life generally miserable. Â So it was just ambivalence. Â It was a communist country allied in a way to the United States. Â It was a very curious but very interesting period. Â

Interviewer

Was your phone tapped? Â Was your house bugged?

Brent Scowcroft

Iâ€™m sure it was. Â I just assumed it was. Â I have no doubt that the house was, because as I say, the servants wereâ€”they used to complain to me that they were called in once a week to say what had gone on.

Interviewer

So where would you have sensitive conversations in that atmosphere if you needed to?

Brent Scowcroft

We had a place in the embassy that we could have those kinds of conversations. Â I found it an absolutely fascinating tour of duty. Â My wife was very uncomfortable. Â We had a baby when we got there, so she was on the part that suffered, and I was on the part that was beneficiary. It was a very interesting experience.

Interviewer

I think it would be very hard for a wife and child under that circumstance.

Brent Scowcroft

It was, yes.

Interviewer

You were there how long?

Brent Scowcroft

A little over two years, not very long.

A Brief Tenure in the Air Force Academy
Interviewer

And then where were you posted? Â

Brent Scowcroft

Then I went to the Air Force Academy. I had been scheduled to go to a commission in Washington toâ€"I canâ€™t remember what the commission was, but it was on reviewing strategic forces; something like that. Excuse me, first of all, right out of Yugoslavia I went to the Armed Forces Staff College in Norfolk, Virginia. Thatâ€™s about a six months course.

Interviewer

And from there you went to the Air Forceâ€"

Brent Scowcroft

And from there I went to the Air Force Academy.

Interviewer

To teach, then?

Brent Scowcroft

To teach, yes. The professor of the Department of Political Science was of the class of â€™46 and he had been in the Social Science Department with me, and the Air Force wanted to send him back to get his doctorate. And he asked if I would come out and sort of take over the department while he was gone.

Interviewer

So how would you compare the Air Force Academy to West Point as a teacher in both places?

Brent Scowcroft

Well, as a teacher they were very, very similar, almost indistinguishable. Â But to me, the Air Force Academy didnâ€™t have the depth of tradition and reverence that West Point had established after 200 years. It was different.

Interviewer

To teach or as a fellow?

Brent Scowcroft

As a student.

Interviewer

As a student.

Brent Scowcroft

As a student, yes. Â Thatâ€™s the equivalent of the services command and staff colleges. Â

Interviewer

So you taught there for how long?

Brent Scowcroft

I taught there for another two years.

Interviewer

And from thereâ€”now weâ€™re in late â€™50s, right?

From Professor to Strategist to Student
Brent Scowcroft

Now weâ€™re in the mid-50s. Then I came back to Washington, again when the professor of the department finished his Ph.D. and came back. I went into Air Force staff in the Pentagon and into the Long Range Planning Division.

Interviewer

This is during the Eisenhower administration?

Brent Scowcroft

This was during the Eisenhower administration.

Interviewer

And who was Secretary of Defense at the time?

Brent Scowcroft

Secretary of Defense at the time wasâ€”let me thinkâ€”

Interviewer

I guess Dulles was still at State, right?

Brent Scowcroft

It was, yes. It was Wilson maybe.

Interviewer

Charlie Wilson?

Brent Scowcroft

Charlie Wilson. No, no, no, Iâ€™m late, thatâ€™s not â€™50sâ€”â€™60, â€™64. So

thatâ€™sâ€”no, that was McNamara.

Interviewer

Alright, so you cameâ€”but we have an intervening number of years here we havenâ€™t covered, so what happened betweenâ€”

Brent Scowcroft

Well, no, actually weâ€™ve covered them all, because I left West Point in â€™57.

Interviewer

In â€™47.

Brent Scowcroft

No, no. I leftâ€”

Interviewer

Okay, Iâ€™m sorry, left West Point as a professor in â€™57. Okay, now I have it. Then to theâ€”

Brent Scowcroft

Iâ€™ve left out one short thing: for a time I went to the Strategic Intelligence School to prepare me to be an attachÃ©. And I was an attachÃ© from â€™59 to â€™61. Then I went to Armed Forces Staff College, and in â€™62 I went to the Air Force Academy and left in â€™64.

Interviewer

In â€™64 you went to serve McNamaraâ€™s Defense Department.

Brent Scowcroft

Thatâ€™s right, thatâ€™s right.

Interviewer

Have you always thought of yourself, then, as a bipartisanâ€”

Brent Scowcroft

Oh yes, I thought of myself as thoroughly bipartisan. Â As a matter of fact, there was a kind of an unspoken ethic that professional military officers really shouldnâ€™t vote. Â

Interviewer

Well, Iâ€™ve read, I donâ€™t know ifâ€”

Brent Scowcroft

Now I did vote, butâ€”

Interviewer

No, I know thisâ€”Iâ€™ve read that Eisenhower didnâ€™t vote until he could vote for himself.

Brent Scowcroft

Yes. Â Well, that was a kind of a tradition that military officers, professional ones, should be rigidly non-partisan. Â

Interviewer

So youâ€™re in the Pentagon, and you are doing strategic planning for the Air Force now. Â What does that mean? Â What sorts of things were you discussing at that time, or planning at that time?

Brent Scowcroft

It was more or less: whatâ€™s the future of the Air Force, what ought to be the concentration, how is warfare evolving, what should it focus on? Â The kinds of things that I thought I ought to be doing. Â And I had aâ€”the brigadier general in charge of that division was a very farsighted officer who was a very stimulating presence to me.

Interviewer

Who was that?

Brent Scowcroft

His name was Richard Yudkin, and he had come back from serving in NATO to run this division. Â And he was one of my true mentors.Â

Brent Scowcroft

What did you learn from him? Â And I guess within the context, let me put it this way, if it was 1964 we were still with the hangover of World War II in a sense, but now we were facingâ€”about to face the challenge of Vietnam and the notion of these proxy wars, right, that were establishing the delicate balance between the United States and the Soviet Union. Â What sorts ofâ€”if you were forward looking in 1964, what were you anticipating would be the challenge to the Air Force, for instance, and what was Yudkin anticipating for the group as a whole? Â

Brent Scowcroft

We were not so farsighted, as I look back, as we could have been.

Interviewer

Did you think you were at the time?

Brent Scowcroft

No, because this is when I started in a way the transition from day to day living to real strategic thinking. Â One of the real debates in the role of the Air Force is, â€œWhat should its role be with respect to the Army?â€ Â Is close air support, for example, really an important Air Force mission, because traditionally the Air Force looked down upon it. Â

Interviewer

It made them feel subservient to the Army, right?

Brent Scowcroft

Yes, thatâ€™s right. Â And the glorious part of the Air Force was fighting other Air Forces in the air, or bombing. Â And that was an issueâ€”the relationship between the strategic bombing mission and the tactical mission. Â Those were the ones that were important. Â But generally Yudkin gave me a feel for the whole NATO mission, the whole issue of alliances, and raised my sights in a very interesting way.Â

Interviewer

So previous to that you had notâ€”well, I guess American policy had not necessarily engaged this notion of alliances and treaty organizations, right? Â That was a new thing with respect to the Cold War, is that right?

Brent Scowcroft

Well, I had thought about it, and I had taught at the Air Force Academy, for example, I taught defense policy. Â So academically I was in it, but as a part of the Air Force trying to figure out for the Air Force, I had not been thinking about that. Â I had accepted the Air Force sort of as it stood, and really questioning DouÃ© and his theories of strategic bombing and was that the way to do, was World War II the right kind of bombing to do to deal with an enemy that we were facing? Â Those were the kinds of things that were not new but looked at in a different way.

Interviewer

As someone looking at Air Force strategy in the mid-1960s, did you have a role in the planning of the Vietnam War?

Brent Scowcroft

No, not really, no. Â

Interviewer

And you were there then at the Pentagon for how long?

Brent Scowcroft

I was there for three years and then I went to the National War College. Â And when I first was nominated to the National War College, I went to General Yudkin and I said, lookâ€”by that time Iâ€™d almost completed my Ph.D. studies. Â I had taught at West Point; I had taught at the Air Force Academy. Â I said, â€œWhy do I need another school? Â What am I going to learn there?â€ Â He said, â€œWell, think about it.â€ Â So I turned it down the first year. Â Then I got offered it the next year, and he said, â€œYou ought to do it.â€ Â And I was still not sure I should. Â But I followed his advice, and it was another important development in my career.

Interviewer

Why was he pushing you to do it, you think?

Brent Scowcroft

I think partly because itâ€™s part of being a well-rounded officer to go to the military academic schools, and I think he probably realized it would do more for me than I thought it would. Â And the things I really learned were primarily from my colleaguesâ€”in the Army, in the Navy, and from the State Department and the CIAâ€”to see the different perspectives that they had, and it was an extremely broadening experience for me.

Interviewer

Itâ€™s interesting, because thatâ€™s, again, a testament to the power of oral history in a way because youâ€™re learning from other people by engaging with them as personalities, right?

Brent Scowcroft

Absolutely. Â Youâ€™re sitting in seminars with your colleagues, and you can seeâ€”â€œWell, I never thought of looking at it that way.â€ Â So to me it was an extremely valuable experience.

Vietnam: A Personal and Professional Appraisal
Interviewer

Now, youâ€™re still on active duty.Â

Brent Scowcroft

Still on active duty, yes.Â

Interviewer

And that takes us to â€™67.

Brent Scowcroft

That takes usâ€”yeah, I graduated in â€™68, yes.

Interviewer

So, now youâ€™re still on active duty, youâ€™re at National War College, and then what happens next?

Brent Scowcroft

There was really at this point no place for me in Vietnam. I was notâ€”by that time I was not flying any more and I was too senior for the kind of people they wanted in Vietnam. So I went back to the Pentagon and I served in the office of the Secretary of Defense in international security affairs. And I was supervising, if you will, western hemisphere affairs for a year or so.

Interviewer

So this would have been Clark Clifford, I guess, is that right?

Brent Scowcroft

Yes, it was Clark Clifford; it was brand new. McNamara had just left and Clark Clifford had just come in.Â

Interviewer

Now this is in the heat of the Vietnam War.Â

Brent Scowcroft

Yes.

Interviewer

What were your attitudes about the war? Â Even privately, or whether you had voiced them publiclyâ€”Â

Brent Scowcroft

Well, itâ€™s interesting because when I wentâ€”well, I was questioning about the war only in the sense of not, â€œDid we need to be there?â€ But, â€œWere we prosecuting a war properly?â€ But I was never focused on the war, because as I say, I went back to the Pentagon and I was in western hemisphere. So for a year I was not really that close. Then after a year I did go back to the air staff and I was in a very specialized shop, if you will, that did the planning for the Joint Chiefs of Staff meetings, and the things that the Joint Chiefs of Staff.Â

Interviewer

You said that you didnâ€™t get to the question of whether we should be in Vietnam or not, but how we were prosecuting the warâ€”thatâ€™s a traditional officerâ€™s distinction. But as a citizen, what did you think about the decision to go? Did you have an attitude at that time?Â

Brent Scowcroft

Yes, I thought it was probably the right thing to do. That communism seemed to be on the march in Asia and that this was a good place to make a stand. I had looked at our earlier adventures, like when Eisenhower decided we were not going to use an atomic bomb and were not going to relieve the French in Dien Bien Phu, on through the thing. When I actually went back to the air staff I was put in charge of something called the Vietnamization program, and that was when we decided that we were going to get out of Vietnam, the first thing we tried to do was to turn it over and train the Vietnamese Army to handle things themselves.

Interviewer

Now this would have been during the Nixon administration, right?Â

Brent Scowcroft

Yes, it was.Â

Interviewer

And this was the famous â€œsecret plan to end the war.â€Â

Brent Scowcroft

Well, it was in a way, and that changed our strategy. We went through in Vietnam a lot of what weâ€™ve gone through in Iraq.Â

Interviewer

Weâ€™ll come to that later.Â

Interviewer

Now, when you say you were interested in how the war was being prosecuted, did this seem like a wise policy to you? Did we need at this point to make that transition to the Vietnamese Air Force?Â

Brent Scowcroft

It did to me. I thought that it didnâ€™t seem to me that the strategy we had was the right strategy in the beginning, in the early years, when the strategy was â€œsearch and destroyâ€. That gave the initiative to the enemy. Â They could decide when they wanted to engage and when they didnâ€™t want to engage, and that they could probably withstand casualties a lot longer than we could. And so that didnâ€™t work. Now, when we changed to â€œclear and hold,â€ that seemed to be a much more reasonable strategy to me. And Vietnamization made sense to me, if we could do it.

Brent Scowcroft

So thatâ€™s when I got acquainted with Vietnam, and that was: how can we, in the Air Force, play the role of training and turning over to the Vietnamese Air Force the responsibilities?Â

LBJ: An â€œOverpowering Personalityâ€
Interviewer

Now, by now you served in the administrations of several presidents. You were to young to really have engaged with Eisenhowerâ€”did you know Kennedy?

Brent Scowcroft

No, I never met Kennedy.

Interviewer

By the time you got to the Pentagon, Kennedy had been assassinated and Johnson was president. Did you know Johnson?

Brent Scowcroft

I knew him personally only after he left the presidency.

Interviewer

What were your impressions of Johnson as a person?

Brent Scowcroft

Sort of an overpowering personality. My impression is that if it had not been for Vietnam, Johnson probably would have gone down as one of our best presidents, because he really understood how to make the system work; through a combination of threats, flattery, cajoleryâ€”whatever it took, he made the system work. And one of the things thatâ€™s so

easy for us to forget is our constitution was not set up to be efficient. It was set up to protect the individual against an overpowering state, and it does that very well. It does it by setting up blocks: executive, legislative, judicial. Everywhere there are checks and balances, and those checks and balances mean itâ€™s easy to stop something from happening. Itâ€™s hard to make it happening except by cooperation, and thatâ€™s what Johnson knew: the secret of how you make this unwieldy system work.

Interviewer

Thatâ€™s the reason why strict ideologues donâ€™t do well in the American system, do they?

Brent Scowcroft

No, thatâ€™s right.

Interviewer

Because you have to compromise, thatâ€™s the wholeâ€”

Nixon: A â€œBundle of Complexesâ€
Brent Scowcroft

And you have to be practical, yes. And the one other thing I learned, when Nixon first came in, and Nixon really set upâ€”Nixon and Kissinger set up the National Security Council and its staff the way it has been fundamentally ever since. But what I saw from the Pentagon side was the studies that were put out, or were ordered to be done, and what I saw was the sense that these studies were just cover; that the White House knew where they wanted to go and they commissioned all the studies, but they didnâ€™t amount to anything. So no one felt invested in the process, and thatâ€™s something I carried over with me.

Interviewer

Nobody at the Pentagon felt invested in the process because theâ€”

Brent Scowcroft

Because it didnâ€™t matterâ€”because the decisions were made somewhere else.

Interviewer

Well that was a frequent criticism of the Nixon White House, is that right?

Brent Scowcroft

Thatâ€™s right.

Interviewer

That they did everything too close to the executive staff.

Brent Scowcroft

So what I learned is itâ€™s important to let everybody know they have a voice. Their recommendations may not be listened to, or may not be adopted, but they ought to be listened to.

Interviewer

So you had to have ownership in some respect.

Brent Scowcroft

Thatâ€™s right.

Interviewer

Nixon was probably the first president that you knew fairly well then is my guess, is that right? Â

Brent Scowcroft

Yes, yes.

Interviewer

And you knew him while you were serving in the Nixon administration.

Brent Scowcroft

Yes, yes I did.

Interviewer

Tell me what kind of a man he was. Â A multi-dimensional man obviously. Â

Brent Scowcroft

Oh, very much. Â One of the most complex individuals I have ever met. Â He had a unusual personality. Â He was by nature an introvert. Â He was not comfortable with peopleâ€”especially in large numbers, and he sort of enjoyed solitude. Â And he had an inferiority complex. Â He had a brilliant mind, but he always felt that he was never really accepted by what he called the â€œeastern establishment.â€ Â And so he had a defense mechanism against â€™em. Â He felt the same about the press, so he had kind of a persecution complex. Â Notwithstanding the fact he was an introvert, he drove himself to be a politician. Â But I remember before meetings, for example, in the White House with political groups, he would say, â€œNow I want you to come and get me in ten minutes.â€ Â He physically disliked that sort of exchange.

Interviewer

He wanted you to come get him out of the meeting.

Brent Scowcroft

Get him out of the meeting. Â Now, once he got into the meeting he was okay and he would brush me off, but he was that kind of personalityâ€”he drove himself. Â So Nixon was this bundle of complexes and sometimes the good side came out and sometimes the bad side would come out. Â

Interviewer

Did you like him?

Brent Scowcroft

I liked him. Â I liked him. Â The time I really got to know him best was right after he left office and he went up to San Clemente and he started to write his book. Â And he asked if I would come out there and spend a couple of weeks reading the chapters on foreign policy. Â So we used to have long, rambling conversations at this time when he was relaxed, he wasâ€”so thatâ€™s when I got to know him with an intimacy, otherwise I would not have.

Interviewer

Had you been on the White House staff when he resigned then?

Brent Scowcroft

Yes, I was.

Path to the Pentagon
Interviewer

So letâ€™s go back, letâ€™s talk about how you got to the Pentagon to [Inaudible].

Brent Scowcroft

I had several jobs whenâ€”I was in the office of the Secretary of Defense for a year, then I went back to the Air staff and I had two or three different jobs there. Â In the meantime, General Yudkin, who had friends, had gone to the director of personnel of the Air Force and said, â€œYou ought to get to knowâ€â€”meâ€”â€œheâ€™s got a good mindâ€ and so on. So I met with the guy.

Brent Scowcroft

And when I was in the Pentagon this time I was promoted to brigadier general. Being a brigadier general is sort of like being a second lieutenant over again. You get all the jobs that nobody else wants. Youâ€™re somebodyâ€™s deputy here, youâ€™re in some administrative office there, and so on. So all these jobs were floating in front of me, and the director of personnel came and said, â€œHow would you like to go to the White House?â€ And I said, â€œWell, I donâ€™t know, what is it?â€

Interviewer

Kissinger was now theâ€”

Brent Scowcroft

Kissinger was the National Security Advisor. â€œWeâ€™re looking for somebody with the kind of credentials that Henry Kissinger would find attractive to be his deputy, and youâ€™ve got â€™em, and the Air Force would like to replace the Army as his deputy. Do you know Kissinger?â€ And I said â€œNo. I met him one time when he came to West Point to speak, I donâ€™t really know him.â€ But I looked at all the other things that were offered to me, and this sounded interesting. So I spent the first year in the White House managing all of the White House assets that were used.

Brent Scowcroft

Well, it was a management job in the White House. It was the Pentagon officer who managed all of the Pentagon assets, which the White House used. Like the motor pool, Air

Force One, the helicopters, Camp David, at that time the Sequoiaâ€”all of these things were managed by this person. And I said, â€œWell, I donâ€™t know.â€ And so the director said, â€œWell look, what we really want is somebody to replace Al Haig,â€ who was Henry Kissingerâ€™s deputy. And he said, â€œLooking at your rÃ©sumÃ©â€”â€

Interviewer

And this is the first time you met Nixon then, I take it?

Interviewer

Iâ€™m a little confused, so then that job was actually the job as assistant? Orâ€”

Brent Scowcroft

No, no they wereâ€”no. The Air Force wanted to get me inside the White House so Iâ€™d get to know Kissinger and get a toehold. So I was very fortunate there, because this was in 1972, and Nixon had just decided he wanted to go to Moscow and he wanted to go to Beijing. So I went on the advance trips, you know, to set up communications, all these kinds of things on both of those trips, right after I got to the White House, and that was a great opportunity.

Brent Scowcroft

That was the first time I met Nixon.

Interviewer

And maybe in part because also you were not part of that Northeastern establishment, you came from Utah, he may haveâ€”

Brent Scowcroft

I think, well, when I first got to know him, one of my ancillary jobs was to be the liaison with the League of Families of Vietnam Prisoners of War, or Prisoners of War in Vietnam, and that was a very sensitive thing for President Nixon, so I used to see himâ€”otherwise I never would have seen himâ€”on those kinds of things, and I sort of got to know him.

Interviewer

So you did the advance trips to Moscow, and where else did you say, Iâ€™m sorry?

Brent Scowcroft

And to China.

Interviewer

And to Beijing. Did you speak Russian? I never asked you thisâ€”do you speak Russian?

Brent Scowcroft

No. I spoke Serbo-Croatian from being in Yugoslavia, and I did some Russian; I never learned to speak it. But while I was at West Point teaching I used to go over to the language department and they would practice their lessons on me, so I can read a little, but I canâ€™t speak it.

Interviewer

So youâ€™re on the White House staff, youâ€™re involved with this planningâ€”

Brent Scowcroft

This planning, and during this year I got to know Henry Kissinger. And he tells a story, which I think is probably apocryphal, as to why he decided I ought to be his deputy. And it was one time we were on Air Force One when Bob Halderman, who was Nixonâ€™s Chief of Staff and a real iron-fisted guy, wasâ€”he and I were arguing about something, and he says, â€œI watched Scowcroft standing there toe to toe with Halderman,â€ and he decided, â€œthatâ€™s the guy I want.â€ Well, I think thatâ€™s probably not true. But when Al Haig at the end of that first year went back to the Pentagon to be the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Army, Kissinger asked if I wanted to be his deputy. So thatâ€™s how I got to the NSC.

Nixon and Kissinger: A Volatile Chemistry
Interviewer

Tell me about Henry Kissinger, another large personality.

Brent Scowcroft

Another large personality, another complex personality. Brilliant. Probably the most strategic mind Iâ€™ve ever run across. He could pursue multiple policies, seemingly completely independent in a way that down the road, they would all come together in one grand policy. He was really brilliant that way and I canâ€™t begin to express how much I learned by watching his mind work.

Brent Scowcroft

But he was another very complex personality. He was a combination of, if you will, at one extreme, arrogance, and at the other, insecurity. He knew he was good, and he was not very tolerant of sloppy thinking. He was a real perfectionist. But he constantly needed reassurance. He would make a decision, â€œWas this really the right decision?â€ He and Nixon were very much alike in that way. And the interaction between Nixon and Kissinger was just phenomenal.

Interviewer

Tell me about it.Â

Brent Scowcroft

Well, it was a mixture of mutual admiration, because they both respected the otherâ€™s mind, and immense jealousy.

Interviewer

Nixon was jealous of Kissingerâ€™s mind, right? And Kissinger was jealous of Nixonâ€™s powerâ€”is that fair to say?Â

Brent Scowcroft

Well, thatâ€™s probably more concrete thanâ€”they were just jealous of each other. And Kissinger would sometimes grumble at Nixon taking credit for stuff that he, Kissinger,

thought heâ€™d done. Conversely, Nixon, especially when Kissinger undertook his famous Mideast diplomacy going back and forth to try to get a deal following the â€™73 war, Nixon would call me when Kissinger would make some statement about the Middle East. â€œWell, whatâ€™s he doing? Why is he saying that? I should be saying thatâ€”he shouldnâ€™t be saying that. He didnâ€™t tell me anything about this.â€

Brent Scowcroft

And he would get increasingly irate as the day went on, especially if he had a martini about 5 oâ€™clock in the evening. And sometimes before he went to bed he would order all sorts of unusual things to be doneâ€”which I didnâ€™t doâ€”and the next morning heâ€™d forgotten all about it.

Interviewer

Unusual like what?Â

Brent Scowcroft

Well, alerting the forces to do this or that or the other. It wasâ€”

Interviewer

In order to take the thunder away from Kissinger?Â

Brent Scowcroft

Yes.Â

Interviewer

And you knew not to listen to it.Â

Brent Scowcroft

Yes. And thatâ€™s one of the peculiar things, we talked about Nixon just awhile ago, and you listen to some of the tapes, and you hear the histrionics, â€œIâ€™m going to break into thisâ€ and swearing and so onâ€”I never heard that. He never used that with me. I did not hear him unusually swearing at people.

Interviewer

Did he makeâ€”heâ€™s notorious for making anti-Semitic comments, too; did he do that in front of you ever?

Brent Scowcroft

No, no, not really. Not really. So I think in a way, in front of certain of his colleagues or staff, he wanted to be one of the boys, he wanted to be the tough standup guy, and he never, I donâ€™t think, felt the need to do that with me.

Interviewer

But Iâ€™m interested that you knew when to believe him and when to sort of ignore him.

Brent Scowcroft

Well, he didnâ€™t drink very much, but he reallyâ€”alcohol affected him strongly. And I could tell when heâ€™d had one martini and two martinis and so on. And when he got in that kind of a mood, if it had been something really critical that had to be done then, I would have done something about it, but usually I could wait till the next morning, and usually he never mentioned the evening before.

Interviewer

And you would never bring it up to him.

Brent Scowcroft

No, no.

Interviewer

Now, would you report to Dr. Kissinger what was going on?

Brent Scowcroft

Sometimes.

Interviewer

And you were Kissingerâ€™s deputy.

Brent Scowcroft

Yes.

Interviewer

But you were kind of caught in between these two duties.

Brent Scowcroft

Well, thatâ€™s why I say â€œsometimes.â€ Â One of my principle jobs was managing these two personalities to keep them cooperative rather than conflicting.

Interviewer

Thatâ€™s very interesting. Â You were their junior in both instancesâ€”

Brent Scowcroft

In both instances.

Interviewer

And you were actually managing them.

Brent Scowcroft

Yes. Â They would both turn to me. Â

Interviewer

Now, did you ever have arguments with either one of them?

Brent Scowcroft

Yes. Â

Kissingerâ€™s Infamous Rage
Interviewer

The apocryphal story is you went toe to toe with Aldermanâ€”did you ever go toe to toe with Kissinger?Â

Brent Scowcroft

I donâ€™t know about toe to toe, it was a differentâ€”I donâ€™t know that itâ€”Â

Interviewer

I mean, did you ever have a sort of a really strident argument over a particular piece of policy, letâ€™s say? Or did you have a difference of opinion about things that might beâ€”you obviously had enormous credentials of your own at this point; you had judgments that you would have made on every situation about policy-making.Â

Brent Scowcroft

Iâ€™ll tell you an anecdote that illustrates this. After I had been Kissingerâ€™s deputy for two to three monthsâ€”he was historic for yelling and screaming at his staff; especially his secretary. Heâ€™d come out of this office and yell, and as soon as he had reduced her to tears, which he did routinely, heâ€™d go back into his office and be all relaxed. It was his way of venting.

Brent Scowcroft

Well, one time I happened to be in the outer office when he came out, and so he vented his spleen on me, and he yelled at me and so on, and I just stood there and looked at him. Again, Iâ€™d been through plebe year, and I just looked at him and didnâ€™t say a word. And he said, â€œScowcroft, some day Iâ€™ll find a way to get to you.â€ Well, he never did, and then he quit. And he never yelled at me again.

Brent Scowcroft

I mean, he has a lovely personality, but he used to build up tension. Heâ€™d call a secretary in to take dictation, and I learned I had to go in there because he would scare them so to death that they couldnâ€™t take the dictation.

Interviewer

Did Kissinger turn to you to say, â€œWhat should we do here? Iâ€™m doing this shuttle diplomacy, what should we do?â€ Or, â€œIâ€™m doingâ€”â€Â

Brent Scowcroft

Oh, frequently, yes, yes. And, as Iâ€™d sayâ€”we rarely had confrontations there because we had then a very collegial relationship, and I treated him with deference, which he was due, but made known what my views were. And so it was a very productive relationship.Â

Interviewer

Would you say that there is a distinction between yourâ€”basic thrust of your foreign policy and national security philosophy from Dr. Kissingerâ€™s, or would you say theyâ€™re fairly copasetic?Â

Brent Scowcroft

Theyâ€™re fairly copasetic, yeah. I would say both of us come from a realist school of foreign policy, but heâ€™s more purist than I. He is much more a Henry Morgenthau â€œthe world is a struggle of nations to maximize their power,â€ and I think thatâ€™s very overdrawn. But other than that, yes, weâ€™re very close in our outlooks, and have remained so to this day. Weâ€™re very close friends.Â

Interviewer

Making that comparison with Morgenthau, how would you compare yourself to someone historical that you couldâ€”comes closer to yourâ€”

Brent Scowcroft

When I was at Colombia in graduate school, Morgenthau was all the rage. He had just come out with his book, Politics Among Nations, and it was a hard realist philosophy. And I sort of leaped to it. But I also had a professor by the name of Tannenbaum who taught Latin American history, and U.S.-Latin American relations, and he talked about the soul of America and what we were about, and it was clearly not that. So I think I got an amalgam there of realismâ€”yes, youâ€™ve got to recognize what the limits are of what you can doâ€”but enough idealism to say youâ€™ve got to lift your eyes up from the cold struggle to what it is you want to achieve.

Watergate and Nixonâ€™s â€œFatal Weaknessâ€
Interviewer

You were on the White House staff when Watergate took down a presidency, the only president to resign.Â

Brent Scowcroft

Yes, I was.Â

Interviewer

Tell me about that episode, what it was like to be there in the White House during that time.Â

Brent Scowcroft

Oh, it was traumatic. It was in a wayâ€”I was late to learn about the depth of the Watergate thing, but watching it happen was sort of like watching a Greek tragedy where Nixon, having thought he could brush it aside, realized he couldnâ€™t, and would do something but just not enough to lance the boil. And I though, you knowâ€”when the break-in first became known, if he had said, â€œIt happened, Iâ€™m responsible. Iâ€™m the president, these people worked for me, heads will roll,â€ it would have been exorcised, but he didnâ€™t. He did just a little bit, and it gradually just entrapped him, and the end was a human tragedy.Â

Interviewer

Did you lose respect for him as it was unfolding?

Brent Scowcroft

No, because I saw both sides of it. I saw what he had been doing and trying to hold on and not divulge the things which would have showed complicity; tried to keep on with his work. The day before he resigned he called three or four of us together to plan some project; I canâ€™t even remember what it was, some mundane thing that he wanted done. So as I say, it was a real human tragedy.Â

Interviewer

Did you sense a bit of pathos then in that scene that heâ€™s pulling the four of you together to talk about something very small?Â

Brent Scowcroft

Oh, clearly. When the world was collapsing about him, he was trying to maintain the spirit of normalcy.

Interviewer

And recognizing this very complex character that you described to me beforeâ€”the paranoia, the insecurityâ€”did it all come together in Watergateâ€”these were the flaws that helped to bring him down?Â

Brent Scowcroft

I think so. Because I think part of what he imbuedâ€”in the White House then there were a lot of young staffers who thought the rules didnâ€™t apply to â€™em. And they were arrogant and hard charging, and this was in the election campaign of â€™72, and theyâ€”Iâ€™m sure they planned the Watergate thing, thinking, â€œGee, this would be a great coup.â€ And should it have brought the president down? Not really. It was a tinhorn break-in.

Brent Scowcroft

But it underlay the symptoms of what I think was one of Nixonâ€™s fatal weaknesses, where he said to break in the doctorâ€™s office that had David Elsworthâ€™s [Daniel Ellsberg] psychological profile and so on. Â To me that was like what he used to tell me to do late at night. Â Itâ€™s showing his peopleâ€”again this inferiority complex. Â He was not a particularly skilled masculine figure, and I think he wanted to show to his colleagues: â€œIâ€™m a tough guy.â€

Brent Scowcroft

[Side conversation]

Interviewer

Did you worryâ€”you had a very personal knowledge of what was going on at the time, but did you worry for the country?Â

Brent Scowcroft

No.Â

Interviewer

It was a constitutional crisis, so?

Brent Scowcroft

Oh yeah. Â No, I didnâ€™t worry for the country. Â By that time, first of all, I knew Gerald Ford very well by then; because while he was vice president I used to brief him once a week on what was going on in foreign policy. Â So I knew him very well, and I was very comfortable with that sort of thing. Thereâ€™s a story that went around that the Pentagon was worried about an unconstitutional use of power by the president. Â I think that was pure fantasy. Â I donâ€™t think it ever crossed his mind. Â

Interviewer

By President Nixon you mean?

Brent Scowcroft

By President Nixon.

Interviewer

Unconstitutionally doingâ€”

Brent Scowcroft

To order the Pentagon to do something.

Interviewer

Domestically?

Brent Scowcroft

Apparently. Â But the Secretary of Defense apparently put out an order that they should take orders from no one at the White House.

Interviewer

Who was the Secretary of Defense then? Â Iâ€™m trying to remember.

Brent Scowcroft

It was Schlesinger, Jim Schlesinger. Thatâ€™s so far out of my mind, and Iâ€™m sure Richard Nixonâ€™s. Â It never was a possibility.

Interviewer

Do you think this was a bit of paranoia on the part of Schlesinger, then?

Brent Scowcroft

Well, I donâ€™t know about paranoia, or whatever. Â

Interviewer

Overreaction.

Brent Scowcroft

Overreaction, yeah. Â Yeah. Â So it was aâ€”yes, it was a constitutional crisis but it was a very smooth transition.

Interviewer

Gerald Ford had only been vice president a short period of time.

Brent Scowcroft

A short period of time, yes.

Interviewer

Now did you know Spiro Agnew?

Brent Scowcroft

Yes, I knew Spiro Agnew, yes.

Interviewer

Give me your impressions of Spiro Agnew.

Brent Scowcroft

Typical Maryland politician. Â Not above doing whatever was necessary. Â Loved his position of spokesman of the press-bashing group. Â Very interesting, at one point when Nixon was getting in trouble about Watergate, Agnew was thinking he was going to be president, and he actually sent people over to see how I ran the office and so on. Â

Interviewer

What would a President Agnew have been like? Â

Brent Scowcroft

I donâ€™t know, because I donâ€™t know what drove his inner personality. Â He was so political, and so narrowly political. Â Would he have risen above it? Â I donâ€™t know, but he saw himself in a way as Nixonâ€™s hatchet man.

Nixonâ€™s â€œWalter Mittyâ€ Diary
Interviewer

So Nixon resigns and goes to San Clemente, and he asks you to come out as heâ€™s writing the book. The two of you sit in his living room or whatever going over chapters, is that right?Â

Brent Scowcroft

Yes.

Interviewer

What did youâ€”tell me about that scene, I guess. Itâ€™s almost surreal, in a way. A presidencyâ€”and it ended, andâ€”Â

Brent Scowcroft

Well, it is, and it was a strange little world out there. Heâ€”again, it showed this incredible self-control of Richard Nixon. Here he had suffered a unique humiliation and defeat, and yet, did it break him? No. Did he succumb? No. He just went on to the next thing he wanted to do, which was to write a book.

Interviewer

Do you think he felt any guilt?

Brent Scowcroft

I donâ€™t know.Â

Interviewer

He didnâ€™t express it to you.Â

Brent Scowcroft

I didnâ€™t try to probe; he neverâ€”never talked to me about the heart of Watergate. But there was an interesting aspect to it. Because when I would read chapters of the book, I would mark them up and I would say, â€œMr. President, it really didnâ€™t happen this way.â€

Interviewer

That was my next questionâ€”was he honest? Or was heâ€”Â

Brent Scowcroft

Iâ€™d say, â€œIt didnâ€™t happen this way, it happened this way.â€ And heâ€™d say, â€œNo, no, it didnâ€™t, and Iâ€™ll show you, because my diary has it in it.â€ Well, he had a kind of a Walter Mitty diary.Â

Interviewer

Explain what a Walter Mitty diary is.

Brent Scowcroft

Well, a Walter Mittyâ€”some of the entries in the diary were sort of the way he hoped the day would have ended rather than the way the day actually ended. Now, is that self-deception or what? I donâ€™t really know. But it happened a couple of times when he would refer to his diary as the authority, and I just knew for a fact that that was not what had happened.Â

Interviewer

How did you resolve those conflicts?Â

Brent Scowcroft

I frequently went to records which would demonstrate what the facts were.

Interviewer

So in the end, he would be willing to be corrected on those issues? So in the end it wasâ€”Â

Brent Scowcroft

Mm-hmm. But a few of them were matters of interpretation, and I didnâ€™t try to have my way.

Interviewer

But he wrote his book himself.Â

Brent Scowcroft

He wrote his book himself. Well, he had two people helping him write the book, but he was a great writer. He used toâ€”when he was president, he used to go across the street to the executive office building; he had a little office there where people were not allowed to disturb him. And heâ€™d sit there and heâ€™d write, and heâ€™d write notes to himselfâ€”yellow pad after yellow pad full of notes. He was very much a writer.Â

Interviewer

Well, he had a very developed interior mind.Â

Brent Scowcroft

Oh, absolutely he did. Absolutely he did. He thought through things very carefully.Â

Interviewer

Would you say, like you said about Johnson, that again but for one very tragic development he would have been ranked higher on the list of presidents?Â

Brent Scowcroft

Oh, I think he would have been. I think he would have been, because while he had these distortions, I would say, in his personalityâ€”especially in foreign policyâ€”he had some profound instincts, and his opening to China is one of the fundamental developments, I think, of the 20th century.

Interviewer

Itâ€™s even a phrase in the language: â€œNixon going to China,â€ being the opposite of what one might expect and how you can do that if you areâ€”Â

Brent Scowcroft
Exactly, exactly.