Knott: I think we’re ready to go. I’ve talked a little bit with Judge Webster about what we’re all about and the fact that this is, at least technically speaking, a Ronald Reagan oral history interview, but we will also be covering some elements of the [Jimmy] Carter years, but particularly the [George H. W.] Bush, Sr. years. So transcripts of this interview will be ultimately sent to the Reagan Library and to the Bush Library in Texas.

Webster: Is there any particular style or anything you want to do as far as the recording is concerned? As far as if I want to stop and talk about something or think about something. I don’t want to interrupt your—what’s your formula?

Knott: Feel free. We’ll take this at the pace that is most comfortable for you and if you want to stop, or if you want to—we can even shut the tape off at certain times if you need to just gather your thoughts or whatever. This is your day.

Webster: Well, I can hardly wait to hear what I’m going to say.

Knott: Just to reinforce the fact that we hope that you feel you can be as candid as possible. Whatever you say in this room will stay in this room. You’re the only one in here who is free to talk about what you say today. Until your transcript is cleared, that’s going to remain the case. So, I think we’re ready to go. One of the things we like to do is to start off with a voice identification, which helps our transcriber who is out in Indianapolis, Indiana. She is far removed from the scene, so this helps her identify folks. My name is Stephen Knott and I’m an Assistant Professor at the Miller Center and a Research Fellow as well with the Presidential Oral History Program.

Selverstone: I’m Marc Selverstone and also at the Miller Center, doing the recordings of John F. Kennedy.

Webster: And I’m William Webster, currently senior partner at Milbank, Tweed, Hadley, and McCloy in the Washington office.

St. Leger: I’m Hannah St. Leger. I’m a research assistant with the Presidential Oral History Program. I’m delighted to be filling in for Rob Martin, who wrote the briefing book.
Knott: Our graduate students put together these briefing books for us. They do a great job. Well, I think Marc wanted to ask you the opening question and then we’ll just roll with it from there.

Selverstone: I was struck in reading through the materials and thinking about your transition from judgeship to the head of the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation], what it must have been like to face different kinds of challenges. Challenges from sitting on the bench and hearing cases to bringing cases to the bench and making cases. I’m wondering if there were any particular challenges in that that you had not expected, or how you handled that kind of a transition.

Webster: Well, I used to describe it as transforming myself from “man of the law” to “law man,” and I really did not find it to be as difficult as one might suppose. I had been a United States Attorney, so bringing cases to court was not a new thing for me. I had worked with the FBI in that capacity and I had had FBI witnesses on the stand when I was in district court and I saw their work product on the Court of Appeals. Plus I knew a substantial number of former FBI agents in various capacities, some of them rather well. I had come to have a deep respect for the general integrity and desire to do their duty and to respect the requirements of the Constitution in the process. In fact, the circumstances of my coming—if I talk too long before you want to—

Knott: No, please.

Webster: The circumstances of my coming really evolved from the problems that had developed in the period that predated my coming. After [J. Edgar] Hoover’s death and the examination of techniques that were used at that time to deal with civil unrest, the so-called “black bag jobs,” then the Church Committee and Pike Committee reports. The first thing Vice President [Walter] Mondale did when I arrived in Washington was hand me a copy of those reports to read. So I knew what the circumstances were and really had assumed before I got there that my coming off the bench had something to do with the kind of job description that they were looking for at that particular point in time.

At my swearing in, where it was an opportunity to show both determination and support for the FBI, I asked that it be at the—I’m going a little longer on this than I anticipated, but just to try to deal with your question—we wanted to utilize that occasion to shift the emphasis from criticism to support for the future. I asked that the swearing in ceremony take place at the FBI rather than at the White House, which was customary. The President came, the Vice President came, the Attorney General was there. The Chief Justice performed the swearing-in process. Former Director [Clarence] Kelly was present and the two heads and ranking leaders of the House Judiciary and Senate Judiciary were also present.

So it was a very formidable statement that I hoped would come out of that. I tried to capsule my own commitment by saying that we would “do the work that the American people expected of us in the way that the Constitution demanded of us.” And I used that phraseology for the next nine years, as both a statement to the public and reminder to the Bureau that that was our commitment. That we had a tough job to do and that there were emerging standards of decency that put actual requirements on us, which we would meet by being more professional, and that I would work to try to get the resources to be sure that we did it in that way.
I’ve almost forgotten the question, but you asked me whether it was tough to make a transition.

Selverstone: Yes.

Webster: I think it was not tough to make a transition in that way. There were other circumstances. There was so much concentration of leadership and theme setting in the person of the Director of the FBI after 48 years of J. Edgar Hoover and, of course, Clarence Kelly did an admirable job of trying to analyze the issues for the future. Had more difficulty in getting the ship to turn, but he had clearly identified where we were. The challenge really came in making sure that things happened in the way we developed policy and how we would go forward. I ran into questions every now and then, “Does he mean it? Is that being said for somewhere out there, or does he mean it?” I had to convince people over time, with the help of some of my key associates, that he doesn’t say what he doesn’t mean. And so, yes, I mean it.

I remember particularly, one of the expressions, the “Hoover hard hats.” The old entrenched people, who out of great loyalty to Hoover and what he had done, but they’d carried it one step further, they began to carry out ideas that in my view needed modification, in the sense that they were the repositories of the Hoover responsibilities. They began to say, “what Hoover would have wanted,” or, “what Hoover did want at the time, while he was still alive.” So I had some problems with adjusting that thinking.

But I remember one particular case, and I’ll stay out of names unless you need to get into them, but the head of our Administrative Services division was typical of this. He had been a great door-kicker, as they say, at a young age, he had moved into Administrative Services. In my view, Administrative Services had aggregated too much power, not only over the other divisions in the Bureau, but also in the lives of the individual agents, laying down restrictions and other things of that kind and being tough. I have no problem with being tough, but tough should be relevant to what you’re doing. He was not. He had kind of an old-school way of looking at what’s right, what’s wrong and— (I’m making this longer than it should be and I will be briefer in the future, but I’m trying to make my point here because it is a good beginning.)

He came to me one time. I said, “Let’s get out of the lives of our agents except as their conduct affects—”

Knott: Job performance?

Webster: “—the Bureau itself and its reputation and its efficiency. Let’s stop measuring sideburns and requiring certain dress codes and so on.” At one point I finally came up with a metaphor to describe what I was trying to say. I said, “Sure, we want the general appearance and demeanor of the agents to be crisp.” So I began hearing about “crispy critters” after that. The good part about it was that there were many people who could roll with the punches on those changes but have enough humor in it so that we weren’t at odds. In this particular case, I think the Executive Assistant Director thought he had a “gotcha.” He came to me and he said, “We have this woman who is pregnant and she’s not married. I think she should be dismissed. That’s relevant to job performance.”
I said, “Why is it relevant to job performance?” He said, “Because we’ll have to pay her for maternity time.” I said, “What do we do with the married women?” And there was a long silence and he got up and walked out of the room. [laughter]

The point I’m leading to is that we then addressed the issue of affirmative action in order to try to correct the imbalance and create greater diversity, both of women and minorities. I rather expected that he—in charge of the huge Administrative Services division, which I later cut in half, but with all that power—would be an obstruction on various grounds. And word came back to me that he asked one question, “Does he mean it?” And the answer was “Yes, he means it.” Then he said, “Let’s make it work.” And we had the first, to my knowledge, all-agency retreat on affirmative action, at Quantico for about three days.

We brought in, he brought in, he masterminded the whole arrangement. We brought in Judge [Harry] Low, who is from California, an Asian-American. He is now head of insurance regulation, chief regulator for insurance in California. But we see each other from time to time. We brought in Margaret Bush Wilson, who was president of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]. We brought in Hector Garcia, a leading Hispanic figure.

We had calls for help out to people like Judge [A.] Leon Higginbotham of the Third Circuit, who called me to give me ideas, such as when as a young man he attended a session on the FBI and held up his hand about getting in, the speaker said, “There’s no place for you in this organization.” He said, “I want you to know that when you’re dealing with minorities it is very important that you stay with them. I know you have to vet people, but delay and silence will be taken as you’re just going through the motions and you don’t really mean it.” A very important kind of insight which we put into our program.

It was a hugely successful conference, and the man I give credit for making it happen was the one that I thought was the most recalcitrant and most traditional and less forward-thinking than anybody that I’d encountered in the leadership. So we had to break through those things and make sure that we were not despoiling the past, but we were addressing the future and trying to be relevant. So that’s a long-winded answer to the first question. I’ll try to do better.

Knott: That I don’t know. Don’t worry about it.

Webster: I think that what I’m trying to say is that I ran into individual kind of problems, but moving from “man of the law” to “law man” was not that hard, because I really think I brought an important message that would shape the way we approached the future. It came off of my view of our role from the constitutional sense.

Selverstone: You had mentioned in passing that much of the agenda that you would be taking up had been established before you had arrived. Is there anything that you contributed to that agenda as well?
Webster: Well, I suppose. I have to stop and think about it. What Clarence Kelly did was bring in experts on a lot of different subjects to try to watch what he did. I mean, from monitoring his movements through the day to finding out what issues were really important and talking to people. It was easier for me to do that kind of outreach for public officials and others than I think it was for him, because he hired people to come in, experts to do this. He had three top priorities established: organized crime, white collar crime and foreign counter-intelligence.

He also advanced the theory of quality over quantity, which was an important concept because in the earlier days threats and risks and so forth were different than they are now. When capturing stolen cars was pretty important, the Dyer Act, made it a federal offense. That was probably the most valuable thing outside of a home that a citizen would have. So it was an opportunity for the Director to go into Congress and say, “We recovered more automobiles in value than our entire budget,” which he did every year. That was very effective and there were people in Congress who would say at the end, instead of arguing they’d say, “Well, are you sure you’ve got all the money you need?” which is a little different than today. [laughter]

I adopted those three priorities and in 1980, I added terrorism as one of the top priorities. We were not having Oklahoma bombings and Trade Centers, but we were having an average of 100 terrorist incidents a year in the United States, all of which were life threatening. Not on the scale of its capacity for harm as it has developed into in the last few years, but it was unsettling. It involved airplanes, it involved pipe bombs, it involved a whole range of things. So I asked that that be made a top priority and that we address it. My theme was to get there before the bomb goes off. I’m kind of amused that today, in the discussions in the wake of 9/11 that anyone assumes that the FBI mentality is to wait for a crime and then go solve it.

In the range of terrorism from 1984, that was never the process. The objective was to develop intelligence on terrorist groups and to deal with them effectively before the bomb went off. When I left in 1987 to go to the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], there were five or six, a mere handful of terrorist incidents that year. The next year there were none. So the process of focusing on intelligence as applied to terrorism paid off. The FBI did it and it wasn’t a question of waiting for the crime to occur. So I was very pleased with that.

I think that Clarence Kelly had started a process for doing, as I said, more affirmative action. We really worked hard at that. We went from 90 to 800 women I think when I left, 700 or 800, I’ve forgotten the exact number. We doubled the number of African-Americans. We did about the same thing with Hispanics. And slightly less, because we started with less, but we made significant inroads in developing Asian-American special agents. In fact, the father of one of the special agents who did heroic duty in a bank robbery in Pittsburgh was my tennis partner at the Arlington Y in those days on Saturdays. So we kept working at that. We brought them in.

I think it took us a while to move seriously to provide opportunities for some of them. After I had left, some of them sued Director [William] Sessions and the Bureau for not having given them promotional opportunities. Well, that was a two-edged kind of problem because many of them were selected because of their language abilities and so on. They were very valuable with a court order with electronic surveillance, things of that kind. There was probably some sluggishness on putting them off, sending them somewhere else. So it’s kind of the nature of evolution. But in
terms of bringing them in and giving them opportunities, we did that. We also moved to recognize proven ability at the top. I appointed the first African-American Special Agent in Charge, in my time. In Hoover’s time they were chauffeurs who were nominally agents. Kelly was working at it, but they hadn’t had time to go through chairs and do other things to have earned—which was important—to have earned the leadership recognition.

When I reorganized the Bureau, I didn’t have a deputy. I had three Executive Assistant Directors, and that man was one of the first three selected as Executive Assistant Director. When we had the Atlanta killings he was there as Special Agent in Charge, helped enormously dealing with a black mayor and whole issue of black children being killed. When Vernon Jordan was shot at Fort Wayne, Indiana, the Special Agent in Charge was an African-American. Later he went to Detroit, and had some major offices. If I remember, I called, said, “Let’s get out there,” and they said, “We’re sending the ASAC.” And I said, “No, we’re sending the SAC out there.” Just his presence was an answer to the question because, as you remember, this fellow from Utah was running around shooting mixed couples, that was involved in this case and so that was handled.

Then we transferred—I’m really spending a lot of time on this—you want to hear about President Reagan, but I get loosened up a little by talking about this. We had a system for dealing with affirmative action and I don’t know whether it would meet today’s requirements any more, or whether we’d be allowed to do it, too much profiling or what, but we had baskets. We had a basket for lawyers, we had a basket for accountants, we had a basket for scientists and linguists, and then we had a basket for women and a basket for minorities. These were for applicants. The system I worked out was that if you were a black female lawyer, you were in three baskets. You didn’t get extra points for each of those things, you were in three baskets. And we always took from the top. When we selected we took the top scores from all the baskets. I think that helped us move forward. When we asked the field, “What are your needs?” the field would come back and say, “We really need more Hispanics in this area,” and so on. And we used the field as a prompter and got them involved in the process. So I think our program matured during that time.

You’re asking what sorts of things did we do. I mentioned terrorism as being one. I supported carefully supervised undercover operations, which was an important new technique, particularly exemplified in the Abscam and Greylord cases, but used in many other cases including organized crime cases. We had considerable success in attacking traditional organized crime. Later, during the William French Smith period at the department, we were asked whether we would be willing to enter the drug scene and I thought we should. I checked with my key people. They all agreed that it was time to do something, that we should try to get value added, not just get more bodies in the effort, and we should focus on what we did best, which was long-term investigations, trying to get at the apparatus and get to the top of the leadership effort. Just an extension of organized crime, because organized crime after years and years of staying away from it had gotten heavily into drugs.

We can come back and talk about those things. Nobody was supporting a merger, but they wanted to bring DEA [Drug Enforcement Agency] under more rigorous control and report to the Attorney General through the Director of the FBI. That worked and it didn’t work, largely because Rudy Giuliani was very much interested in drugs and he really wanted, as an Associate Attorney General or head of the criminal division, whichever it was at the time, he really wanted
to be in there dealing directly with them. It made it more difficult. And Congress had committees for oversight on drugs and committees for oversight on law enforcement and we had trouble getting people to let us come together more closely. There was a lot of resistance in some quarters in the DEA, but the rank and file people wanted the opportunities and the prestige, frankly, of being FBI special agents. We started a process that brought them to Quantico so they could train under the same circumstances.

My thought was we’re not going to be able to do this overnight and have it work. But the more we become like each other, the better we’ll be. They had to have the same college degrees to be eligible that the special agents had, we had other requirements that we put in place. It went very smoothly. They’d been going down to FLETC [Federal Law Enforcement Training Center], the training school in Georgia, the Federal Law Enforcement Training Division or something. It was under the Secretary of the Treasury and it picked up a lot of the little agencies that did not have a Quantico, did not have a national academy. We brought them up and put them in Quantico.

It’s a slower process than I thought when I chaired the National Commission on the Advancement of Federal Law Enforcement, which is a statutory commission, two-year study, completed about three years ago. We recommended that they go ahead with the merger because we thought there’d been too much federalization of crime. We were spreading out all over the place and there was duplication, redundancy. We recommended taking the non-regulatory responsibilities of DEA and ATF [Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms] and putting them in the FBI. Janet Reno and then-Secretary Larry Summers, who had just come on board, had the Secret Service and the ATF people talk to him.

It was dead on arrival, that particular suggestion. It didn’t go very far. It was an election year; I wasn’t surprised. We had to make our report as we saw it and one of the five members of the commission was a former deputy head of ATF. So it wasn’t a question of pushing them in a direction they shouldn’t go. It was just a political judgment, which is all by way of saying these things sometimes take more time than you’d like, not only because internally it takes time, it externally takes time to build support for good systems.

**Knott:** Judge, you mentioned both Abscam and then Greylord. Could you just tell us a little bit about what that operation was?

**Webster:** Which one, Greylord?

**Knott:** Yes.

**Webster:** Well, if you remember, Abscam started out as an investigation of stolen art in New York City. We had our property people on it, which was unfortunate because we really could have used people with corruption skills, which we did in time get ourselves reconfigured. It moved very fast as we got into contact with corrupt middlemen. It started and then moved into municipal corruption in Camden, New Jersey, and Philadelphia. Then the next thing we knew corrupt middlemen were bringing us—they didn’t know they were dealing with the FBI, they thought they were dealing with a sheik who had a lot of money to burn—they were bringing us people from the Congress.
We can come back and talk about this in more detail, because I think you want to hear about Greylord. But the issue there was, was there going to be entrapment? I spent a lot of personal time on that investigation because it was highly sensitive. We put, for one, a man named Tom Puccio, who has gained some recognition in law practice for some of his cases. He was Assistant U.S. Attorney in the southern district of New York. We had him monitoring the meetings on closed circuit TV. He was there to ring the phone, so that the sheik’s representative would pick it up and talk about something while he’s telling him, you’re getting a little too close, don’t go that direction. The objective was, there must be no entrapment. We’re talking about high-ranking officials. We’re not trying to suck them into something. We established rules. I established some rules on how I felt we needed to protect ourselves and the operation and not have it challenged in the courts successfully.

I said, these middlemen must be told that the sheik does not want to talk to someone who isn’t ready do business. Don’t bring them there to be sold by the sheik’s representative. Number two, when they come, you talk dirty. Make it very clear this is an illegal, criminal activity. Number three, if they want to leave, you let them leave. Don’t try to sell them. That became an important issue in the [John] DeLorean case, which was handled years later by DEA, I think, when they tried to soften the deal and sweeten it to keep them there. I said, “If they’re corrupt, they’ll come back. If they’ve wandered in, been sucked into something they didn’t understand, let them go. They should go. So don’t worry about letting somebody off the hook.” So we had that going.

This was an extraordinarily sensitive thing as it was going on. Congress was shocked, “The Executive was attacking the Congress,” when in point of fact we were only following the leads that came to us. We weren’t trying to develop any more. We applied those tests. The ones who were crooked behaved in a crooked fashion; the ones that were most likely not but always looking for money and getting into those things did not get charged or prosecuted.

About that time we had an opportunity to do something about the corruption in the state judiciary in Cook County, which is Chicago. For twenty years it had been one of the most notoriously corrupt judicial centers in the country, and nobody had been able to do anything about it. Cases were being fixed, all kinds of things were taking place. We had an opportunity to do something about it. We had a state judge who was transferred, seconded in on assignment to Cook County. He was appalled at the openness of what was going on with the bailiffs and the people working the halls and things going on of that kind. So he offered to be our undercover operative, that is, to develop the evidence. His code name was “Winston.” He carried his recorder in cowboy boots, he came from out-state, Illinois. We had one other person in a similar capacity who had been a former special agent. We developed an extraordinary case there, over 100 convictions came out of that investigation.

For me, the clear sense of the risk involved, to go ahead and authorize Greylord when Congress was making so much initial noise about the Abscam investigation, meant that if anything went wrong in Abscam or anything went wrong in Greylord, that they would be looking for a new director and maybe a new form of law enforcement, but I went ahead and authorized it. The interesting thing was that by the time we had finished with the Abscam trials, nobody questioned that we knew that we were doing. We didn’t have that problem with Greylord. I thought to wire,
to bug chambers in a court setting and so on, would generate strong objections. But all of this was done with appropriate court supervision, with departmental supervision. People kept it to themselves. Eventually some of it began to get out, but most of it stayed. The thing I’m most proud of is that 14 petitions for certiorari were turned down by the Supreme Court in Abscam. Not a single victory for them, we won every case. In every case entrapment and all the other issues were put forward.

A lot of funny books have been written about some of those things. The hardest part of that was that Senator Harrison Williams, who was greatly beloved for some of his liberal causes, was up to his ears in getting money from the sheik. He went down, had a session in Florida on a boat we’d seized from a drug case. It was a yacht, we called it The Left Hand. I don’t know where we came up with that name, but there he is being photographed with all these really seedy people, talking about things he shouldn’t have been talking about.

Meg Greenfield was editorial editor of the Washington Post and saw the arrest being made, and was just outraged by the whole process. That’s the other kind of problem you have, when the press gets a hold of something, how do you contain them? How do you keep them from blowing the operation until you can put it in place? You end up having to deal, make some kind of minor concessions. You couldn’t legally interfere with their watching you, but you try to persuade them to stay out of the way and they’ll get their story when it was time. But she was outraged.

There were a lot of questions. Congress formed a commission. I remember, because one of my good friends was Alan Simpson, and he said he didn’t think he wanted to serve. I said, “You’ve got to serve on this, you’re the only one with a sense of humor. You’ve got to go in there and do whatever you think is right.” But we stopped seeing each other for six months, no conversations at all until it was over. He’s talked about that many times. I think he’s even lectured on it when he was at the Kennedy School in Cambridge.

But they came back. They had to say something. “It could have been better supervised.” To me, it was pretty well supervised. When you’re dealing with a lot of characters who don’t know they’re dealing with the FBI and you have to keep them moving, doing the front work for you. It’s pretty challenging. They had to cover a little bit for one Senator in particular, who liked to say he walked in and walked out, but the recordings are ambiguous. I defended him on that, because I said oftentimes a Senator has to be ambiguous because you don’t want to offend a constituent. But it was not a heroic activity on his part. They had to deal with all of that, but they found we had broken no laws, we had violated no principle and we’d done some good. We pretty much put an end to that kind of hands-out stuff. It will always come back but I think it was good effort.

Greylord was extraordinarily successful. We did what nobody had been able to do in the past, and we did it through the undercover operation. We’ve had some that did not work well because the undercover people, the cooperating witnesses, were not as good as they should have been. I’d say if I faulted anything on our supervision it was not making sure we had the best read on the people who were working with us. But basically it functioned.
We also mentioned terrorism a while ago. I could never get the White House—this was during the Carter days, and I think it probably would have been true of most any President, a political thing. I could never get the White House to define the circumstances under which, when the FBI was out-gunned, the President would waive the *Posse Comitatus* statute, which the President has to do himself and allow the Army or the military to weigh in, in a domestic situation. Some of that debate is still ongoing, incidentally, because of 9/11 and other things. So I said, “What we’ve been doing is we’ve been shipping in SWAT teams. If the thing gets bigger than one SWAT team in a local area, we bring in others. But I don’t believe that’s the level of skill and horsepower that we’re going to need. So if you won’t let the Army know, let us know, under what kinds of circumstances, then we have to come up with something else.”

I went down, spent time at, was it Fort Dix, Fort Bragg, where they kept their Delta teams and their other special forces. I concluded that they were very good at dealing with some kind of situation out of the United States where the sole objective was to end it, to bring it to a close. I thought that in the United States we had a larger responsibility, which was to save lives, save the lives of the hostages if we could. They trained to do that in the Delta operation, but the end of it was, we’re going to close this down, whatever it is. Somebody may get killed, but that’s it. We wanted to put more emphasis on saving lives. So we created the hostage rescue team. Very carefully selected initially during my time.

The head of an HRT was a lawyer. Very conscious of the techniques that they used, what they could do and what they couldn’t do, when they needed court orders and so on. We equipped them with abilities to drop from helicopters, to fly in. We could send the HRT plane anywhere in the country. I think they’ve doubled the size of the hostage rescue team now. But it was a good approach and we constantly worked on that.

**Selverstone:** Did you have any of those discussions with the Reagan people? Getting them to define the kind of circumstances under which—

**Webster:** Well, the Reagan administration was very supportive of what we were doing. I didn’t have any discussions that I can recall about waiving the *Posse Comitatus Act*. Having the HRT ability considerably reduced the need to do it. We worked with the Army, presumably all of that was approved through the Department of Defense reporting to the President. The system the Army likes best, and which we went along with, is we reach a point where we’re outgunned. We ask for help, the President waives the *Posse Comitatus*, they move in, they’re in control at that point. When things are under control, they give the baton back to the FBI, but there’s a clear transfer of authority. I think that’s still pretty much the way it is.

I was trying to think what was done, precisely how it was handled in the riots in Los Angeles, but that was a National Guard thing. Pete Wilson sent them right in, but you had only one round of ammunition per guardsman. So it wasn’t a question of turning the whole thing over to the National Guard, we didn’t do that. In those days we didn’t have to. I wasn’t there. I was head of the commission that reviewed the performance of the government and the law enforcement afterwards.
So that was the approach and I think it worked pretty well. Later, there were problems with the leadership judgment on decision making, on the use of deadly force, revision of the terms of engagement, things that in my judgment should not have happened. A very fine deputy without that legal background, with a high level of paramilitary experience in the Army, changed the tone a little bit, and I would not have done that. I would not have done some of the things that were done at Waco or Ruby Ridge, particularly Ruby Ridge.

I don’t know how you keep these things on subject matter, but we’ll—

Knott: Please, don’t worry, this is exactly what we’re looking for.

Selverstone: I was wondering if you might be able to talk to us about the period in which the Reagan administration comes into office and the decision to retain you as FBI Director, any recollections you may have.

Webster: Well, just a few, not many. It was a very smooth thing actually. I had been a non-political appointment, it was intended to be a non-political appointment by President Carter. I was not privy to setting the job description, but I’d known the Attorney General, we’d worked on a number of judicial committees together, Griffin Bell. I had not known President Carter, but I think the idea that before I went on the bench, I had had a Republican background, had some appeal to him. In fact, there’s a funny story. When I was sworn in, President Carter turned to talk. “Now, we heard a lot of nice things about Judge Webster,” and so forth, he went on and he said, “But he’s mortal, he’s fallible, he’s a Republican.” It jolted me because I’d been on the bench for eight years, totally hatched. I’d come to Washington and I had not thought of myself in a political context before. But I think that he was thinking this just as another way of demonstrating that this is not a political appointment for a political agenda.

When President Reagan was elected, some of my friends at the Los Angeles Times—funny, I had lunch with a couple of them yesterday because they were doing a big paper on secrecy and Jack Nelson is going to teach at Harvard. Do you know Jack?

Selverstone: He came down and did a forum, actually.

Webster: Did he? He was bureau chief at that time. I was here, Ron Ostrow, he was bureau chief at that time, conceived the idea, since they were from Los Angeles, of trying to be the paper that found out whether I was going to be replaced or what. So they printed an article. I believe Ed Meese was the person they talked to, one of the key advisors to the President-elect, and the answer was very quick and forthcoming. They said two things. They said, “No, we believe that this is not a political appointment and it should be continued wherever possible.” And then they were nice enough to say, “And besides, we like what he’s doing and what he’s done.” So, without talking to me directly, they sent a signal that we were going to get along just fine and we did.

I got to know William French Smith almost immediately, of course, when he came to Washington, and helped him get past some problem he had. As I remember, Bill Safire had written something that—as only Bill can do when he wants to turn his pen into characterization,
that Smith was a “patsy” or something. There was a reception at the Corcoran and I introduced him to Bill Safire. I said, “You two really ought to know each other. You might actually like each other.”

So, the beginning was very smooth. The transition was good. I think, let’s see, Dick Wiley, I think, Richard Wiley might have been the transition for the Justice Department. There were two or three, Fred Fielding, Dick Wiley, they’re now law partners, and Dick Houser, who had worked for Fred Fielding.

Knott: Fielding?

Webster: Fielding, Fred Fielding, in the White House. I think they looked through everything, seemed to like what we were doing. It was about as smooth as you could possibly want. I could conceive of scenarios where particular departments become campaign issues, and therefore the people who come in as transition are looking to prove what they’ve been saying, the rhetoric they’ve been using in campaigns. But there was none of that, it was professional from start to finish.

I can mention one funny incident, at the inauguration. We were invited and we sat up in that upper area where officials sit during the inauguration. We had a great view of Pennsylvania Avenue from the FBI, and I had invited a number of people to come back and watch the parade from my office space on the seventh floor, including some of George Bush’s relatives, I’m trying to think who all they were. A lot of family people came up. But I needed to get back. So they’d arranged to get us in a car which was parked outside and head down Pennsylvania Avenue. Right alongside us was the young son—

Knott: His son? Ron Junior?

Webster: Young Ron, Ronnie. He didn’t have the right license plates. He was to be the first car in Pennsylvania Avenue and they wouldn’t let him go, he didn’t have the right license plates. That put our car first going down from Capitol Hill. My late wife, Drue, was wearing a red coat. The only other person wearing a red coat was Nancy Reagan. We were starting down, these people were looking in, Now who is this? They didn’t realize that Reagan had gone to have lunch with Congressmen. So yes, they started waving, so we started waving back. We had a wonderful time all the way down Pennsylvania Avenue.

Knott: Great. Do you recall your first meeting with Ronald Reagan during this time? I assume it was during this time that you met him for the first time, is that accurate?

Webster: That’s right, that’s right. I had once gone to hear him speak in St. Louis, didn’t meet him, but remember his strong pace, coming down, a very impressive figure, energy, spoke smoothly and forcefully, but not as a mob builder. It was a very impressive performance. That was the closest I’d gotten to him. I don’t remember our first meeting, actually, to tell you the truth. I think we went to the ball, we might have seen him at the ball, but I don’t remember that. I know that I had met him before he was shot. We already knew him at that point. My memory won’t go back that far to get everything in chronological order. He came to the FBI a few times.
I think almost immediately they asked me to come over and stand behind him in some Rose Garden exercise. I’ve got some pictures of that. That’s about the best way I could do it, go back and look at the pictures. The White House and the FBI are pretty careful to date those things. Then there were other times I went with him. I flew with him one time to a meeting, some big meeting. I can’t remember what organization, whether it was the International Association of Chiefs of Police or what. But again I was there but don’t remember any particularly meaningful discussions. After he was shot I went to see him in the hospital because he had to be interviewed and took two men along to do the interviewing.

**Knott:** So when you saw him in the hospital, this was the actual interview?

**Webster:** Yes, to be interviewed about what he saw, what he remembered. I have some pretty vivid memories of that incident if you want to talk about it.

**Selverstone:** Please, absolutely.

**Webster:** I was holding the annual meeting of Special Agents in Charge and I had arranged—I’m trying to remember whether it was arranged through Lewis Powell, whatever it was, we had it at Williamsburg, thought it would be a better opportunity. We usually had it at Washington. I thought, *Why not in Williamsburg?* There are a lot of good reasons to be there, people bring their wives, their spouses, good chance to get together. I can remember saying, we were going through the planning part, and I said, “I think you probably ought to have a small plane down there just in case.” Somebody said, “Don’t you think we’ll be criticized?” That’s when we were under such scrutiny. Everything, “Don’t you think we’ll be criticized,” somebody said, “if we do that?” I said, “If something goes wrong and we don’t have transportation, we’ll be criticized for that. I’d rather err on the side of being prepared.” Because you’re down there, there’s no airport there, no regular transportation there. You’ve got to go to Newport News to get on a plane. So we were there and we set up a full command center.

We had some protests, some other things that were going on at the time, I don’t remember precisely what. But we had a very complete set up, where it was almost like headquarters had moved to Williamsburg. The word came through that morning that the President had been shot. I moved over to the command center to find out what was going on, what we were doing, and then I ordered the Executive Director for Criminal Investigations and the head of the Washington field office back to Washington in the airplane. Then I arranged to take a commercial flight, first available commercial flight. It was headed to Maryland, Baltimore. But without my having asked them to do it, I don’t know how it happened, whether it was the pilot’s idea or someone at the Bureau thought about it, they came back and said, “We’re going to drop you at National.” So they made an unscheduled landing there, picked me up. I was being driven back in a Bureau car.

Our privacy modes were pretty slim and far between in those days. They were briefing me on the telephone as we went through as to what was going on. Funny thing, same thing was happening to Vice President Bush, who was coming back on Air Two, he was getting briefed. And somebody out in Illinois was picking up those telephone calls and recording them. Some of them were actually put out on the radio in Chicago and picked up.
Fortunately it didn’t get the big network news. It was kind of what we were dealing with in terms of our capacity. I can veer for just a moment.

One night early on, with a kidnapping taking place and a hostage situation, I came back to the Bureau in my tuxedo and there was a room about this big with some old chairs and some floor plugs that everybody was stepping over and that was being managed out of there. From there came the command center that we put in place, that now is a whole floor, it is one city block of command center.

We had a very efficient one created. We didn’t have anything like that to work with when we got there, but they did a very good job. They got [John] Hinckley, of course, right away. They found the bullet fragments they wanted. I said, “Find out everything about this. We do not want another Warren Commission if we can avoid it. If we have to have one, we’ll have one. But let’s be sure we can close all the loops. Is this one man or is this a group of people? We need to know.” So they worked very hard.

I went to, not the arraignment, but they brought him before a magistrate that night to set bond and do the other things. Somebody said, “Why are you here?” My memory is that I said, “I just came to watch.” But it was reported that I said, “It happened on my watch.” Which would have been another reason, my reason, maybe that’s what I said, I’m not sure. Then we followed that through. There were things, little worrisome things found in his hotel room, maps and things of that kind. We were not sure if we were picking up any different names. There was also some kind of weird connection between Neil Bush and Hinckley’s father. The small world department kind of things that had to be sorted out.

Then the interview came and I went over. He was reading newspapers. He had his glasses on in bed and was trying to just sort of read through. I knew how he liked a good laugh, at least smiled over things that otherwise were not so funny. Hinckley had used these devastator bullets, do you recall that? They were advertised as being good for varmints because they had an explosive content. They could blow up if they didn’t all work, but if they could they could blow up on impact. Well there was a funny story about President Reagan. They had all these tubes down his throat and he couldn’t talk and he had a notepad and he kept throwing things out like “I hope you’re all Republicans” to the doctors and all these other kinds of things. They were struggling around looking for something down his throat and the nurse said, “There, this is it.” He grabbed the pad and wrote, “What is it?” So we got a hold of one of the devastator bullets and I had a little bell jar about this big and put it in there and I had a little brass label that said, “This is it.” I gave it to him over there and he got a chuckle over it.

Mike Deaver, about two years ago—maybe even, time goes so fast, maybe even a year ago—wrote a book about his 30 years with Reagan, or 20 years, do you remember what it was?

Knott: Yes.

Webster: It’s a pretty interesting book. He sent us the book on tape version of it. I don’t have a copy of the book but I do have a copy of the tape. Maybe we do have, maybe Lynda got a copy. But in any case, in it he describes going to see Reagan on what might have been his last trip
before Reagan slipped away in Alzheimer’s, and described the room and here was this bell jar. And he didn’t know the story. I told him what the story was about the bell jar.

There were other contacts from time to time. If the White House invited me to come over to talk about something and hadn’t called the department first, I would always call the Attorney General and say, “I was invited to go over, would you or somebody like to go over with me?” We kept that pretty much—I wanted the protection of working through the department. That was always respected by President Reagan and his troops. From time to time they wouldn’t think, “Would you come by and brief us on something?” But I tried to follow through consistently on that and I’m glad I did it. Something seductive about being asked to come to the White House and talk to the President about something. The thing that we had to work at through the years was not taking direct operational orders from the White House, because they never came from the President, they always came from somebody who purported to speak for the President.

I was with Griffin Bell one time, and the call came, “The White House is calling.” He said, “You tell them I don’t talk to houses.” We wanted to keep that relationship the way it should be. We did not want to become a federal police at the direction of the President, and President Reagan really did not abuse that. But then you had your Ollie Norths of the world, who would try to do those things, and he was very good at friendly talk. “The President really appreciates what you’re doing,” and so on. When I got over to CIA I had to deal with the Iran-Contra problem. Those were largely guys that got contacted directly and were asked to do things, and they didn’t ask questions because they were doing something for the President. Whereas in every case that I know of, where Ollie made those calls to the Bureau, to anybody he talked to that he’d gotten to know, they immediately reported it to their superior. So that the thing went up very quickly to find out, is this an authorized request?

Selverstone: It was understood that that should be the protocol.

Webster: They understood. It was also protocol at the CIA, I found out, but it was a little different. You’re out in Colombia or Costa Rica or something like that, you don’t pick up the phone and go back. Just they didn’t, anyway, they didn’t observe it, because it seemed like a reasonable request to carry arms in the airplane or whatever. They didn’t. But I think it kept the Bureau out of harm’s way that we followed that rule because in the cases that I had where I look back and I took some heat, they were almost always cases I didn’t know anything about.

Then the question was, under our rules, should I have known something about it? You usually found that there was some slippage. There was some relaxation of the old Levi rule, Edward Levi rules, during the Smith administration. Not a whole lot, but just a little. And in the area of terrorism they had a lot more freedom. The supervisor who was dealing with the CISPES [Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador] case, which came along just as I was going over to CIA, thought that his authority was to go forward with name checks. Did not require telling the higher supervisor what he was doing. And that’s true, he didn’t.

Common sense would have said, when the people you’re looking at are all ministers and priests, it’s a pretty good idea to tell somebody about it, even though the rule didn’t specify. But they were so apolitical, when I think about it, that they didn’t see this. They didn’t see this was a
problem that really needed some attention by people who had to deal with other branches of
government and know what to do with it. So that was an illustration where it wasn’t followed.
The rules were technically followed but bad judgment was exercised.

It turned out we had a lousy informant and as often happens—too often what happens, once is
too often—the agent supervising the informant got cuckolded and the fellow gave a lot of bad
information and we were chasing ghosts about alleged fundraising for terrorists in El Salvador. I
use those just to talk about reporting responsibilities, how that can operate as protection and
guidance and not have a situation where somebody says, “Oh, you’ve been manipulated, or used,
or misused by the executive branch in some way.”

**Knott:** May I ask if you have any recollections of a couple of pardons that President Reagan
issued in his first few months in office of FBI agents who had been involved in some illegal so-
called “black bag jobs?”

**Webster:** Well, yes, was that the [Edward] Miller, [Mark] Felt, [L. Patrick] Grey indictments?

**Knott:** Yes. How did you react to that?

**Webster:** Well, have to step back a little bit. When those indictments first came down, there was
some internal outrage in the FBI. There was a show of support on the courthouse steps and I did
nothing to stop them from doing that. I wasn’t really happy that it was taking place. I realized it
was a complicated issue, but the law enforcement end and the Justice Department weren’t too
comfortable about protesting indictments. It was turned into a show of support rather than—I
mean, you say the men are innocent until proved guilty—so they were there just to evidence their
support, but it was not criticism. I don’t recall any blasts at the Justice Department or the
prosecutors for having done anything wrong. It was simply to say, “We’re with you through the
process.”

I did nothing to stop that, but I was uncomfortable with it. I did not know Miller. I think I met
Felt a few times. He’s one of the people who always shows up on somebody’s Deep Throat list.
And Grey I got to know later when I invited him to attend the 75th anniversary of the FBI. It was
a healing process and Jimmy Stewart came and spoke and so on. Two friends of mine—became
friends of mine, one became a very good friend of mine, Bill Simon and … it’s my very good
friend, whose name I can’t remember right now. This happened to me the other night when I was
trying to talk about her. She married Henry—this is my “Rose” story, try to work your way back.
She was the famous playwright who married the head of *Life.*

**Knott:** Clare Booth Luce.

**Webster:** Clare Booth Luce, thank you. She really was a very good friend. I was at a private
dinner with President Reagan the night the lights went out in the Watergate. She and Bill Simon
raised money for their defense, and I thought that was a good thing. It wasn’t a question; they
were entitled to it. From time to time I’ve contributed money on the CIA side when similar
things happened, to provide defense. I thought they were entitled to a defense even though with
some of them I had personally participated in the disciplinary process. But as long as it wasn’t for individuals, as long as it was a fund, I was comfortable.

They had raised a defense fund for these fellows. I know they were both reasonably close to President Reagan, probably had an opportunity to weigh in on what they had done. I never was close enough to the issues. I think investigations were over. Do you remember when the indictments came through?

**Knott:** All I have is the date of the pardon, when Reagan issued a pardon, which was April 1981.

**Webster:** Well, I’m talking about the actual indictments. Don’t remember when that took place. But my sense of it was that I had not participated in any of it. The work was done, it was in the hands of the prosecutors, however they’d done it. So accordingly, I didn’t know with any level of conviction myself. I knew what they were charged with doing, but I didn’t know what the defenses would be and whether they had overstepped their authority or what.

Later—not those three, but later—I was given the 48 agents to discipline. That was in the Carter administration period, when Griffin Bell was the Attorney General.

**Knott:** Discipline for—?

**Webster:** The black bag jobs. And, if you want to know my conclusions—they’re all on the record—but I brought in my law clerk at the time, Russell Bruemmer came in as a special assistant. I got him to help go through all the records with me, focused on that. Later he did the same thing for the Iran-Contra thing, in between being a partner at Wilmer, Cutler and Pickering, and head of the banking department. As far as the street agents were concerned, I think I disciplined about a half a dozen of them, always for violation of rules that had been in place. Not for *ex post facto* concepts and regulations. The things they did, they should not have done.

As for the others I felt there was an institutional responsibility, there’d been a total breakdown in educating the agents. In 1972, the Supreme Court handed down its decision in the *Keith* case, which answered the question as to whether or not you needed a warrant to conduct electronic surveillance in a domestic security case, as distinguished from a national security case. Up until that time the assumption had been that the President had the authority to provide for the national defense, that included the national security and that he could authorize, through his Attorney General, wiretaps on various activities.

Of course, if you’ve studied the history of the [John F.] Kennedy era, the period of [Dwight] Eisenhower and so on, there were a lot of warrant-less searches that were taken under the assumed authority of the President to protect the national security. The *Keith* opinion came down and said, not so. They reserved judgment on international security and that’s where the FISA statute, the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, came in. But they said domestic requires a warrant. These fellows had gotten warrants and bugged places, break-ins, without search or wiretap authority. But I said I wanted to look and see what they had been told after the *Keith* opinion. They did it subsequent to the *Keith* opinion, ’72, to ’74, ’76, whenever it was.
The only thing that we could find was a wiretap that went out, “due to Supreme Court opinion this day, cancel the following investigations.” It didn’t say why. It didn’t give instructions or educate them. So we cannot punish agents for doing their duty as they understood it when we failed to tell them what the requirements were. So I shipped it back. The department had done nothing either. The department did absolutely nothing. These people thought they were doing what they had a legal right and duty to do. So that’s the way that ended. I sent the package back and it was accepted in the form in which I sent it.

I did discipline some of them. I mean, they were supervisors who broke existing rules, and they were in serious violation of those. But not the people who were just carrying out orders. It is always the problem in the military, where you carry out orders, can you be prosecuted for carrying out orders? At what point do you have to question the order? I don’t suppose that question is ever going to be completely answered, but that was the way I got into the black bag jobs. These fellows were subsequently indicted and then President Reagan subsequently pardoned them.

Now interestingly enough, President Bush 41 as they say, Senior Bush, pardoned a number of agents, officers, case officers who had been indicted in the Iran-Contra thing when he left office, as a final act. So executive clemency is still alive and well. I don’t know what to infer from the question or what the question implied, but that’s the way it was handled. I think we treated it—we didn’t go out and light bonfires or any of that kind of thing.

**Knott:** I guess I was just curious if you thought perhaps the pardon was sending the wrong message.

**Webster:** Ah, I have to think back a lot of years to try to think what I thought about right message or wrong message. Did the pardon of President [Richard] Nixon send out the wrong message? You know, those are questions that are not easy to answer. I think President [Gerald] Ford did what he genuinely thought was the right thing to do under the circumstances, trying to put the whole issue behind him. I suspect that President Reagan thought pretty much the same thing. Anyway, that’s what happened.

And you know, an interesting legal concept, which sometimes has been helpful to me on some of these issues, acceptance of a pardon is an acknowledgment of some form of guilt. So if you’re really going to be pure about it, you don’t accept the pardon. You take the trial and so on. If you accept the pardon, that in itself is a kind of message: that something happened here that shouldn’t have happened, but for various reasons it’s going to be forgiven. It doesn’t leave you free to go out and say, “I never did it.” Some will try that, but legally it’s an acknowledgment.

**Knott:** I think you mentioned earlier that there was some effort during William French Smith’s Attorney Generalship to ease some of the guidelines that had been put in place regarding domestic security and terrorism. Could you talk perhaps a little bit more about that, about your own feelings—?

**Webster:** I can’t talk about details because I’ve frankly forgotten the particulars. I was very fortunate to have a man named John Hotis, who was a career FBI agent. Held a master’s and
doctorate in law at Yale, which he got as an FBI agent, and he did something at Harvard as well. The reason that I enjoyed having him is that when we had to negotiate the guidelines for how we conducted different activities, John held his own with the best of them at the department. He was not just a cop over there arguing from a cop’s point of view. So very, very important contribution. He knows the subtleties of these modifications.

The guidelines were a little looser in the terrorist field when we put them together. They were written at a time when the FBI was under severe scrutiny and fire. Sometimes when you do that things get interpreted all as, “Thou shalt not do this,” and “Thou shalt not do that,” and I was arguing, “Give us affirmative statements of what you expect of us and we’ll do better with those.” I think they had to do with when you could open an investigation, when you had to close one, what kind of watchful watching you could do as things went along, things of that kind. Where before, at least in the minds of some who interpreted it, you had to open it and close it. In terrorism you’re picking up bits and pieces of something, it was very cellular types of organizations and I think they might have loosened up in that way.

I can’t think of any major, major changes in the scheme of things. We were giving Miranda warnings before there was a 
Miranda
 case. In fact, the Supreme Court decision in 
Miranda
 has a footnote that refers to that. When they came down to the kind of warnings that need to be given, the FBI has been doing this, so it’s not a burden on the FBI. That was always my view.

On the other hand, you always have an issue of gloss. And I think this is probably the basic difference between the Carter administration and the Reagan administration. The Carter administration would have people like Senator, then Vice President Mondale, who because of their experiences, were trying to tighten down on things without necessarily thinking through the consequences. The Reagan administration came with a different attitude. They were always talking about loosening up, loosening up, because they are doing their duty. Don’t make it impossible. What about the rights of the victims? You know, we have a whole bunch of rhetoric that was out there, deeply felt, but nevertheless out there.

We should talk about the charter, which illustrates your point. I began to work on a charter for the FBI almost immediately, because Congress was demanding one and I didn’t want Congress to write that kind of a charter: “Thou shalt not do this” and “Thou shalt not do that.” So I said, “Fine, we want to help write this charter. We want to know what the American people expect of us. We want that to be an affirmative statement of our mission.” You can include all the requirements that you want, but let’s not act like we’re on probation and these are the terms of probation.

We worked this thing through and produced a charter. We had a ceremony at the FBI at which [Peter] Rodino, Bob McClory, Strom Thurmond, I’ve forgotten who was the chairman, Ted Kennedy, all the leaders of the Judiciary committees were present. I don’t think the President was there, but I think maybe the Vice President was there. Anyway, it was a pretty high level, Attorney General. We announced the charter, which everybody agreed would be the charter. It was a good charter, it really was a good charter. Reagan was elected. And when everybody came down there, after a while I said, “What about our charter? We ought to get a bill over here and try to get the thing adopted,” and so on. Their attitude—and I love Bill Smith—but their attitude,
they said, “Oh, we think there is just a lot of overreacting. We’re not in any hurry for charters and things; we don’t want to tie you down.” I said, “This charter does not tie us down. It helps us do our job in an appropriate way.”

Well, it just never happened. I said, “Okay, but I’m going to pretend that we have a charter. And this is it, this is the charter.” We continued to educate and enforce the requirements of the charter internally to get people properly trained to go ahead on it. The Reagan administration folks were so supportive of the FBI in their approach that they really thought this had been imposed on us. I could never quite convince them that we had had a role in putting this together ourselves.

**Selverstone:** How did some of this play out regarding the ’84 Olympics and your approach—?

**Webster:** I don’t know how I can make that jump from what I’m talking about. Let’s talk about the ’84 Olympics. We were concerned about terrorism. I established early on a relationship with Peter Ueberroth, who was designated to head the program. We started planning years before the Olympics on what to do, how to do it. It was in Los Angeles if you remember, and I’ve forgotten—150 miles, 135, big big spread—because Ueberroth wanted to use all the existing facilities he could to save money, end up in the black, provide places for people all over, and did a superb job. His team was terrific. And we were in there trying to work out how we could respond, would respond.

I took a helicopter trip to I don’t remember how many of those places. Our biggest problem was Daryl Gates. Daryl was head of the LAPD [Los Angeles Police Department] at the time. We got along pretty well. Years later when I headed a commission to review the riot, he had some rather harsh words to say, but he moderated eventually. But he was very proud of his police force and he said, “We’ll be the first ones here,” and so forth. This is not an attitude about the FBI, it is an attitude about everybody outside the LAPD.

Somebody was telling me, a fellow who was on the advisory council with me, the President’s Advisory Council on Homeland Defense, and he was helping Pete Wilson and went to a meeting with Sherman Block, the sheriff of Los Angeles County, and all the others, and there’s a statute there for mandatory assistance, mutual assistance program in emergencies. Daryl turned to Sherman Block and said, “Sherman, I can’t think of a situation in which I would need your help.” This was before the riots, of course. It was also an attitude he had about the Olympics. His people would be there and they would be able to do it.

Somebody had passed—I think there was an executive order, I can’t remember specifically what shape it took—that identified the FBI as having primacy in terrorist situations.

The Bureau had had a lot of laws like that. The first law was one sentence, said, “The Attorney General may have a Bureau of Investigation,” back in 1906 or something like that. So we weren’t always designated being the person. Then in subsequent years, when Reagan was shot, they passed—no, it wasn’t, it was when Ford was shot at—they passed a law. A select number of people were covered by the Act, and the FBI was given full authority, not only to do things, but to command assistance from the military, from other people. It was in play when the Olympics were set up.
But I had the worst time with him. We had meetings in the office, we had telephone calls. He’d say, “Well, maybe if the President calls me, then I’ll—” [laughing] So we were trying to prepare in a context in which not everybody was fully on board. You need to know who is responsible in an emergency situation. You can’t be debating the issue while something like that is going on.

But the President was very supportive of what we were doing. He wasn’t worried about it. His style was, if he thought you knew what you were doing, he pretty much left you alone. He was interested in anything you wanted to tell him, but unlike a lot of Presidents, he wasn’t feeding a lot of questions to you. Maybe some of his people did, but he didn’t. He figured you would tell him anything you thought he needed to know and he wasn’t really interested in micromanaging the job. He wanted to know the job would be done and done properly. So with respect to the Olympics, I can’t remember a whole lot of briefing or detailing to him.

Selverstone: I was just wondering if the issue of the rules of security played into—

Webster: You mean the guidelines?

Selverstone: —if the guidelines played into your ability to perhaps pick up any leads or look into any cases or potential cases or situations, things that you were hearing prior to the Olympics going off.

Webster: I don’t think we asked for any exceptions. Of course, as I said, I think the terrorism guidelines were looser, or more flexible, than the original Levi guidelines on other types of crimes. I don’t remember any situation where we had to go outside the guidelines. It all went off well. We had issues that weren’t really our baby but we were keeping track of them. I think the Soviets wanted to keep their people on boats in the harbor and a whole bunch of threats. We didn’t want anything to happen, and it didn’t. We came through just fine.

We had similar workouts on—I’ve forgotten what they call them, athletic events in the Caribbean. Was it Puerto Rico, what was it? I remember there the only incident was Bobby Knight got in a fist fight.

Selverstone: The Pan American Games?

Webster: The Pan American Games, yes. [laughing]

Knott: Outside of your realm of responsibility, I guess.

Webster: Not totally. But that one was.

Knott: This is probably a good time for us to take a break.

[BREAK]
Webster: For years I had an impacted wisdom tooth. I tried to have it removed in Guam during the Korean War. They couldn’t do it there, they said it was too hot. Then I got to Pearl Harbor and they were having some kind of polio epidemic and they didn’t want to do anything like that. It was a pretty severe thing. Finally, I gave a talk at the Detroit Economic Council years later, and the damn filling next to my tooth fell out.

Selverstone: In the middle of the talk?

Webster: In the middle of the talk, and I didn’t know whether I dared put my tongue there or drink coffee. Right before the talk started, right there at the table. I pocketed the piece. When I got back the dentist said, “You know, I’ve been trying to get this other tooth out and this is a perfect time now because that thing’s not in the way.” So we scheduled, I went over, I had it done. I went to an NFIB [National Foreign Intelligence Board] meeting, that’s a foreign intelligence panel of various agencies, and then went from there to the White House for the situation meeting. And I kept looking at that cup of coffee. Did you ever see the movie Ten? Does that ring a bell with you, years ago, with what was her name?

Knott/Selverstone: Bo Derek.

Webster: Bo Derek, and Dudley Moore, who just died, would sit there and look through a spy glass at these orgies taking place across the canyon. He had his little bar there, and he’d gone to Bo Derek’s movie father, who was a dentist, in order to get to know her better. He had 23 fillings and he got there with his mouth all anesthetized. And he poured this wine and the wine kept going down. I kept thinking when I was sitting there looking at that cup of coffee, and kept thinking about that. Why would I think about this? Then the President came in, sat down, and Bill Smith said, “Mr. President, Bill Webster just had an impacted wisdom tooth taken out about an hour ago.” Don’t know why he brought it up—and the President said, “Really, I didn’t know we had anybody young enough to still need that.”

Knott: We’re going to have to ask you to tell that again, we cut the tape off. It turns out we did get your tooth extraction story on tape.

Webster: I’ll have to be more careful.

Knott: Any more humorous stories from the situation room that you can recall?

Webster: One or two come to mind now, more later maybe. There was one time, I remember, that they had one chair in there that for some reason was much lower. And the seating, pecking order, the protocol order was always pretty much the same. When the Vice President was there, he sat on the President’s right and it moved along in different places. Those were my CIA days; I’m somewhere at the table but not up in front.

The Vice President would sit there on the right. Everybody got there before the President, then the President would come, people stand, start the meeting. Bush would always move that chair, although he was pretty tall and he could live with it, but he would move it over. However the
circumstances, Cap Weinberger came in one morning and sat down and sort of disappeared. He said, “I knew they’d been beating up on me in Congress but I didn’t know it’d gone this far.”

There was a very interesting by-play between George Shultz and Weinberger at the table. At the risk of generalizing—Holmes¹ says “generalizations are no damn good including this one”—but it always seemed to me that when push came to shove, Shultz was arguing for a military solution and Weinberger was arguing for a diplomatic solution. And the way they would try to build support from the President, they’d each talk, “Now Mr. President, your program” and “your ideas” and so forth, and try to get him locked into their point of view. He always listened but he never seemed to buy into it one way or the other on those issues.

I’ll think of some other ones as we go along. But he always used his cards there. He had his little deck of cards that he used, even in a group as small as this.

Knott: Did you ever witness any instances where he expressed any irritation at something, or frustration? Or did he tend to be fairly—?

Webster: Bill Smith said, “He’s got an Irish temper.” And I never really saw it. Maybe he reserved that for people he felt most comfortable with in letting his hair down, but I never saw it. There was one occasion where it came close, but it was always very controlled. That was the morning when I went over for the photo op after he had announced that he was nominating me to Central Intelligence.

He had called me at the FBI the day before and asked me if I would take over the CIA. That was an interesting conversation because I was getting, during the last minute briefings, I was headed up to the Hill to support the FBI’s budget. It was really a very important session and I had been focused on that. He called me and—I don’t remember all the words that went into it—but he said he would be very pleased if I would agree to succeed Bill Casey at the CIA and so on. I was concerned that he might want an answer. He said something about a press conference. I said, “Mr. President, I’ve got to go up and do my duty for the FBI right now. I’ve really got to think about this, I’m honored.”

I had in fact been telling Ed Meese that I was getting ready to leave. I didn’t want the President to have to pick somebody in the tenth year, when the election year would be going on, and it’s so hard to get a confirmation on some of these appointments, it would be controversial. I thought I ought to leave sooner, and I’d really made a tentative decision about joining a law firm and so on.

I knew at the time, when Casey was dying and then Bob Gates was having problems getting confirmed, and I just felt this was apt to come back to me. I don’t know, but I talked to Meese and I remember saying something like, “My plans are pretty well laid, I would prefer that you not put my name forward or advocate me in some other way.” The only way I knew how to make sure that I didn’t get into that process was, I said, “I don’t know how to say no to a President, but

¹ Alexander Dumas said “All generalizations are dangerous, even this one.”
I do know that I don’t want to hear from anybody but the President.” I figured if the President wanted me bad enough, he’d call me. If he didn’t, I didn’t want to be going through that because I’d already had my plans tentatively in play.

So I got the call. And I said, “I really need a little bit of time. I really kind of need to pray about this. My children have been looking forward to getting me back and I need to touch base with them.” He was very good about it and accepted that. I asked one question about Bill Casey. I don’t know whether I asked it inartfully or not—I can’t remember now exactly—but what I was saying was, is there anything you would want me to do or not do differently than Bill Casey? And he said, “No. I think he did a great job.” I don’t know how he interpreted my question but that was all that was said about that.

Anyway, I called my youngest daughter and she said, “Oh Dad, you know I just love the FBI, but that other place is scary.” As it turned out, she had a great time, because we would go down to the farm at Williamsburg and she always called it “Camp Shhh.” But I was really being torn at that moment in time. I worked my way through it, did my testimony, came back, and called—I’ve forgotten who I talked to at that point. Someone had called me to see where I was in my thinking. It might have been Ed Meese, or it was Howard Baker that called me, Howard Baker that called. So I said, “Howard, I’ve made my choice and if the President wants me there I’d be honored to do it.” So they called me back and asked me to meet the next day.

So we were talking about the Irish in him at this point. They had the photo op in the Oval Office and we had the usual two chairs, the wing chairs in front of the fireplace and the couches. And as the press was coming in he said, “You know, this is a photo opportunity, so they usually don’t get to ask any questions. But it is Helen Thomas’s birthday, and I’m going to let her ask one question.” You know what the question was. The question was, “Mr. President, how do you feel about all these people calling your wife a Dragon Lady?” His cheeks flushed and he said, “Well, they ought to be ashamed.” She said, “Well, your Chief of Staff does.” Baker said, “No, Helen, no, no.” [imitating] “Well your Chief of Staff does.”

What he had actually said, as I found out later, was that “when she is angry she can be a real Dragon Lady.” There’s a difference there. But that’s one time I saw him visibly unhappy. They’d taken a shot, a cheap shot he thought, at Nancy Reagan. Other times I’d really not seen that. I wasn’t present during the time when there was a leak out of a very tiny group, I don’t know whether it was the full National Security Council, but it was just a handful of people. Casey had persuaded the President to have everybody there polygraphed. And George Shultz was one of those and George let it be known that he might take one but then he’d resign. If he couldn’t be trusted at that level he didn’t think he ought to do that. I would have liked to have been a fly on the wall while all this was being discussed around the President, because it was a touchy kind of subject.

I really can’t think of any time when I was around him, in small groups, in large groups. I was with him at the [Walter] Annenbergs. He was kind enough after Drue passed away to invite me over with about four or five other people to watch the fireworks on the Fourth of July. I’ve been in other more formal settings and I just have never seen him take a shot at anybody. He might have, maybe I didn’t know him well enough to know when a shot was being fired, but he never
blew up or lost control or took out after anybody. He was fairly stubborn in his way of thinking and maybe we can come back to this in a different—when you cover what you want to—but Colin Powell used to say that he had an actor’s memory. Once he got it in his head it was pretty hard to get it out of his head.

Ferdinand Marcos was a good example of that. He had liked Marcos. He couldn’t quite be persuaded that Marcos had done bad things. He would accept it for a while and then someone would hand him something else and he would say—I remember coming back from a California trip and he came in, we were all in the conference room on Air Force One. He was dressed down in his warm-up suit and he plopped this thing somebody had given him, I guess climbing the stairs of the airplane, and he said, “I’ve been telling you all along…” and then he left and Colin Powell was shaking his head and said, “We’re back to square one on this one.”

But he listened. He’d never been totally convinced. We had a situation where he liked to tell a story about a platoon of Philippine soldiers who had escaped to the mountains after the Bataan situation and they somehow didn’t get the word that the war was over for some considerable period of time, like a year. Word finally got to wherever they were holed up and they came marching into town. They were two-by-two and they came in and the platoon leader snapped a salute and said, “Sergeant So-and-so reporting for duty, Sir.” He used to get a little teary on this particular story and he used it to make a moral point. But he used it enough that the press started questioning it. So the word came out—not directly from him—but word came out that the President would like the CIA to find the origins of that story, and we did. It was in a movie.

Selverstone: Not surprisingly.

Webster: It was in a movie and he had picked it up as a fact. But he kept on telling it anyway because he had a point he wanted to make. Sometimes he was a little smarter than the rest of us.

Knott: Any other general impressions of him before we move perhaps to some more specific events?

Webster: It’s more my impression.

Knott: Sure.

Webster: I had a very close, long-standing, and affectionate relationship for President Bush, one of the most decent, honorable, smart—But what it takes to govern this country, with all its complexities, is a mind that is less complex, sees more in black and white, can articulate points of view and repeat them and repeat them and repeat them. Not have too many, but enough to build a confidence in a vast majority of Americans so that they build confidence and they are willing to follow the leadership. I thought he did that better. He and Harry Truman were my two models for people who led in that way. I hate to make it appear I’m downgrading George Bush. I think he’s an extraordinary human being. But these two saw and believed in what they said in very clear terms.
What was Reagan’s message? It was get the government off the backs of people, build a strong national defense, lower taxes. I think there may have been another one. But he hit home on those repeatedly. He always seemed to me never to follow the polls. He and Maggie Thatcher were in a period where their leadership meant to lead, not to follow somebody else’s lead. And it was a good time for us. In terms of his thinking, we ran up a huge national debt. There are a lot of things you could say were on the down side. But America had tremendous confidence in confronting the Cold War and the Soviet adversary that I think would have been hard for anybody else to manage that as well as he did. And yet, he was willing to meet with [Mikhail] Gorbachev, actually began to like him.

I always had the feeling what you saw was what you got, or what you got was what you saw. That was pure Reagan. I don’t think he was Machiavellian. What he knew or didn’t know about Iran-Contra is still a little blurred, but I’m absolutely sure he believed that whatever was going on was in the best interests of the United States and he never purposefully lied about it. It is just the way he understood the problem. And at one point he said, “I guess I was wrong.”

My impression, he was always very nice to me. I have some wonderful notes and letters that he wrote, things of that kind. But I never felt close to Ronald Reagan and drew the impression that no one was close to Ronald Reagan except Nancy. That was his one true friend. And it wasn’t that he didn’t like people or that he couldn’t get along. There was just a kind of area around him you didn’t try to break through. That was his turf. He didn’t ask me a lot of questions. George Bush would ask you questions all the time. Carter, I wasn’t around Carter that much, but he was curious.

Reagan was a good listener and he would tell good stories to make good points in between, but not a lot of questions. I went to see Colin one time, he was National Security Advisor. I said, “I’m pretty good at reading people, but I like to get a report card. I can’t tell whether I’m really helping him or not because he listens and I don’t get a sense that he disagrees with me or agrees with me or what.” And he said, “Listen, I’m with him a dozen times a day and I’m in the same boat. So don’t feel badly about that.” It was just his style. If he trusted you, he didn’t question you a whole lot. So it made it harder to know a lot about what was going on in his mind, what was troubling him, except what he chose to say. But in a declaratory way. He wasn’t probing you, testing you, or getting things out in quite the same way as has been my experience with other Presidents.

**Selverstone:** In some ways I would imagine that would be helpful to you.

**Webster:** It was helpful in the sense I didn’t feel I was working for somebody who didn’t like what I was doing. But on the other hand, I wanted to know if there were any problems that I needed to address, any worries he had. Now it may be that I wasn’t—and there was such an effort to keep the CIA, because of some of the allegations about Iran-Contra and other things—Casey was such a believer in being part of the policy process that the Agency came under fire as spinning its intelligence or skewing its intelligence to fit the personal policy objectives of the Director. I saw it as my responsibility to push the other direction and to make it clear that we provided useful and timely intelligence for the policy makers for them to make policy decisions,
and that we didn’t try to prejudge it or shape it. Part of that was staying away from policy debates.

Sometimes you found yourself in a policy debate and I thought my role there was only to correct people who were themselves misusing the intelligence they were given, or misinterpreting. I can only remember getting in one heated discussion, which had to do with Panama. I may be a little fuzzy on the accuracy of what I’m about to say, but I think I remember it about right. There’d been an approach that [Manuel] Noriega had made. We were at that point building up to doing something about Noriega, but through some bank. I’ve forgotten what Reagan’s approach was now, but my job was to tell him the bank was riddled with corruption and so forth. It was not to say whether they should or should not negotiate with Noriega or his people.

Then-Vice President Bush was running for President and his people were hard over against negotiating with Noriega. President Reagan had a sincere desire, I think, to find a non-military way out of where we were going. Some of his people were arguing for negotiation and others were not. The best I remember—I could be mistaken—Baker was with George Bush in not wanting to have any more efforts in the area, whatever this bank situation was. George Shultz, I think, wanted to try for a diplomatic solution, at least to pursue this somewhat. I think George Bush’s people may have been concerned that it would make him look weak or wimpy, which was always a problem that he had to deal with, when he wasn’t a wimp in any sense of the word.

But President Reagan had sent word that he would like me to attend this meeting. I’m trying to remember where the hell this meeting was. I think it was upstairs in the White House, in the family quarters. But there were a lot of people in the room, a lot of chairs brought in. I got a call from George Bush saying he wanted to know again what I was going to say about this bank or whatever that was. I can sharpen my memory, but I can’t right now. Whatever that was, he wanted to know what I was going to tell him. I told him and so on. He said, “You know, you shouldn’t even be there.” I said, “Perhaps not, but I’ve been asked to be there.” The message was the President wanted me there, so I had to be there.

Selverstone: I’m sorry, who said you shouldn’t even be there?

Webster: George Bush didn’t think I should be at the meeting. This is the view he expressed, he expressed in his book, when they wrote a book when he ran for President. I’ve forgotten what it was, life story, or somebody wrote it, told about his days. I think he generally respected my efforts to try not to appear to be arguing for policy, but sometimes there’s a borderline, if a policy depends on an estimate of what’s going to happen.

I can get into all of those, we can come back. I think we should save time to talk about Gulf War and that sort of thing, what’s Saddam Hussein going to do or not do? The minute you put yourself on the line, or the Agency on the line, and express to somebody who doesn’t like what they hear, thinks you’re trying to achieve a different result. That was really major over the sanctions. Let sanctions work or not work? How long do you let them work before you do something? Would they modify behavior and so on. We were in that in spades.
But that one meeting I remember, George Bush really didn’t think I should be there. I had to report on the bank thing, which I did. I may have weighed in one more time when I maybe shouldn’t have, but we tried very hard to keep policy out of our job. It’s hard to sit there. You’ve got perhaps more access to intelligence than anybody, at least as much as anybody, and it’s pretty hard to sit there and know what, in your mind, the policy ought to be, and not advocate for it. Because it was too important to protect—the whole concept of a Central Intelligence Agency that Harry Truman created was to get an organization that didn’t have an agenda. Every one of the other departments has an agenda. I want a department that’s going to report to me and tell me what the intelligence is, without telling me what I ought to do about it. So there was that.

But I know that Bill Casey didn’t hesitate to tell the President what he thought he ought to be doing. Including to get a new Secretary of State. “You need a new quarterback,” or something.

Knott: Could you talk a little bit about William Casey? About your relationship or dealings with him while you were FBI Director and he was CIA Director? Your observation of him as a DCI [Director of Central Intelligence]?

Webster: I had seen him, met him, not gotten to know him when he was a lawyer and I was a lawyer. He was kind of a tax law expert, had his little deal with one of the publishing companies, kept that thing going. That’s about all I knew about him at the time. He’d been a political figure in New York. I think I even heard him talk one time when I was at some meeting on a political subject. He worked very hard during the Reagan campaign, he was traveling around all the time. People I’ve talked to who stayed in the house with him, said he would arrive with a tennis-type bag, little duffel, with his suits all rolled up inside. I’m jumping around here. We had a very good and very satisfactory relationship. I can’t think of any time when it was otherwise in the almost eight years that he was in office—was it eight years? Pretty close.

Knott: Well, by December 1986 I think he started to fail, so six or seven.

Webster: Somebody said, “You were only there for four and a half years.” I said, “Yes, I was only there for four and a half years, but I was the fourth longest tenure in the Agency.” I think I served longer than my next three successors combined, and it was four and a half years. So he was there a long—Casey, [Allen] Dulles and [Richard] Helms served longer than I did, and that’s all.

He could be very charming. He could also be rough and he didn’t shy away from controversy or challenge. Some people couldn’t stand him, other people loved him. Our relationship was good. We traveled around a fair amount, because he had the airplane and he was good enough to ask me there. Anytime they dedicated a building or did anything like that, I was always on the speaker’s platform. He always recognized my presence. It was a serious effort. We were not feuding. In fact, if anything, he was maybe more courting me than the relationship that used to exist between CIA directors and FBI directors, which was not good. We had a lot of time to visit.

We didn’t always agree on things. Coming back from New Zealand one time he was saying, “We’ve got to work this out so we can keep these lawyers out of the picture.” I said, “You know, I report to a lawyer, the Attorney General of the United States.” “I know, that’s what I mean.” He
was trying to look for channels and ways that he thought that people who were being technical about legal requirements were impeding getting important intelligence and so on. I don’t know how far he would have extended that. He was too smart to want to change the way we did business and observe rights and so on. But he did feel the Justice Department was often in his way of doing things. So we didn’t really agree on that for obvious reasons, but we got along well.

Pleasant socially. He was a character in a lot of ways, had that mumble voice that he liked to use on purpose and sometimes not on purpose. We had these old green privacy, secure phones as they were called. Hard to hear through, anyway. And I get this “Hello, Bill” and I’d say, “Hi Bill, how are you?” “Well, I’m mumble, mumble…” and I’d say “Bill, Bill, stop, I’m losing you.” And he would have to start all over. I remember one conversation about money coming out of some part of the world, and I said, “What is—” Sultan of Brunei, was it, no it was Madagascar, and it was actually Mauritius, because I couldn’t understand. “What is this story?” He’d say mumble, mumble, and I’d say “What?” and he’d say “Mauritius [mumbled].” “Okay, Mauritius.”

We did a number of things together. I admired his creative approach to surrogate warfare, which was to turn the tactic that the Soviets had used so successfully back on them. The crown jewel of that was Afghanistan, in my view. I think he was the principal architect of that program. He supported the people that he sent over there. They were very skillful and good at handling Mujaheddin and other characters. He focused on Angola, on Cambodia to a lesser degree, Afghanistan, and then where he got in trouble was trying to support the Contras in Latin America, in Nicaragua.

He and Baker did not get along. They had that issue over the purloined copy of the debate manual for the presidential debates. Casey challenged him to take a polygraph and Baker told me later, his explanation was he thought Casey knew how to rig it, how to beat the polygraph. And he didn’t, so he wasn’t going to get into that contest. But they had a lot of problems. There was one other, it might have been with George Shultz. Shultz could get very, very prickly when personal issues arose. And Casey would usually back off of those, say he didn’t mean to offend him or he didn’t mean to do that; he wasn’t accusing him of something. Shultz was all ready to challenge a statement on a personal basis.

But I think the President admired him, liked him, liked his spirit. Didn’t pay a whole lot of attention, obviously, to what some would say the “inspired,” others would say “nefarious” technique of getting money from the Sultan of Brunei, who sent $10 million and forgot about it, literally forgot about it. And giving that then to the Contras when we had the so-called Boland Act commitments, of which I believe there were actually three.

We can talk about the Boland Act, but there were three different changes. And they were, frankly, a pain in the rear end on some of the things that they did and I could understand later when I had that responsibility. Casey, his solution was just to go around them, the hell with them, and do what he wanted to do. But they had situations like if you wanted to talk to a Contra, you had to be ten miles north of his border. You had to have him come out so you could talk to him. You understand, we’re in the business of trying to engage a covert action, which has the sanction of the President and so on, and we’re doing this, why put up all these road blocks? I
think he got really kind of ticked at the on-again, off-again approach that people had. They
probably got tricked into doing it because they never believed they were getting a straight story.

They didn’t believe that Casey would be totally candid with them and that made them nervous.
And what do you do when you’re nervous? When you’re a Congressman, you start laying down
restrictions and rules and so on. Largely because they somehow thought he wouldn’t level with
them. He would probably not have thought he wasn’t leveling with them; he probably thought
they were asking for things they weren’t entitled to know. So that would be it. I can remember
some of my own experiences on trying to protect sources and methods, which we were sworn to
do, and still accommodate the needs of the Congressmen when sometimes it seemed to me that
they were being absolutely unreasonable about it. If you want an example of that—I’m jumping
around here a little bit—it had to do with elections in Nicaragua, when they were finally going to
have some elections.

I say this because sometimes it isn’t the leaders in the Congress. David Boren was a star in my
mind, as chairman of that committee. But they had some staffers down there that would pick
their own candidates. For some reason or other, they had their candidates and we were
authorized to distribute money to support a number of candidates, so they would have a full and
fair election and get off to a good start and not let somebody have all the money, somebody be
way ahead. So we took our lead from the State Department and we supplied funds to candidates
that the State Department gave us.

Somebody on the Senate staff found out that we had not given to their favorite candidate, and
some of that is pretty sordid, some money, then wanted to know precisely who we had given
money to. Even Bill Cohen thought that was not sources and methods, we should tell them. I was
saying, if we tell, if we say this—and obviously our suspicions about the staff were up, because
they were making the deal out of it. Some of the people were making waves about this and they
had a stake in it. If we told who we were giving the money to and it got out, that was tantamount
to the people being defeated at the polls. It gives their opponents an argument. We didn’t care.
We didn’t care who we gave the money to. The State Department was doing it.

They ended up canceling the whole program. I offered to give the information to the chairman
and the vice-chairman, which we would do sometimes, when we said, “You have a right to
know, but not all of you should be hearing this because otherwise we can’t protect sources.” I’d
tell the chairman and the vice-chairman. By that time they were all aroused and they just wrote
the program out of the bill so we couldn’t give the money to anybody. So, these were the kind of
things.

I got along better I think than most of my predecessors with the Congress on these issues. But
Bill had real problems because there were people who were prepared to believe that he wasn’t
leveling with them. It was just his personality and his way of doing business. Was the original
question about how we got along with the President or how I got along with Casey?

**Knott:** How you got along with Casey and your observations.
Webster: We did some good things together. We worked together on strange things like trying to get the *Washington Post* not to write stories that would disclose sources and methods. That’s all been public, acknowledged I think in [Ben] Bradlee’s book what we were doing. I have to say that I wasn’t altogether confident that the rules would be followed closely, but recognized that maybe he thought there was a difference when they were abroad and when we were at home. But I don’t remember our ever feuding about anything while I was at the FBI. I was a guest in his home. I don’t remember ever having hosted him, but I wasn’t married at the time and it wouldn’t have been logical. Sophia and I got along well. Bernadette and I got along well. That friendship existed while Sophia lived, after Bill died. I went to his funeral.

He had engaging and at the same time unnerving personal characteristics that I kept hearing about all the time. He flew around a lot and he took his secretary with him all the time. I only took my secretary once and she was so panicked by the escort in Paris and the screaming down the middle of the lane, she never wanted to go back again. So I didn’t travel with—because Bill wanted to dictate in the middle of the night. He was just one of these guys that wanted to be able—he had no real regimen. One of the things that she had to do every morning was go in the back of the plane, you could stretch out back there, or hotel, wherever he was, and go through all the bedding to see whether or not he’d left a classified. He was just bigger than life in a lot of ways.

He loved to read. He had a huge library up there on Long Island. When he shopped, he shopped for books. He was always buying books. He gave me an article that he wrote one time on how to read a book. It was really an article on how he read a book. It said, “Look first at the table of contents, good. Look back at the end notes to see the quality of the support for whatever is being said.” I said, “That’s good.” Then he said, “Read on. When you find yourself not interested, skip ahead 30 pages and pick it up again. Then read until you are similarly disengaged and skip another 30 pages.” I said, “How can you read that way?” He said, “It works; it works!”

We had a comic strip called *Rex Morgan, MD* when I was a youngster, and I always felt like I could come back two years later and pick up on the strip and not miss a beat. But I said, “A book, a serious book, you can skip ahead 30 pages?” “Yes, that’s the secret to getting a lot of books read.” So try that some time.

Knott: I’ll keep that in mind.

Webster: I think I have it somewhere. It’s a whole little—more than a memorandum—whatever you call short pieces, in great detail on how to read a book.

We were entirely different in our approaches to how to do business. The sense that I had from some of the people that I talked to—I don’t know whether it was because they were talking to me or not—but in the scheme of things, how do you view Casey’s time at the Agency? And the answer was really, “He did a lot of good, he got a whole million square feet more buildings, he got more things. The President was very supportive of whatever he wanted to do. He obviously had some great covert action programs going.” But then they say, “But on balance, I’m not sure. Maybe there wasn’t more harm than good there in terms of our being able to carry out our work.
and enjoy the confidence of Congress and other people involved.” I don’t have an opinion on that subject but that’s generally what I’d hear.

We changed a lot of the covert action procedures because it had come into so much questioning. Even though, as I said before, that I thought his surrogate warfare strategy was very, very effective. In my view there were about three things that brought the cold war to an end and that was one of them. I think driving the Russians out of Afghanistan did them so much damage, from which they never recovered internally, and with the Soviet hegemony over the Warsaw Pact people. Just didn’t do it. I think that was one of the biggies. And I give him a lot of credit for making it happen, because it wasn’t easy. We’d take 10,000 mules from China across Pakistan and Afghanistan. It was a lot of tough going.

I met with those Mujaheddin types that were some borderline crazies and they were typical tribal people who were united for one purpose only, and that was to get the Russians out of their country. The minute that was over, why they would do exactly what we knew they would do, exactly what they have been doing since then. Maybe we should have stopped—I had left when they started pulling people out of Afghanistan, pulling our American presence out. So I didn’t have a role in that. But that might have been too soon, too early, maybe we should have stayed longer. But we handled a very, very complicated problem, and I think people he put in there—Milt Bearden, Frank Anderson and others—were well suited to this. You’re out there on your own with a bunch of very unusual people.

I sit around and watch one of them chewing chicken bones, with the chicken, while we’re talking. This is one of the Mujaheddin I’m talking about. The others, he had a fellow like [Borhanuddin] Rabani who was an academic who ended up being president of Afghanistan in there with these other guys. [Ahmad Shah] Masoud ran his own world in the northern part of Afghanistan and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who was probably the best fighter. All we really were focused on was getting them to do what they did, which was give them the Stingers and teach them how to use them and get them to drive the Russians out of there.

I’m really wandering afield. I don’t normally do this.

Selverstone: It’s interesting, though. In some of the things that we had read in preparation, you had made comments, I guess it was ’90, about the possibility that once the Russians do leave, there is a decent likelihood that they are going to—

Webster: Back to tribal, it’s been a tribal country forever. Put together by the British.

Selverstone: Yes, and anti-Western.

Webster: Yes.

Selverstone: Was there anything that you tried to put in place at that time to perhaps provide for some greater human intelligence on the ground, anything to try to counteract this sentiment?
Webster: We were really limited in the physical presence that we could have in Afghanistan. We did almost everything from Pakistan, Peshawar, and out on the outer reaches and training and so forth. In fact, one of my favorite projects failed because of that limitation. We’d go right down and stop at the Khyber Pass.

You know the Predator and the role it played in Afghanistan? The drone?

Selverstone: Yes.

Webster: Well that’s the modern version of what we had back then. What we had couldn’t take pictures and fire, we didn’t have people on the ground with laser guns, but we had a drone that could deliver an explosive package. [tape cuts out] . . . Soviet transports on the ground. They were flying stuff in with impunity and I wanted to give them the ability to knock out these guys. That was tough sledding with the State Department; they weren’t at all sure they wanted us to do that or that we could. We didn’t know we could either, but we thought we could.

Knott: Destroy these transports as they were—

Webster: On the ground, yes. That would be costly, it would be public, more humiliation for the Russian troops and so on. It took three, as I remember, three hand-offs to launch this thing from the edge of Pakistan, and send it down, send it south—in my mind it is south—but in my mind we had to send it, turn 90 degrees and head it into the target. This was all done by hand operations. You had to put the Mujaheddin troops in place to take it, hand it off. You put something in their hands to shoot like a Stinger, and boy were they good. They were so accurate. But working the mechanics—it was just Murphy’s Law and we couldn’t make it work. I was prepared to use it to take out the pharmaceutical plant, the so-called pharmaceutical plant, the chemical warfare plant that [Muammar] Gaddafi had near Tripoli. What was the name of that? Al-Rabta?

Selverstone: Rabta, right.

Webster: But there I ran into the Air Force people, they like to have piloted planes. They never wanted to buy into these drone things.

So I got a big kick out of seeing all the Predator could do. They could even fire it from the parking lot at Langley, now think about that. They could send the signal that sent the explosives, the rockets from the Predator down. Amazing what you can do today. It was amazing what we could do then, compared with what we could do before. We’re really off the subject, aren’t we? I’m trying to think where you wanted to be. Thinking about Reagan and thinking about Libya made me think about La Belle discotheque and—

Knott: Would you talk about that, please?

Webster: Well, I thought he handled that splendidly. He had a lot of frustrations to overcome. The French wouldn’t allow us to go across their border, their property for that. Incidentally, before we leave, I want to come back because there was a lot during the Reagan administration
that improved the cooperation in European countries in the war against certain types of terrorist activity. We had to go through a hell of a time—again, thinking about France—so many sanctuary countries, that if they left them alone they wouldn’t bother them. Then one-by-one we got them off. We had meetings in Milan, which I attended, then the Summit. We finally got the United Nations to treat these activities as criminal and bring to bear all the cooperative requirements that went with criminal activities.

But Reagan didn’t hesitate to do it. Once we had the evidence that the responsibility for the attack was Libyan he exercised the principle of self-defense. Which is kind of new to me, incidentally. I haven’t studied enough international law to understand how much could be brought under the rubric of self-defense, but that clearly was an acceptable response. Margaret Thatcher cooperated. That’s about all; we did the rest of it. But that attack did something to Gaddafi because he’s really been a sidelinier—except, I mean Pan Am 103 tracks back, but in terms of active militancy out there, he went to ground.

I’m trying to think of the military operations. He had that one and then of course there was the cooperation in the Falklands. There was, what else—

**Knott:** Grenada.

**Webster:** Grenada is what I’m trying to think of, Grenada.

**Knott:** The reflagging operation.

**Webster:** The reflagging in the Gulf. He did not seem to have a lot of difficulty in making up his mind what to do about those situations and he did them. In fact, I really find it difficult to fault him on any of the national security issues except possibly that crazy effort to exchange hostages for weapons. We’ve taken a lot of hits. Have I got the chronology right? We’d taken a lot of hits in the Middle East.

**Knott:** [William] Buckley.

**Webster:** Buckley, the Marine barracks.

**Knott:** The embassy was bombed twice.

**Webster:** The embassy. And then of course Iran, sitting there.

**Selverstone:** TWA 847 in ’85.

**Webster:** We were dealing with a little different animal. It was more state-sponsored terrorism. You had groups like the Hezbollah but they were subsiding. And Abu Nidal was out there. Not now, I guess.

**Selverstone:** He’s dead.
Webster: Is that confirmed now?

Selverstone: I have not heard that it’s confirmed.

Knott: Suicide by multiple gunshot wounds.

Selverstone: Was that it? First time in history. And the [Leon] Klinghoffer episode is in there as well, the Achille Lauro.

Webster: The Achille Lauro. They were so wrapped around the axle, even the Interpol organization had an Article III chapter that said it could not be used for political purposes, political causes. I can remember arguing again and again that wanton acts of violence against innocent victims, away from the scene of the controversy, under circumstances that would be criminal under any one’s civil law, had to be considered criminal in the context of what was taking place out there. Therefore, the red flags and the other things that would normally flow in a cooperative criminal investigation had to be made available to us.

Selverstone: Did you have any sense that the hostage situation was personalized in some ways for both Casey and for Reagan?

Webster: Yes, I think so. When you say things like that, I pull back a little, because in this current discussion about Iraq, I would hate to think that it is personal. I think that must not be. But I think in the things that had happened in Lebanon, they hurt. I think they hurt. I think they felt the pain of the American patriots out there being carved up, blown up that way and tortured. I think that to put closure, to close the circle, goes back to the wedding cake and the Bible and the other things that were out there. Just a real desire to try to get the hostages out of there.

Selverstone: I had even heard the story that some of this, at least for Casey, stretched back to his OSS [Office of Strategic Services] days and an operation that he had run with a woman, in fact. And she had been captured by the Germans—

Webster: She had?

Selverstone: —and killed and pictures of this wound their way back to Casey. That much of that came flooding back to him in ’84, ’85.

Webster: I had not heard that story. I could believe it. You’re making me think of one incident—I wish I could be more particular about it, but I haven’t thought about it for so long. I have to go back. Where we planned to, and I think did, run an attack against one of these groups with punishment as the objective.

Selverstone: Falala?

Webster: Falala, yes, that sounds right. Does that make sense?

Selverstone: Sheik Falala. And missed.
Webster: And we also took, in addition to Buckley, there’s a fellow named [Robert] Ames, highly respected, and was in charge of Middle East operations or analysis. It might have been analysis maybe, who was over there at the time. That was not his regular station, he was not the station chief, but he was over there at the time that they blew up the embassy and took out the whole CIA station in the embassy. I know there was a very strong feeling in the Agency about wanting to do something about that. Highly respected, he was very good.

In fact, I think David Ignatius wrote a novel that wasn’t far off of that, I’m trying to think what it was called. You know what I’m trying to think of? David Ignatius, who has been one of the key figures in the Washington Post and head of their business page, their section, and he was over in their European desk, and France for a number of years. His father, Paul Ignatius, was Secretary of the Navy under I think President [Lyndon] Johnson. Good friend of mine. What was the name of that book? It was a thinly veiled repetition of that story about Ames, the good Ames.

Knott: Well, why don’t we stop for now, hopefully lunch should be arriving sometime soon.

Webster: It’s somewhat easier for me to comment on the process and the mental processes with George Bush than it was with Ronald Reagan because the practice that he had developed before I got there in 1987 was to work primarily through his National Security Advisor, whether it was [Robert] McFarlane or [John] Poindexter. I believe that their pattern was more one of telling the President that they had looked at the Presidential Daily Brief and that he might find one or two sections interesting to him. It was not a censoring, but a further cutting back on the kind of information that we thought was vitally important for the President. It was our best effort.

A lot of work went into the Presidential Daily Brief, and in fact, it would be in process of editorial change right up until 4 o’clock in the morning before the brief, which would take place sometime—I’m not sure quite when it was in President Reagan’s case—because it was provided to him not by the CIA, but it was delivered to him by his National Security Advisor, who tended to minimize the extent of scrutiny. We would hope that he would see it all, because there was a lot packed into 18 or 20 pages, including the charts, the graphs and so on.

When President Bush became President, having been Director of Central Intelligence and having a different perspective, he announced that he wanted to take his briefing from the CIA. So we developed a little different approach, which was that the briefer would be there for the 8 o’clock, the opening gun, the first order of business on the President’s schedule every morning. I usually went but I didn’t have to go, and if I were out of town or had something else I had to do, I wouldn’t go. But I was there whenever I could go. [Brent] Scowcroft and Gates would get their briefing about a half an hour before the President’s meeting, so they would not be seeing something for the first time and have a chance to reflect on it. Then they would come in at 8 o’clock with the briefer and me, if I were there, and we would go for about half an hour, followed by whatever national security issues that Scowcroft wanted to bring up. We would
usually leave because they involved policy questions. That way, I had an opportunity to see President Bush’s reaction.

He was very interested in the book and all that it contained. He would start at page one and read through. Gave me an opportunity to slip in some other things that needed to be raised or some additional facts, but largely, as I say, to read him. To see what areas seemed to be of concern to him. He didn’t hesitate to ask for more information about something after he read it, if he wanted to know more about something. “Could you find out this, that or the other,” or ask a question that we couldn’t answer. Actually we tried to anticipate as much of that as we could. The last thing I did before I went to bed, wherever I was, they delivered a copy to me about 10 o’clock at night, the first round. I went through it. If I could anticipate questions that a President might ask and I didn’t know what the answer to that question was, I would call the operations center and say “I suggest you cover this or restate it so it doesn’t produce a question we have to go out and get an answer to.” That would be the idea, to try to make it more clear to the President, and then I’d go to bed.

I’d get up the next morning and read the edited version. It would be in the car waiting for me as I headed into town and to the White House. While I’m reading the edits, the President is reading five newspapers, which I don’t have a chance to see. I usually get to glance at one or two of them in the car, but that’s the way that the process worked. Which is by way of saying that I know a great deal more about how President Bush reacted to some of the intelligence than I did with President Reagan, because when I came to CIA, there was no real designated time for the Director of Central Intelligence to meet with the President unless he needed to see him about something. We set one up, scheduled one for every two weeks. At first, I think they had me down for about—this was done in the White House, they had me down for about 15 minutes. And it was obvious to Howard Baker and some of the others that the President was appreciating—I started to say “enjoying,” but I think he was, enjoying and appreciating those discussions so they doubled the time that I had, but not the frequency.

My impressions are more anecdotal than they are drawn over time as they were with George Bush, where I could see the validity of the process, how it would work and how it could be helpful and particularly the things that we did. I tried to leaven the meeting occasionally with George Bush because it was just fun to do. First thing in the morning, a cup of coffee brought in for everybody, and it was a lively session. At one time I brought one of our two—a husband and wife team—specialists in disguises, face disguises. So that you could go into a group that didn’t look like you and look more like them. It wasn’t all that perfect up close, but it was good for getting somebody in for a meeting. Incidentally, they are on the advisory board of the International Spy Museum, and they’ve got a new book called Spy Dust that’s just come out.

I brought her in on the pretext that she was the courier for some space imagery, which we normally required be in the custody of a courier at all times. So the courier, when we used those, would come in and the President would review them, and then he’d take them back, just as the PDB was recovered and retrieved and taken back. We were going through these things, the President was reading and I noticed that he looked up and he looked at her. He’d go down, he looked, he looked a little while. Former DCI, you know. Then he looked at me and he would
make a little—cock his eyes, look at her—he was the only one in the room besides me who was aware of what she was doing. But he got a big kick out of it.

She pulled off her mask and showed who she really was. Occasionally it would be fun to bring in something that he hadn’t seen before or a new technique or new kind of thing. But largely it focused on the text and the graphs, the maps, and the imagery that we had for him. So I guess, what I started off to say was that I had much more opportunity to observe reactions over time. With President Reagan it was some problem, some issue that we had to talk about as a group.

Knott: You mentioned at lunch that you wanted to say a little more about covert action. I guess this is the time to address that.

Webster: I used to say that covert action represented about 5 percent of our resource expenditures and about 95 percent of our problems. I think that’s probably still a fair stretch. Covert action is a capability that every President has wanted to have, no President has wanted not to have. At the same time they worry about all the political issues that are involved, but it’s very rarely that either the Agency or the FBI sat around and came up with crazy ideas to do undercover. The category we used to refer to in the FBI for some reason as “How to shoot a Russian stallion.” Now, I don’t know what that really means in all its implications, but it conveys to me the idea that you’re spending your time dreaming up things like putting itching powder in [Fidel] Castro’s beard, which was certainly part of the history of that relationship, that kind of thing.

But on the other hand, covert action offers the President the opportunity to do something under denial capabilities. Something that cannot or should not be done by the military, something that cannot or should not be done through diplomatic channels. I might say there are even circumstances where the whole issue of deniability is useful, even though the other side knows that it is undeniable. A good example of how that wasn’t handled was Eisenhower about to go to a summit meeting after the U-2 incident and finding himself in an untenable situation where [Nikita] Khrushchev would have been happy to have him deny it and that would be the end of it. But for other reasons Eisenhower concluded he had to face up to it.

Now, back to covert action. The Agency becomes the focal point for covert action because of its capabilities to do things covertly. It comes to it when both the traditional avenues of action, diplomatic or military, are for various reasons unacceptable or unworkable. So usually the Agency gets a request to support a covert action in a particular area to fit a particular problem. Then it’s the job of the Agency to come up with a way of making that happen. There is a covert action review group inside the Agency that looks at it from all sides. Can it be done lawfully within terms of United States laws? Are there resources, funding, to do it? How would you do it? The nitty-gritty of making it work. The same process takes place in the National Security Council when the proposal is in finished form. It’s like looking for a proposal to build me a house. “All right, here’s the house. Do you want this house?” And the President hears his advisors and then he makes the call to go forward or not, and that’s called a presidential finding.

I was concerned, looking back on the history of covert action, that maybe a couple of questions were missing that ought to be asked. So I put in a couple of requirements at our level and then
they became useful at the presidential level and they were these. I asked, “When you’re answering these questions, I’d like you to ask and answer two more. One of them is: Is this covert action plan consistent with our overt foreign policy?” That seemed to me to be important. We don’t get into the arms for hostages situation, which was contrary to our overt foreign policy. Our purpose is to support the foreign policy of the United States by covert means, not to frustrate it or go in different directions. So I wanted to ask that question. That one they didn’t have too much trouble with in being able to answer one way or another. I said, “If it’s not consistent, we want to do something else. Don’t come back and say it’s inconsistent, come back with a better plan.”

The second thing was, “When this becomes known, or public, as these things almost invariably do in time, will it make sense to the American people?” I said, “If it won’t make sense to the American people, in your judgment—and I realize that is a subjective judgment—then there is a good possibility that we ought to think twice before we do it.” And they used the itching powder and the other things that have been tried and really denigrate the whole purpose and process of covert action in my view. But I asked them to think about that. You’re taking a plan to the President. You’re asking him to do it. Have you thought about it? At least have you thought about whether it will make sense to the American people? And that’s when it becomes public.

So we replicated, in a way, our effort to raise those issues when the debate would take place at the National Security Council level. And I think, on balance, that our covert action programs took on a good deal of validity in what we were trying to do. It didn’t always succeed, but we didn’t turn it into a rivalry, or a “gotcha” game between the KGB [Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti] and the CIA. It was to support our foreign policy and not do something to stick it to somebody just for the fun of it, or the whatever of doing it. We kept a lot of not-so-good ideas from going forward in place of ideas that had some real expectation of moving the ball in the right direction.

But covert action is a capability that every President wants, will not give up. So the solution is really to manage it in a way that it serves him and the country and not the other way around. Particularly those personal rivalries that develop between services, hostile services. Some of our most successful operations were very, very mild in their programs, of getting propaganda into countries where propaganda would otherwise be barred. When I say propaganda I don’t mean falsity, I mean truth, getting truth in.

One of the most popular exercises during President Reagan’s time was getting through other publishers, other things, getting translated copies of The Federalist Papers into the Soviet Union and in the Warsaw Pact countries. Amazing interest in what they had to say. Because they were on the edge of wanting to hear more than what they were being told, and hear more from the outside. It worked out perfectly with glasnost and perestroika. It was a very good effort. There are some things that are tactical, covert kinds of things that are done. They aren’t what I really call covert action, they weren’t to support a foreign policy—they were just actions in the field where we were in Afghanistan or for something of that kind. Where I’ve already gotten authority to engage in effect a quiet war using surrogates for that purpose to help them, and to help them succeed.
**Knott:** Would you be called upon to make these kind of tactical, covert war decisions? How would that—

**Webster:** They wouldn’t be my decisions. You asked for something that might help a particular foreign policy objective. Here is what we’ve thought through. We’ve analyzed it from the point of its legality, its manageability and its chances for success. And we’ve also, now, looked at the questions you should ask yourselves as well, would it make sense to the American people? “Well, we think it will. And we’ve factored that in.”

Then the President makes a finding, makes that finding. He is supposed to report that finding to Congress within 48 hours. It’s not entirely clear to me how that rule got in place. Whether it is Congress’s mandate or whether it was executive order or whatever it was, but that is the considered practice. There are certain kinds of covert action that with the direction of the President can be limited to what is known as the “Gang of Eight,” which is a group of the top leadership of the Congress, for a limited period of time. And Congress, being what it is, will only tolerate a limited amount of time before those leaders start getting nervous about being the keepers of the special secrets and will want it released to the intelligence committees, at least so that the other members of the committee know about it.

They are entitled to be briefed and they are briefed. The surrogate—I call them the surrogate committees—the “HIPSI,” the House Intelligence, Permanent Intelligence Committee and the Senate Selective Committee on Intelligence. The whole concept there is that those two bodies would pick from their own members the people most trusted to look at these issues and report in generalities that they’re all right or they’re not all right, or take appropriate action. So that’s, in my mind, been a system that with very few exceptions has worked well. I found fewer leaks coming out of that end than I did at the other end of the pipeline, just as a personal observation. But there was a potential, with all the unnamed, unidentified staffers sitting around the room, that you might want to shrink the size of the audience just for comfort’s sake. We would do that, sometimes down to the ranking two members of the committee.

Usually covert action is a last resort. It isn’t the first thing you think of to do. It’s when you have not been able to achieve the foreign policy objective that you believe is legitimate and worthwhile by using the other, public tools, and you go to work to try to find something else.

Now, you had Executive Order 12333, which prohibited assassinations, and that factors in to types of covert action that won’t fly, and shouldn’t fly. That was a process agreed to by President Ford at a time when Congress was threatening to enact legislation. They agreed, by whatever parliamentary means was appropriate then or now, that it would have the force of law. They didn’t pass a bill, forcing him to veto it or anything. It had the force of law. And every now and then, whenever we get into situations like post-September 11th, you have people who are saying, “Let’s repeal Executive Order 12333.” And at least my point of view, and one that I didn’t hesitate to say, was that will send the wrong signal. We can do most everything that we need to do without offending the resolution. But to reject it is saying we are now in favor of targeted assassinations, and is the wrong thing to do. And they haven’t repealed 12333 and we’ve been able to get along.
You get into issues from time to time, unintended consequences, I suppose. When we were building up for the situation in Panama, I reminded—I didn’t remind him, I told him. Because apparently he wasn’t aware of it. I told the President that during President Reagan’s time, when Colin Powell was the National Security Advisor, that he and I had been required to send a letter to Congress—I suppose to the committees, I don’t remember quite where it went, the committees, the intelligence committees—committing that if we learned of an attempt to assassinate, or a plot to assassinate General Noriega, we would inform General Noriega. And as we got closer to what we were going through, when we were trying to generate and support, to the extent that they would accept support, the local resistance groups that were trying to overthrow Noriega by whatever means, that this might get called into play.

I told the President about it, President Bush, and he reacted very quickly. He wrote a very stern letter to Senator Boren saying that whatever understandings with respect to that, it was no longer wise. It could not be expected to observe—I don’t know what the language was—but the idea was, all bets were off. And they immediately backed off. They said, well, they really hadn’t intended for that. But I saw the letters, and I know what the letters said that went back in response. That was their view at the time.

Their view was moderated by passage of time, but it was an example in which the President asserted his authority and his responsibility and would not be bound by that kind of commitment. I knew they weren’t likely to accept our own legal counsel’s interpretation of the resolution, so I asked Bill Barr, later Attorney General, but before that was Office of Legal Counsel, which is sort of the President’s lawyer at the Department of Justice, asked him to prepare an opinion, which he did. A very lengthy opinion stating what kinds of situations would constitute our participation in an assassination or a violation of a statute, and what kinds would not.

So we continued to work our way through those legal issues, which usually involved covert action and which I think, in the end, gave us a foundation on which to act and which we could look back on and say we knew what we were doing and we were doing it in the right way. But it gave some strength to the idea that just associating with a group or having our ear on the window with a group would not make us party to an assassination within the meaning of that statute unless we knew about something. Then we had a problem, whether we should have to tell anybody, but we would not be guilty of having engaged in assassination.

Selverstone: So bringing it specifically to Panama, and [Moises] Giroldi I think is the name of the Panamanian officer who allowed Noriega to make this phone call in which his people came in and ended up torturing and killing the officer, would that have been a situation? If he had a gun with him and he had left the room with Noriega being dead, would that have been a kind of situation in which you would have been okay with the result there?

Webster: Is that the name of the fellow who led the—and then got himself killed in the process?

Selverstone: Yes, right.

Webster: We didn’t have that particular thing in mind when I brought it to the President’s attention. But the situation there was that he didn’t want our help. He wanted this to be a
Panamanian solution. The only thing he would tell us or the army was that he would appreciate it if we’d block a couple of roads. I’ve forgotten which roads or why. But that’s all he wanted from us. Occasionally we would then hear from him about what he’d done or what he was going to do and he was going to get Noriega to step down and leave the country and they’d send him off waving. I mean, he had a very unrealistic concept of what he was trying to achieve.

But your hypothetical is if he had killed him, would we have been accountable for it? I think the answer is no, we’d withdrawn our obligation to inform. We were not directing, instructing, encouraging, or anything else. In fact, in his case, we didn’t even know what he had done until he did it. He said he was going to do some things but we didn’t know what, because he wouldn’t tell us. It was kind of unusual.

Thinking back to Casey, I suspect Casey wouldn’t have been too bothered by any of this. He would have charged ahead, maybe for good or for bad. But we felt obliged, in view of criticisms and suspicion and so forth, that we wanted to have a very firm, principled basis for doing what we did or didn’t do. I don’t think the President appreciated our being under some kind of obligation. It would have made the administration look bad over something we could not really control, just so that the Congressmen could say, “It wasn’t our fault, we told them they had to tell Noriega.” There’s a little of that that happens in Washington, as you know.

Selverstone: Yes, sure.

Webster: CYA or something like that.

Selverstone: That sounds like the right initials.

Knott: You also mentioned at lunch time about the mining of the harbors in Nicaragua and what that said about congressional oversight of the intelligence community. Do you want to share that?

Webster: Well, you’d like a little repeat of that?

Knott: Yes, I don’t think we got that on tape, if I remember right.

Webster: When I came to the Agency, they were reeling under attacks for accusations of disingenuous conduct, failing to observe regulations imposed by the Congress on the Iran-Contra issue. What I call the Iran-Contra issue, it is really the Contra issue, the support of the Contras in their insurgency efforts in Nicaragua. Sorry, I’m losing my chain of thought for a moment here.

The Boland Act was actually about three acts. They kept amending the Boland Act. It imposed restrictions on what we could do in support of the Contras. It was a very hot political issue, a lot of debate, disagreement within the Congress. But the impact was to increasingly limit resources that could be dedicated to support the Contras’ efforts in Nicaragua. Some of them were very difficult to live with, such as a requirement that we couldn’t talk to an agent or informant or operative supporting the Contras within ten miles of the border, as I remember, of the country. We’d have to extract them, have meetings, and put them back in. Things of that kind made it
very difficult to deal with. I’m sorry, in the time frame, I’ve lost what you were trying to get. I’ll come back to it as soon as I hear—

**Knott:** I believe you told us at lunch time there was this uproar when it was revealed in the press that the harbors of Nicaragua had been mined.

**Webster:** Some of this uproar resulted in the Boland Act amendments and so forth. The one feeling that we in the Agency had not been straightforward with them was in secretly mining the harbors of Nicaragua. When I got to the Agency, charged by Congress with looking into some of these alleged misdeeds, I inquired about the mining the harbor issue and was promptly told that not only had the committee been informed by CIA, but there was a record of it. They brought me the record.

Indeed, I read the record and the statements were made either by Director Casey or by his deputy, John McMahon, advising that we were laying mines in the harbor at Nicaragua. At the time that the charges were made, there was such a furor that the Senators, I believe Senator [Barry] Goldwater at the time and Senator [Daniel Patrick] Moynihan, were furious. Senator Moynihan resigned as chairman. He later withdrew the resignation as I remember. They kept reiterating they hadn’t been told, when in fact they had been told. The transcript is quite clear. They seemed to feel that they hadn’t been told strongly enough or that they hadn’t had it repeated or flashed in their face. I think the term was “pound on the table to be sure we’re not asleep.”

Whatever it was, it was a very bad rap for the Agency, but it caused a lot of damage in public esteem and so forth that we were engaged in something like that and misled or didn’t inform the Senate of what it expected to know. All of those things were painful and we had to work very hard to overcome that kind of reputation, deserved or undeserved. I had to make a couple of hard choices myself in making some personnel changes. Some I had no regret about because they needed to be made. A few I made because the people involved no longer had any credibility in the Congress and it was important when we carry messages of an important nature, that we be believed. I did that very regretfully, because it was not punishment. The investigation had exonerated at least one of them that I removed. And I say “removed,” I asked him to step aside and he very graciously did. But I had to do something to restore, start off with a clean slate and not have people arguing about, “Well here comes so-and-so, and he’s so flip and he’s so fast, how can we believe him?”

But we did a number of things in that area that I probably should mention. One was the establishment of the four C’s, which was a shorthand for what witnesses going up to brief the Congress should do. We knew that a lot of people were going up there with no political savvy but were experts, analysts, other witnesses who would go up and testify. We knew that they’d be confronted with situations where they could see people in the room that shouldn’t be hearing what they were talking about, or worried about too many people hearing. The answer was not to talk around the issue, the answer was not to be disingenuous. Or what we were most often accused of in the past, only answering the question that was asked and answering it as narrowly as possible, so that though we knew what they were interested in, we weren’t going to tell them.
We heard that again and again. And there may have been some historical basis for Congress’s feeling, but it was their feeling and we had to deal with that.

So the four C’s with all testimonies should be: Correct, candid, complete, and consistent. Then to that was appended: If, in your opinion it would be unwise to give answers of a sensitive nature that would implicate sources and methods because of the people in the room, or for whatever reason, you are authorized to tell the committee that you are not authorized to answer that question. But you will report the question to headquarters and headquarters will immediately work with staff to come up with an appropriate solution to the problem, which will answer their question and still respect our sworn duty to protect sources and methods. I’ve always been proud of the fact, in the time since that time, not once were we accused of lying. I felt that that was very, very important, not only to us but to the President. If we engaged in that kind of deception, or were believed to be engaging in that kind of deception, it would reflect on the President’s probity, because he appointed us and he delegated us that assignment.

It would put him, in any event, in an unwanted spot about whether he had to do something about us or whether he had to kiss off the Congress or tell them it wasn’t any of their business. It was a formula that seemed to work. I don’t know whether it’s working now or not; I think it’s still in play. But it’s important in separation of powers that the President be seen as being responsive to the concerns of Congress, but nevertheless entitled to protect the prerogatives and responsibilities of the executive branch.

**Knott:** You may have already touched on this earlier, I think you did mention it, but perhaps there is more to add. If you could just tell us about the period when President-elect Bush asked you to stay on as DCI. Any recollections from that time? Did you expect to stay on?

**Webster:** I really didn’t know, to tell you the truth. I really didn’t know. As I mentioned earlier, I had not planned to finish out the ten years. I was in my tenth year I think, certainly after my ninth year at the FBI. So I had originally had plans to leave. It wasn’t a question of needing to stay on or wanting to stay on. I’d lived most of my life following the concept of one of my role models, John McCloy, in his “private man in public life” theory. The private man in public life is not an elected official, he is not a bureaucrat, he is one that has been called in to do a job and when he’s done the job he will leave. He doesn’t own the job and he is free to leave if he cannot agree with the policies under which he is serving.

That being the case, it wasn’t a question of needing to stay on or having any desire to serve for any particular time. I confess that having known George Bush for so long and having respected him so much, the prospect of working with him and for him was the one thing that would make me change my thoughts about returning to private life after so many years in service in Washington, to which I had not originally aspired. I never did know the full story, but I began to hear reports from friends who were looking into it a bit. I was originally told, one of the first things I would hear was a call from President Bush to stay on, that he had indicated that. But the call did not come right away. Other things were going on, whether or not he was doing—as he had every right to do—exploring other options to see if there was somebody he would like to bring in or not like to bring in. Finally Bobby Inman was calling on my behalf, Admiral Inman, and others.
Finally, I had a call from Craig Fuller, who was one of the original key players on the Bush team. I think he had wanted to be Chief of Staff and I don’t think he got that appointment.

Knott: That’s right, John Sununu got the appointment.

Webster: Sununu got the spot, right. He called me about something and I said, “You know, this has been going on for a while. I’d really like to talk to somebody about this. Because I serve at the pleasure of the President, and if he doesn’t want me I’d like to know sooner rather than later. I’ll make it easy on him.” So he called back later and said, “Let’s have some lunch.” He came over and had lunch with me in the suite that CIA has in the EOB [Executive Office Building] and he said, “Well, the only thing that the President was concerned about at all was whether or not you were able to stand up to the military.” Now, I didn’t have a direct conversation with the President about this at all, so I’m only repeating what Craig said to me.

From this conversation I gathered that the President having had to confront military turf situations when he was Director of Central Intelligence felt that somebody had to stand up to the military. I’m not sure if I’ve got that about right; I think that’s about what he said. I said, “Well, the President is going to have to be the best judge of that.” I had a practice of meeting with—I think Bob Gates actually had started it and I continued it—of meeting with the Secretary of Defense, Secretary of Treasury, and National Security Advisor each, one day a week. I would go have breakfast on Mondays I think, or Tuesdays, with the Secretary of Defense. Lunch with the Secretary of State on Wednesdays or Thursdays. Then a pretty good lengthy, relaxed meeting with the National Security Advisor late Thursday, at the end of the day.

So I made reference to the meetings. I met with [Frank] Carlucci, with Dick Cheney, with Cap Weinberger. Is there anybody else in there? I think that was the line up: Carlucci, Weinberger, Cheney. And I said I really couldn’t recall any instances in which we had engaged in any turf grabbing or issues of that kind. But I just left it. I said the President will have to make that decision. But I said, “I do want you to know, while I’d enjoy working with the President, it is not a must in my mind. I’m ready to go home at any time.” I was ready to go home three years before. So the President called me within a day or two after that, I think. And he said he really felt that there should be continuity and not a political change, not an automatic change. There should be continuity and we had always worked well together and he hoped I would agree to continue. So I did.

I think that length of time, whatever was behind it, satisfying himself—I had to do that once in one of my directorates at CIA. I had a terrible time looking for somebody else, hoping I could find somebody better and didn’t. So maybe he went through the same process, I don’t know. I don’t know, never asked. But it was always a friendly and supportive President for me. I was invited to join the group of his new Cabinet, his new appointees, new officials at the auditorium of the EOB. Of course by that time I think the press was wondering what would be the case and so on. There may have been others who either wanted the job or wanted the job for somebody else and were trying to raise the issue whether I was up for the job.
I don’t know what was going on behind the scenes, but somebody in the press asked as we were going out the door. I was walking out with the President, we were walking out together, the other people were still on the platform, I don’t quite remember. Except I have a great picture that hung in the White House for a while of us both standing at the door looking back to catch that last question. And they said, “Well how long is Director Webster going to serve?” Some question like that. Good press question, produce some kind of . . . And he said, “It is open ended.” And we turned around and left, which was great from my perspective. It put aside the idea that I had made any kind of an agreement to come and stay for six months or three months or leave after that, or there had been any kind of discussion other than that I was to be continued in office. So that’s the fill in on that situation.

Knott: Did he ask you to make any sort of changes? Do you recall him raising any issues that he was concerned about with CIA?

Webster: Certainly not then. Things like that I usually heard from Scowcroft. Say, “That was a little strong statement you made in Congress today,” or something like that, although most of those things were sent out ahead of time for people to look at and complain about if they want to. Gates was always getting in trouble with Shultz, who, as I say, could be prickly about thinking that anybody at the Agency was talking about foreign policy, what it ought to be. Bob, of course, as a historian, had been around, had a lot of ideas. He would occasionally say something that Shultz would pick up on. That’s when he was deputy, not when he was DCI.

I can’t remember how much instruction I asked for. He didn’t ask. He’d been Vice President, it’s not like I’m seeing him for the first time. He didn’t tell me there was anything about what I was doing that he wished I’d do differently. I know he was very close to [Duane] Dewey Claridge. I had a hard one there, because at the time, I liked Dewey very much. I’ve had to revise my views on that since then, but the reports of the group that went over the Iran-Contra issue at the hearings and all the other things that I agreed to undertake—I said I’d review everything. They came back and the situation with Dewey, I thought I had a loose cannon on my hands who was not always completely candid. I think the discipline I imposed for some of the things he said and didn’t say in that involved reduction in grade and a reprimand. Dewey is a very proud guy, he didn’t like either of them. The reduction in grade didn’t really—because of the way the compensation structure was in effect at the time—didn’t really cost him any money, but it was a rather severe punishment not usually imposed beyond reprimand. I wasn’t going to suspend him or do anything of that kind, he was too senior an officer. But I did drop him a grade, for which I have never been forgiven.

But I know that the President liked Dewey. He’s hard not to like when he wants to be likable. I think he called Dewey, after the discipline came out, he called just about everybody that was involved in the disciplinary process. We had Alan Fiers, we had two or three other people.

Selverstone: Clare George?

Webster: No. Clare was the one I was talking about. Clare in my view was exonerated from any wrongdoing. Clare, and I told him so, but I said, “I’m going to need your job because people don’t think your style is, has not won you the confidence of the Congress. It doesn’t do the
Agency any good to send people up who aren’t going to be believed, regardless of whether it’s their fault or not.” But I said, “I’ll give you another job.” And he said, “No, I really think I should leave and I should retire and maybe I can help you by taking some people with me that ought to retire.” He did a very statesman-like thing.

Clare and I have been friends. Clare went through some serious depression problems later on and thought he’d been fired, but he hadn’t been fired. I gave him the DIM, the Distinguished Intelligence Medal, later and I would not have done that if I had thought that he had not been worthy of it. I had a lot of respect for Clare. He’s the one who went over and replaced the guy that was the station chief that was killed in Greece. Really good man. He’s losing his sight now. He’s lost his peripheral vision. I changed jobs and he chose to retire, or he would have had a senior position in some other place where he didn’t have to deal with the Congress. He had a way of dancing through things, which is just his style. It was just the way he grew up, grew up in the Agency, that was all. I didn’t find anything that Clare had done to merit administrative action. He was not disciplined, he was not punished in any way. He retired on his own.

But Alan Fiers had been one of those that shipped things on the airplanes and there were two or three others who had broken existing rules. I was always careful not to do the *ex post facto* thing. And discipline is not something I enjoy, or ever enjoyed doing. But I learned when I was on the federal court that you do all your soul searching before sentencing, and after you’ve done it, you have to go on. You’ve done the best you could and then that’s it. But when you have to take adverse action against people who spent their whole careers in an organization and you’re a relative newcomer, you’ve got to think long and hard about it. It hurts you to do it. You know you have to do it because it’s exemplary as well as punitive. You’re trying more to make the point that other people should not do these things, and there is accountability here and you have to do it. But it doesn’t make you happy to have to do it.

**Selverstone:** There was some talk in the media at the time about the pace of change, the pace with which you made some of these decisions. Your perspective on that? As you suggested, you were new in the organization that people had been in their whole lives and you wanted to give it the requisite amount of time.

**Webster:** I think it took close to five months or so. I’ve forgotten how long it was. But when I did it I did it, and then I went into the bubble and explained why I had done it, too. And that wasn’t easy, because there were a lot of unhappy people, some of them with their families there. But I felt it was the thing to do. It’s really hard to lay hands on people who are part of the good history of an organization. And you don’t do it willingly.

Did I talk about the 48 FBI agents? I think I mentioned that earlier this morning. But I did discipline the ones that—and institutional failures I found very difficult. I would not impose the discipline. I would make the point, but I wouldn’t discipline. Back in the Bureau it was discovered that sons and daughters of agents seemed to be getting through because they got access to the questions, were being helped by getting the examination questions ahead of time and knowing what the answers were. One of my best executives—I don’t know whatever led him to make this recommendation—recommended we polygraph 5,000 people who had taken those
examinations. And I said no. This is an institutional failure. There is no rule that says these questions are secret.

Lawyers take bar exam prep courses that are based on questions that are gathered from the law schools and collected and passed on. I said, doesn’t make it right, but it also doesn’t make it evil if no one told you not to. If you had a set of rules that said—and he said, “Well, they should know not to.” But I said, “I think we had a responsibility to tell them not to.” I just wasn’t about to go tear up an organization to find out who got a copy of an examination. The idea was to get the best people on board. If there was any indication that we were wrong, well then we shouldn’t do that.

But anyway, we got off the subject. I was talking about the difficulty of imposing discipline in an organization where you’re new, but you have to do what you have to do. I didn’t hesitate to fire out-of-hand people who betrayed their trust, when I knew the evidence was solid. I didn’t have to wait to take them off the line if they were going to be a risk to keep on board. Others we’d suspend until they had a chance to be heard in court. That Iran process was painful, but I think it was good and it was healthy and in the end most people thought we had done what we should have done. But I did want to be careful.

**Knott:** During that first year of the Bush administration you had the events in China take place, I believe that was in June of ’89, if I have the dates right.

**Webster:** You mean Tiananmen Square?

**Knott:** Yes. Do you have any recollections from that period? Did the Agency see this coming? Any sort of internal debate within the administration over the best way to foster democracy in China? I guess more than anything, was it seen? Does it seem to be coming down the pike or did it catch the administration off-guard?

**Webster:** I’m trying to figure out what is the correct answer to that. We were still tilted pretty far over toward Taiwan, even though that was no longer the official China, as far as the United Nations and so on. But mainland China we watched a round of things taking place.

Let me isolate the question a little bit and talk about Tiananmen Square. We were of course aware of the emerging more activist student groups that were talking more openly about democracy and some of the “no-no’s” from the old days, that were being to some extent tolerated as long as it wasn’t stuck in their face. I have for a long time believed out of my experience in government and watching these things, and still believe, that the two things that were intolerable in China, from the standpoint of the regime, was an attack on either its legitimacy or its sovereignty. That you were allowed to do a lot of things, say a lot of things, but if you suggested that the regime was illegitimate or attacked its sovereignty, which would include its relationship to Taiwan and so on, then all the years of building relationships and so on were out the window.

Their long-range view of time and the world and the length of their civilization permitted them to say, “We don’t care if you cut off trade. We don’t care if you do these other things. We will not tolerate an assault on our sovereignty or our legitimacy.” One had to understand that in our
dealings with the Chinese. These were the two things that they wouldn’t tolerate. You could see some of that in the relationships between Taiwan, going through Hong Kong and investing in enterprises in China. As long as they didn’t make an issue or assert independence, do that sort of thing, they could work it out somehow. They’re pretty pragmatic. But just would not tolerate any kind of a perceived assault on their legitimacy. And Tiananmen Square became one of those events that in the minds of the old hands was intolerable.

Now, we were aware of many of the things that were taking place there. Had a pretty good China hand crowd, I think, in reporting back, both at headquarters and in the field. We were aware that Deng Xiaoping had gone off into the country and talked to the old generals, which is usually an indication that they’re getting their act together one way or the other. That they want everybody on the same page. We were aware that they had sent out for divisions from the provinces to come in and replace or supplement the divisions that were from Beijing and who likely had children and other people involved in the students and so forth, involved in these activities. You remember, there were flowers and if you remember, some of the scenes over there, talking to each other and so on. It would have been very difficult for those headquarters divisions to do anything serious at that point. Wouldn’t have wanted to do it, whereas the people from the army divisions from outside, the other provinces, did not have the same sentimental issues to confront. So that was still another indication.

We knew when they had left their headquarters and had gone to their bunkers that they felt threatened, but we didn’t know what they would do or the moment in time at which they would do it. This is one of those problems in intelligence. Talked to Henry Kissinger about this one time and he said something that stuck with me. He said, “Well, you can’t know until Deng Xiaoping knows,” which I thought was very wise. They were still making up their minds about what to do. They didn’t know until the last minute what they were going to do. And so we reacted with a great deal of sadness, but I don’t know what else the government could have done that would have changed their minds in the light of this perceived attack on their legitimacy. That’s my take on it. When you get down to these last minute things, you look back in hindsight, what did I know, what did—somebody could have told me something. Half the time you couldn’t tell because they didn’t know themselves what they were going to do, you could only guess.

In the Gulf War, we made one bad assessment, I think, long-range assessment, in October, about at the end of the Iran-Iraq war, that this was a very worn-out Iraqi military, wounds to lick and heal, that their objectives would never change. That they wanted to be the bully in the neighborhood, that they wanted to be the Arab Prince against Israel, but they were expected to take a pause while they regrouped and got back in order. That was an assessment in which the whole intelligence community joined, by the way. There were no dissents from that issue. But by January we were reporting the military build-up in great detail, and counting the number of armed military hardware units that we could see from the space imagery, and the number of people that were associated with that, and personnel. That’s not always accurate but it’s a methodology. I remember reporting to the President that there were 180,000 troops aimed south.

Scowcroft thought perhaps that was saber rattling. I said, “That’s a lot of troops.” And he said, “Yes it is.” Then we reported—I’ve forgotten, was it August? When did they invade?
Selverstone: Early August.

Webster: Dick Kerr, my deputy, was going to the deputies’ committee, which reported that in our opinion they would invade Kuwait within 24 hours. They invaded them 12 hours later. We were absolutely on target. One of the problems was, I think, that the people in the State Department were focused on the Middle East and some aspects of the Soviet Union. I even heard one expression, “Well, it is a filling station in the desert.” I remember that term. Sort of like—

Knott: Kuwait.

Webster: Filling station in the desert. We had been reporting the slant drilling controversy, consistently. We knew that he was ticked off about that and probably correctly so.

Knott: Could you elaborate on that, the slant drilling?

Webster: That’s a technique of sending your drills into the other guy’s territory from where you are. You’re in one country and you slide it in and you’re getting somebody else’s oil.

I can’t remember how much we knew about [April] Glaspie’s meeting with Saddam—

Selverstone: April Glaspie?

Webster: April Glaspie. I think we did have a read-back on it. The problem there was that he gave her every opportunity to say what we would do and the answer was sort of what happens a number of times in the State Department—by design usually—“we have no position on that.” Which was read as, we won’t interfere or we won’t do anything about it. So it was all there. The only thing anybody can fault us on is that long-term view, which we corrected as time went along and the build-up started. We were showing exactly what was happening and we did judge that he would attack. Now, the why we judged it was when he had his logistical team hook up with his operational forces in exactly the same way that had been done when he launched the attack on Iran. So we judged this was a serious event.

I don’t know what more we could have done about that. I mean, you’ve got the State Department knowing what we knew and behaving with Saddam Hussein as they did. I don’t know what the President at that moment in time could have done at all.

Selverstone: Just thinking about your comment that you started to see great mobilization of forces starting early 1990, January, February. Were there any personality studies to suggest that the timeframe for Saddam might be telescoping, that this is a man who is not really too concerned that his people might be tired, and would be fully willing to push them right now?

Webster: Well, I think the more recent, more current intelligence issues were handled correctly. I just think the estimate, the long-range estimate probably didn’t build those factors in. I’m not entirely sure what they did. It’s something you have to fight all the time. I think it’s implied in your question, not to put yourself in somebody else’s shoes when you’re not them. It was so
logical that a tired country, that of course they won’t do anything. They wouldn’t be stupid enough to do something like that. That kind of reasoning. I’m guilty of that when I go fly fishing. I look in my fly box and say, “If I were a fish I’d want that royal coachman there.” But I’m not a fish and I might not want that royal coachman if I were a fish. But I think if he had invaded the next day, I think we’d have looked very bad.

But people are always, with intelligence, they’re always claiming shock. Words I hate—in the Bureau I hated the word “botched.” I just hated to see somebody describe something as botched. In the Agency I hated to see something called “intelligence failure.” Intelligence failure is when something happens that you didn’t know about. In the intelligence community they divide life between two kinds, one is called “secret” and the other is called “the mystery.” The secrets, if you’re good, you can find out. Mysteries take longer.

Knott: That’s good.

Webster: They don’t lend themselves to easy assessment.

Knott: Allegations of intelligence failures were made both at the time and later regarding the sort of assessments of the health of the Soviet Union and of the Warsaw Pact. Do you want to address that?

Webster: All I can say is, I don’t consider myself an expert on the details and the history of those packages, and the health. I have seen redacts, gone back, people who have produced supremely convincing material on here’s what we said, here’s what took place. Here are the warnings, here is the commentary. And we got everything about when they turned out the lights at the end of the day. We projected the rise-ups against Gorbachev. We had plenty of evidence and reporting on the rise of the Mafia, the erosion of their economy, the anger at the defeat in Afghanistan. We accurately predicted the breakup of the Warsaw Convention. In fact, I think you had it in one of your lists in there, Cheney was upset with me, or reported to be upset with me—he never said so personally—but when I gave testimony I said that the dissolution appeared to be irreversible. That was a very strong statement, and it was.

So I don’t how much more accurate we could have been. The only thing we didn’t know was that Gorbachev would sign off and turn off the lights, at what moment in time. But it was a direction that I publicly stated that in our view was irreversible. It came just at the time that Cheney was asking for more money for the Defense Department and he described it as not helpful. But that got a blow back. He called me right away and he said, “I want you to know that I have called the heads of my groups,” that is DIA [Defense Intelligence Agency] and NSA [National Security Agency] and so forth, “and told them that nothing I’ve said is intended for them to ever change their opinions and their estimates. I wanted to have it just as accurately as they could.” We never said that we could turn our backs on the Soviet Union or that they were not a problem. We described a breaking up of their system and we described it as irreversible.

I appreciated that call from Dick, by the way. I appreciated it even though he might have thought I could have picked a better time or place to make the statement, but we only made that thing on schedule, once every year I think was our formal report. But I have looked at the projections. I
have to say that during the last two or three years we had a division of thought within the Agency on some things. One of them was whether or not the glass was half full or half empty. And Bob Blackwell was the optimist and, I’m trying to think, there are three or four others who were sternly pessimistic. It was more a question whether you could bring them into a world order in which they would not be our foes, than it was how bad the economy was.

We had differences over time on gauging their material strength, that is, their armed forces, how much of their budget was being devoted to military versus how much was going to support the economy. Or how much of the resources coming out, how much of what they produced was being poured into the military. Partly because they didn’t know themselves. [Sergei] Akhromeyev said before he died, said he just asked for tanks. He said he listed their requirements and they got them, he didn’t ask the question of what they cost. He didn’t know what they cost. We tried to do modeling, long before I got there, using examples of what it would cost us to produce a tank and going through some manipulations of the numbers and bean counting and figuring out what part of their observable figures. Even applying their own figures, but their own figures were not accurate. There were some less than precise calculations going on in that area.

I think we went from a period of when the main objective of intelligence against the Soviet Union before I came—shortly before I came—was really, were they going to do a stand-up, break-out offensive against us? And if so, when and where? And did they have the equipment and military superiority sufficient to achieve those goals? We were doing terrific things with the Navy and others, going out and picking up stuff in the middle of the ocean to come back and test the throw weight and to do all the other things to try and understand our relative strengths and weaknesses, but that didn’t give the answer to the question whether they would or would not do a break-out.

We were constantly being urged by the Supreme Commander of NATO, “For Pete’s sake, give me as much lead time as possible because we don’t have enough troops on the ground to withstand an assault as presently constituted. And it will take me X number of weeks to build up the political will to get the troops here, get them authorized and sent.” They were just desperately in need of any lead time. We were tracking, we had sensors out all over Russia to watch any change in movement of heavy equipment from the factories and so forth or from the military bases, of where they were going. Our satellites were working overtime, watching what they were doing.

So once that period passed, once Gorbachev realized—I mentioned that Afghanistan in my view was one of the major factors. Another major factor in my view, one of maybe three—I have to think now what I thought the third one was—but the other one was SDI [Strategic Defense Initiative]. SDI for all the wrong reasons hastened the collapse of the Soviet Union. They knew that they couldn’t compete with us in marshaling the assets to do this. They didn’t have the resources to do it. They doubted that we could make it work, but they knew they would have to try to compete. In the end it went through a whole range of unilateral actions to show they were no longer a threat. Pulling people back behind the Urals, discontinuing certain intermediate ballistic weapons and so on, doing everything they could to say, “Look at us, we’re not a threat.” All of that we were following very closely.
I thought those documents were out of classification now. If you’re at all, if this is all part of what you’re doing and you have anybody who has the clearances, you really ought to have a look at them. Some of them are really—I think one or two of those have been published in intelligence studies. List what we knew and what we said, as we went along.

I don’t really apologize. There are a lot of things I suppose that could have been improved on, before my time, during my time, after my time. But on the Soviet Union I don’t denigrate the effort; I don’t denigrate the results of that effort. I think they did a good job in trying to manage the effort, manage our understanding of what was happening in the Soviet Union. I don’t think there was an intelligence agency in the world that predicted the exact moment of time and so forth. Certainly that’s not an excuse for our not doing it if we could have. But that was the essential of what was happening, was reported. The close-down, again, it may be in that category that Kissinger talked about. You can’t know about it until Gorbachev knows about it and makes up his mind to do it.

Selverstone: At what point did you start to pay more attention to Boris Yeltsin and his—

Webster: I think the Agency deserves a lot of credit here. I don’t have any dates, the chronology in front of me. I’m a little fuzzy on the different positions that he ran for when he ran to head the Russian government, and his policies appeared to us to be far more democratic in their true nature. Gorbachev in our judgment had many admirable qualities, but he was raised as a Communist and he never stopped being a Communist. He wanted more openness in thinking, he wanted more freedom of speech, and politically he was loosening up the country, but economically he never stopped thinking like a Communist. This was when we were getting these reports all along—privatization, he did not understand privatization. They sent a delegation over here toward the end of this, trying to get a handle on things. They said, “Now tell us, in a market-oriented economy, who sets the prices?” That kind of said it all to me, that this is the way they thought.

But Yeltsin, everything he said, when he talked about these issues, seemed to make far more sense and resonated well with the people. But he had this very quirky personality that turned American leaders off. He was characterized as a boor, as a heavy drinker, as telling wild stories of falling off a bridge or being pushed in the river and all this kind of stuff. It had taken them a long time before they found—they could certainly work with Gorbachev. It went through an evolution.

I remember, Reagan was moving in that direction after Reykjavik and other places, and they had developed a good working relationship. It seemed to me that Bush came a step backwards when he came in. He wanted—

Selverstone: The “pausa,” as it’s called, the pause.

Webster: He wasn’t so sure about this and he wanted to look at it for himself. But by the time they’d had their various Malta meetings and so forth, he had developed, I think, a personal kind of relationship. Baker had this relationship with [Eduard] Shevardnadze, they’d go fishing
together in Montana and Wyoming and so forth, all of which let them think that this was the way out of all this. But what they were ignoring—not ignoring, but weren’t taking sufficiently into account—was I think that the economy was on the rocks over there. We were telling them all this, that Yeltsin was coming up in the political polls, that he was becoming a significant factor. He wasn’t really popular with our leaders.

Made a trip over here, got blamed for all the liquor that was consumed, as if he consumed it personally. I mean, almost literally. He had a couple of boorish ways of dealing—wrong place, moments in time. Something offended Barbara Bush one time, or at least offended those who were interested in her being treated properly. Everybody would have preferred to improve the relationship with Gorbachev. But they would come back at us and they would say, “Why are you pushing Yeltsin?” Because they’re all in the policy business, they think we’re pushing things. I’d say, “We’re not pushing anybody. We’re telling you that Gorbachev is becoming increasingly irrelevant in the Soviet Union and you’d better pay attention to Yeltsin. We’re not suggesting how to treat him or what to do about him, but we’re saying you’d better pay attention to him.” And that sort of settled things down for a while. But they were really so hot over one way and so disenchanted by Yeltsin at that stage.

Then we had another shift. Can I take a minute and talk about that? When Yeltsin was standing up to them, the tanks out in front of the Russian White House? There was a lot of concern of course, of what’s going to happen. Somehow, he was able to get communications through to us on some weird thing, like faxing into Johns Hopkins. There was some strange way, I’ve forgotten how. He was able to get a few communications. They couldn’t close the whole thing down, and they didn’t really know how to close the whole thing down, or they would have taken out the press and everything before they did it. I think the Army wasn’t entirely on board and the Army leaders did not want to be responsible for killing a lot of Russian citizens and so there were real holes in that.

As this thing developed, we were accurately saying this is a strange revolution and we’re not really sure that this is going to fly. The President arranged or got a call from Yeltsin. I got there—I can’t remember whether I got there in the middle of the conversation, but certainly right after the conversation was over. Because when he put down the phone, they had the usual way of, interpreters and other people, not in the room, but helping what was being said and so on. When he put down the phone President Bush said, “He just said, ‘Mr. President, we are going to arrest these people and try them and put them in jail.’” This is with the cannons pointing right at his belly. I can’t help but think that was a defining moment in the relationship and in Bush’s perception. He saw real courage there. There was a process there, it was not a counter revolution, he was thinking in those terms. But that really softened up the relationship, made it possible, as far as it went, for them to continue to work together. I think there was a kind of real respect that was developing there.

All those personality aspects were things that you just had to grapple with because they could make a big difference. I think that President Bush, some of his greatest achievements had to do with personal relationships and his ability to earn trust and get people to work together and to respect him. I think he put a high level on that. Personal diplomacy, very important. It only goes so far but it’s very important and he was awfully good at it. He had the time in the United
Nations, he’d been to China, he had every exposure to understanding people. A lot of us find it easier to hate people we’ve never seen or worked with and I think he had the benefit of having spent real time with so many leaders and common ordinary citizens around the world, that it was very useful to him in putting together the coalition to deal with the Gulf War especially.

But that’s kind of the way I saw, from my perspective, their reactions to the Russian leaders. The military liked Akhrorov. This was a guy that never went in out of the cold in Leningrad in the entire siege, what was it, 180 days or longer? It was long—

Selverstone: Nine hundred day siege.

Webster: Yes, 900 days. It was long.

Knott: He was outside the entire time?

Webster: Outside the entire time. And he was a major officer, a leader. He could have gone in whenever he wanted to. But those were things that were bound to build a certain level of respect, admiration. Figured, he may be on the wrong side politically, but they’re not all bad, we can work together, we can build. It’s the same kind—much more minor scale—here we are with [Vladimir] Putin, who has a nice working relationship with President Bush and a good business relationship with Saddam Hussein.

Knott: Were you involved in any sort of cooperative endeavors with the KGB after the fall of the old regime? Or did that come a little bit later?

Webster: Even before the fall of the KGB. We had one back channel relationship, which had to do with terrorist assaults or threats on our embassies. We were both willing to and did supply information that we picked up about that kind of activity, because it involved innocent civilians at risk in foreign countries. It was one that the Soviets were more anxious to expand on than we were. It was very close-hold, nobody wanted to talk too much about back channel communications on these subject matters. But they wanted to build out from there and there was never very much enthusiasm or confidence in the Agency that it would work. I guess years of squaring off in every part of the world, it’s a little hard to—but this was a humanitarian kind of effort.

Then, I think, in subsequent times, there had been a kind of coming together. I was hosted, visiting Moscow, staying with Tom Pickering, to a private tour of Lubyanka and a museum—

Knott: This was while you were DCI?

Webster: Not while, after I retired. Then met with a retired general, General [Vadim] Kirpitchenko, was head of the second directorate over there, at a safe house, talking about the future with a former resident from here in Washington who was filling in with questions, “how did we do” questions. “What did you think about our professional performance?” Like a bunch of old professional soldiers talking, old adversaries but still professionals.
Selverstone: What did you tell him?

Webster: I told him, I said, “I thought your trade craft was admirable.” They were very careful, they did a lot of hard work. But I said, “I have to say, your recruiting is overstated. Because sadly, I don’t know of anybody you recruited. I know a lot of people that rang your doorbell or phoned in and said, ‘Can I come in and talk to you?’ But I don’t know of anybody you won over to your side because they didn’t initiate the contact.” That of course is because money rather than ideology became the principal reason for betrayal. But he took it very well. We had these funny run-ins with him all the time.

We rounded up one colonel making a dead drop in—it may be the one you mentioned in your notes over there—in Potomac. It was out in Potomac somewhere. He had this explanation, because he was protected by diplomatic immunity. His explanation was that he was out driving in the country for some purpose, I don’t know remember what the purpose if any was, and he had a call of nature and he stepped out of the car and it was wet. And he saw these papers and he thought they’d be good to stand on. So he picked them up and you know, “That’s my story and I’m sticking with it.” We have a video, with a smile. Other things, they had much tighter security on us than we were able to manage. We were pretty tight in Washington, San Francisco, and New York, and we limited their movements. But then they had these satellite countries that did a lot of very effective work for them and were not under those restrictions and we had to hustle to keep up with what they were doing.

It’s one of the strange things, or interesting things to me, how the higher up you go in leadership role, the more intelligence you want, the appetite is undiminished. That’s where covert action sometimes comes in, sometimes others. I have a letter from George Washington, it’s not an original but it looks like an original, it’s an awfully good reproduction, that Malcolm Forbes gave me. Had it framed with a silhouette of Washington and a translation of the letter. It is to a major or a colonel describing the importance of intelligence and the importance of secrecy and how to use hidden handwriting and other techniques for getting messages to him and how important this was.

It’s been that way from the beginning of time. Go over and see the International Spy Museum if you have a chance. It’s the hottest thing in town right now, there are lines over there actually. But it takes you back to the Trojan Horse and the whole range of history that they’ve got there. I don’t know of any President—there may have been Presidents who may have been suspicious about how good the intelligence was, and you have Presidents who were told by their staff that we already know those things. You have Presidents, even like in George Bush’s situation, where every Arab leader in the area was saying that Saddam Hussein would never attack a fellow Arab state, and we’re telling him he’s got 180,000 troops. But nevertheless, the need to know. Preferably, the need to know first is compelling in the leadership roles of the President. They all want it and they all want covert action.

That’s one of the reasons I didn’t worry too much about CIA being merged into Homeland Security, because CIA reports to the President of the United States. That’s the way he wants it and he’s not going to give that up. But there is an important convergence, infusion of information that has to be done, with the FBI, the CIA and others and Homeland Security. We’re working on
that. But some more so than others felt that way about intelligence and generally also about law
enforcement. They know when they’re not having screw-ups that the public really appreciates
the organization that is putting their lives on the line for them. And the President expresses that
feeling. It’s an extension of what someone who has gotten himself elected President can
understand.

I don’t know how our time is going. We didn’t talk a lot about the Gulf War. Did you want to
come back to that?

**Knott:** I think what we’ll do is take a break and come back for the Gulf War and finish up,
okay? And Hannah is also going to take some photographs if that’s okay.

**Webster:** Well, I’m glad I wore my suit then.

[BREAK]

**Knott:** —observations you have about the CIA’s role and how well the agency performed during
the war, and any other reflections you may have about the war?

**Webster:** Let’s see, where to begin. We talked about the things leading up to the Gulf War
before. It’s interesting, if I duck back for a minute, my mind flashes back to things I should have
talked about. One of the things that I had a little bit of a role in starting came out of the Panama
insurrection and subsequent invasion. I was in Europe, actually, when the Panama attempted
take-over, attempted coup took place. It was over before I could get back. But there was some
unhappiness about the fact that while it was going on, there was some high-ranking official from
Europe who was visiting and had been in the Oval Office and various people of national security
orientation, coming by to say hello and pay courtesy calls. There was a little bit of slippage going
on while it was there and they were out-of-pocket for one thing.

When the incident finished and the coup failed and so forth, the President wanted to get a group
together. I got a call from Cheney saying the President wanted to have a meeting in Scowcroft’s
office to talk about why we were caught in this kind of situation. It really didn’t have to do with
rehearsing what was known or not known, because everybody involved knew the limited
information we had from this attempted coup plotter who wanted to overthrow Noriega, how
sloppily the communications and the management occurred.

I said at that time, “You know we have all this secure equipment that we put in place. There’s
one at Defense, there’s one at State, there’s one at CIA, there’s one at the White House, where in
an emergency we can talk over secure lines, have secure faxes, secure video information and so
forth. And it is reserved for the one thing we probably won’t ever have to use it for, which is a
nuclear attack. Why don’t we have some system where we can use these facilities so that people
do n’t have to pile into their automobiles and come roaring down to the White House every time
and lose that time and bring people in who have special expertise and participate?”
And out of that discussion—I said the other thing that had troubled me, it had been an exercise emergency situation, and nobody came themselves. They sent somebody to go sit in, occupy the chair where somebody is. I said, “We need to exercise this equipment anyway. We should get used to exercising them; we should get used to having them. We have them. And if some kind of situation like this comes up and there isn’t time for a prescheduled meeting, why don’t we learn to use them in ordinary circumstances, utilizing what’s there? If the top agency or department head is not available or shouldn’t do it, why don’t we have the deputies on tap and the deputies can sit down and talk to each other on the phone and pass back. Or you could feel free to go in and join them if you can, if you can’t, whatever.” It was that kind of a discussion.

Out of that came a more formalized approach creating what became known as the deputies’ committee. It functioned very well in these emergency and wartime-type functions. All of us, even the heads of the departments and agencies, got used to being part of this process and going into these rooms and sitting down and talking to somebody in four or five places. If somebody wanted to see something, you could send something, all on secure systems, send it off to them right away. They could put something up on a bulletin board that could be shown and everybody could see it and so forth. My reason for reverting to that is because we talked from time to time, I said the deputies’ committee in relationship to Dick Kerr telling the deputies’ committee meeting that we’d predicted an invasion within 24 hours. A very useful process.

It got complicated a few times. Once during the Philippine insurrection, when the President was in the air flying somewhere and the Vice President at that time, Dan Quayle, came down, chaired the meeting in the White House, which was not necessarily his function because the President hadn’t either asked for it or demonstrated—but he did an admirable job, it’s not any criticism of him. But there is a pecking order in emergencies that was first identified when Ronald Reagan was shot and Al Haig said, “I’m in charge here.” That had to do with succession to office, but not with the succession to management in wartime situations, which devolve to the Secretary of Defense, who was also in the room, Cap Weinberger then.

But I think Dan Quayle wrote a book called Tested or something like that in which he—

Knott: **Standing Firm.**

Webster: Yes, *Standing Firm*. This was a big piece of what he wrote about, but it didn’t sit too well with Cheney. So the thing didn’t work all that well at that point. We turned out our lights thinking the meeting was over and went home. There was nobody—or at least we walked out and left the place thinking this was the wee hours of the morning. Colin Powell was saying, “Anybody home over there?” It didn’t always run that smoothly, but it was very effective and it was a very useful thing in making sure that you didn’t lose all that time trying to get people together in circumstances when it was hard to get them together. You always had somebody designated to sit at the table, although there were five tables—different parts of the government.

Now, why did I bring this up? I brought this up because we were talking about getting into the Gulf War. There were a number of emergency meetings right after the Gulf War started. The President had his meeting in Aspen with Mrs. Thatcher. There’s some difference of opinion as to where that statement, “Now this is no time to be wobbly,” first occurred. I had for a long time
assumed that it occurred out there, because they were together. I’m told, by Richard Haass I think, that it occurred at an entirely different time, later on, over blocking shipping or embargo of some kind, at that time when Congress wasn’t ready to vote.

But at the first opportunity at the President’s return, we had an opportunity to sit down together in the Cabinet room. And, by the way, I had mentioned the situation room? The President had moved all his situation meetings into the Cabinet office and made sure it was secure but it gave a little more room for the ego and other people to use under much more comfortable circumstances. So, we had a meeting in there. [Norman] Schwarzkopf came, as commander of the Central Command. I reported that we had lost communication with the Agency, which was true. But Schwarzkopf said they were still in touch with their people, who were getting messages out of the area. We just discussed the different situations. I don’t remember if it was on the first occasion or the next meeting, but certainly by the time that Saddam Hussein had his troops on the Saudi border, why, it was clearly our view that unless restrained he would invade.

**Knott:** He would invade Saudi Arabia.

**Webster:** Would invade Saudi Arabia. The Saudis had their checkbooks out and were ready to make a settlement, initially, until it became clear that Saddam had more in mind than a consolation check. Their oil fields and so forth are in close proximity to that area and it would be a matter of hours before they could overrun if nothing happened.

I may be getting my place of meetings mixed up because we had another one at Camp David. I think maybe it was at Camp David where we met, same *dramatis personae* that I mentioned. We, with the President, decided that Cheney should go to Saudi Arabia to get permission to land our troops and get pledges of support and assurance that we were there to deal with him. Apparently, at that meeting, there was a lot of talk back and forth between the members of the royal family who didn’t realize, or didn’t care. I think they didn’t realize it.

The then-ambassador who was there was understanding that conversation and able to report it to us, but [Prince] Abdullah [bin Abdul Aziz] was not too happy about letting the troops land there. They were talking about the Kuwaiti royal family and said, “There is no more Kuwaiti royal family, the royal family is no longer there.” And Abdullah said, “Well, they’re here in Saudi Arabia.” And the King said, “Yes, they’re in our hotels.” It was over as far as he was concerned with. It could happen to them if they didn’t start to think about what to do next.

I know that Prince Bandar [bin Sultan] had been having conversations with the people in Switzerland and other places. Their concern was that we’d fly in and fly out as it happened once during the Carter administration. I think there’d been something, we’d flown a couple of squadrons of airplanes in and then flew out, left them holding the bag. They were afraid they would get in trouble with their neighbors and Saddam Hussein if they allowed them to come and then we flew off and left them. So there had to be some assurance that we would stay for the duration, until the problem was solved. At one point, I think the question which Cheney propounded in diplomatic terms was, “Do you want us to defend you or rescue you later?” That seemed to be the pivotal point. The king was very much supportive of what we were doing, the other people got in line and we got authority to land the troops.
Then we had the whole problem of setting up appropriate kinds of communications and making sure the intelligence was getting where it should go. The President amassed in a very short order a superb coalition of people ready to help. Sanctions were put in place—and sanctions are another subject, I think, that needs to be discussed—and we had to iron out a lot of important details, because we could download the intelligence, but the communications systems were separate for each of the services. We had a lot of problems of how do you get this information. Schwarzkopf was getting established in headquarters way down in some subterranean building somewhere and that all had to be worked out. Our relations could have been better with Schwarzkopf, he really didn’t like the message carriers on bad news, nobody wanted to bring him the bad news or the things he wouldn’t want to hear. All that got sorted out.

As we did these build-ups, we had certain kinds of benchmarks that they had set out for themselves, before they’d take the next step. First was the area air attack. I can remember that night very well because we all went to our battle stations. What fooled me was the reports—we were getting reports of planes in the air hours before the time that we thought the first attack would take place. I tried to call Scowcroft and the President picked up the phone. So I passed that information with a little flurry. Colin Powell got back to me and said, “They’re up in the air but they’re not going anywhere; we’re still on schedule.” We had those kinds of conversations, and then it started.

I’m trying to think how to organize a response to this. There was that whole period when Saddam Hussein was taking one of the reporters over to see the milk—

Knott: The baby milk—?

Webster: Baby milk factory that was bombed and so on.

Selverstone: Arnett.

Webster: Yes, Peter Arnett. I got to know Bernard Shaw very well during that period, developed a lot of respect for him. He was sound as he could be. So we had to deal with whether or not—I don’t think we were actually targeting, but we had provided intelligence about where command centers were and so on, and we stuck with those. He mixed it up a lot, he put civilians in on top, just like he spent all his nights in the suburbs because he knew we wouldn’t bomb the suburbs. We had to deal with that kind of situation.

Then the question is when to begin the land exercise, after everything was ready, of course. We had some fractious moments there because the President had agreed that when the Republican Guard and the other hardware had been 50 percent degraded, that would be the time to launch the invasion. Where they got to that or how they got to that, that was a military thing, I wasn’t involved. But anyway, that was it. But our people were telling me that we couldn’t substantiate the record, the number of kills that were coming through from the military side. We were trying. I called a meeting of all of our analysts, our people, General [Malcolm] Armstrong who was in charge of watching this area of our work, to try to reconcile it, and we couldn’t.
I told the President, “We’re having trouble.” Rotating these satellites, we didn’t have synoptic coverage, we had to do like you do in navigation and ships, you have to move the line forward. So we’d have them coming over and then we’d put it all together and we could not find the kills that were being reported. I mentioned to the President that we had this problem because we didn’t show anywhere near the level of destruction that they were reporting. We didn’t know who was right. If that was going to be the basis for his decision to go forward, I wanted him to know the problem. We were trying to get it resolved.

The military started, as I recall, by saying, “Okay, we’ll only count every other kill.” The President was very cool about this. He said, “You mean you think there’s pilot euphoria.” He’d been a pilot, been shot down and so on. I said, “I think the fog of war is pretty heavy out there. I don’t know the reason for it, but we can’t find them in the field with our imagery.” So, “Okay, we’ll only report every other one.” And we still, we’re not coming up anywhere—“Okay, we’ll report every third one.” I said, “Why don’t they go back and start with a lower number instead of this.” The idea is that the killings would catch up with the reports of kills.

Never got an answer to why, except I got a call from Scowcroft saying the President wants everyone to come in and talk this thing through. The unfortunate part about it was that it included John Sununu, who was upset because people in Congress, who had been getting the briefings, which they were required to do, had recognized that there was a problem here and were asking questions about whether we were really as far along as we should be. He wanted to know who was doing the leaking. Well, there wasn’t any leaking, the reports were authorized and mandated reports and they were being given officially and there wasn’t any leaking. But he was jumping all over General Armstrong. He was a general officer, he had no political axe to grind at all. It made for a very starchy session.

I think Colin Powell understood what the problem was. Cheney was there. He didn’t have much to say except it was pretty apparent they didn’t like us being too much into the military part of this thing. That was their call. They’re in the military now and so on. I tried to make it clear, we weren’t trying to make any call. We were trying to point out that our intelligence did not support the factual conclusion. They could pull the switch any time; we were not judging whether he had a lot of weak troops on the front lines and a lot of other things to have reason to think there’d be a roll out. But if your decision is based on a 50 percent degrading, we can’t support what you found.

Anyway, they went back and they made a decision based on all the other factors, which is fine. They were ready to go notwithstanding this problem. Then the rest is history. The roll-up came around the horn, hail Mary, and afterwards they ran and did an inspection in the field and couldn’t find any SCUD launchers. None. They were saying 200. None.

Knott: They were saying they’d knocked out 200 and they never found any?

Webster: None. Similarly, the Republican Guard was protected. We were reporting all of that. They pulled them way back, up north, to try to hold on to as much of their equipment as they could. There were other things going on. I’m jumping around, I didn’t have the chronology in front of me and I hadn’t thought about this sufficiently.
I was concerned about some of the weird ideas that Saddam came up with, firing the trenches with oil, the oil fires and all the other things. But the one that grabbed me the most was we could see ships loaded with fuel staged—I’d have to have the maps in front of me now—but I’d been on tankers in World War II and in the Korean War and I know about momentum. And I knew that if those things got loose, you couldn’t just stop them, you couldn’t disable them. As long as they had enough momentum to get where they were going to go—and I mean distances. Jubayl was just down the road from south of where they were and it seemed to me that what he was getting ready to do was to fire up those tankers and send them down into the oil—and the water works. They could have destroyed the water system that came out of that area.

We talked at length to Colin Powell, who was focused on other more military types of things. But we were looking at all these strange things. Saddam put up nets to catch helicopters. He was sort of fighting the Iran-Iraq war, I think in a way, over again. But we were being tasked to do those things. We were being tasked to gauge what was happening in other countries. What were they doing? Were they helping, were they hurting? What kinds of support? We had to watch the Soviet Union very carefully because they were not in favor of this war and we wanted to be sure the embargo was effective.

Back to the embargo now. The sanctions had been in place for some time before the decision to attack occurred. Many in Congress felt that sanctions should be allowed to work, give them another six months, whatever it takes, and see if that won’t cause Saddam to leave Kuwait. There was a big movement in that and some very wise people were on that side of the equation, Sam Nunn being one of them. At the last moment of the Desert Shield period, Les Aspin asked for our views, because we’d given them earlier. But he wanted our views now as to whether sanctions were likely to cause a behavioral change and the withdrawal from Kuwait. We analyzed the sanctions, we judged that they had been very effective in keeping him from getting stronger, but not in any sense from his ability or his resolve to go ahead with what he was doing.

I made reference to the fact that his air force was about the only thing that actually experienced any degrading. When you’re not worried about the other people coming at you, you’re just sitting there on the ground, you’re not falling apart, the sanctions are not doing anything to you in that sense. But they were finding trouble getting mechanics and others to help with the airplanes, and some other parts of the maintenance programs had fallen down. Then we said, but the air force has never been a major part of his military strategy in any event and therefore that factor would not change our view. Sam, who was a good friend and I have a lot of respect for him, he was saying, “I think we better have him come up here and tell us about this.”

So they no sooner started this than we launched the air attack. The first thing Saddam Hussein did was take his airplanes and put them in Iran and some over in Jordan. Never got them back from Iran after that, they were appropriated. And Sam said, “I don’t want to go on—that’s no longer an issue here.” We dropped it. But we had all these different people with different ideas about what kinds of solutions would work, and there were those who really said let’s give sanctions a chance. Our argument was that when you give them a six-month reprieve, you don’t put any more pressure on them then they’re under at the beginning, because they’re not hurting.
So we were proved right in that assessment and nobody argued about it after that. The land attack went very fast, got up to the point that Saddam started turning his troops around and started out. There had been a lot of damage done to his main forces, his Republican Guard, but they were still out of the loop. They hadn’t closed the gate on them, locked them in, which had been part of the original plan. I think Schwarzkopf was trying to be a good soldier, but he had anticipated they’d have more time to work on those troops. But a political decision, partly military decision, we were not involved in that decision or even asked about it. I was in New York. They decided that 100 hours was a nice time to close it off.

The President was legitimately worried about the appearance of piling on if we started bombing troops who were retreating, and what it might do to the alliance. There had been a lot of concern about the alliance. Anyway, they made the decision to stop and the rest is history. It is still being debated about whether we should have gone to Baghdad, we should not have gone to Baghdad, but maybe if we had bombed for another 12 hours or more, we might have weakened his troops substantially. That’s 20/20 hindsight. But that was a purely political decision not made with—when I say political, I mean it was a policy judgment to stop in light of our relations with our allies and how far we’d gotten and what our authorities were. Our authorities were not to go to Baghdad, our authorities were to get them out of Kuwait.

I can back up just a little bit more. In between, we haven’t talked too much about the SCUDs. They began throwing SCUDs at Riyadh and at Tel Aviv. They had extended the Russian SCUDs in order to get the extra length, that they bought from the Russians. But with that they lost a lot of their accuracy. I mean they could aim in the general direction, but that’s about as far as it went. Even more, the nature of the these longer beasts was that they would go in an arc. We had the Patriots, about all we had to deal with this. They weren’t designed for this kind of air defense. Anyway, but as they went up, they hit the tail of the Patriot, causing the payload to drop and generally explode, instead of exploding it in the air. And thousands of Israeli apartments were destroyed and the big challenge was to keep them from retaliating.

Knott: Right.

Webster: Their whole policy, central to Israel’s defense policy, was if you hurt us we will hurt you. We will retaliate for every act of terrorism, every act of war, and so on. That had been a successful strategy and we had concluded—we being our government—concluded that that would have been very bad on our coalition and we wanted them to stay out of the conflict. In turn we provided them with the Patriots and people to man them and so forth. And we considered that one of our great victories. It made us very comfortable to turn on TV and see Patriots going up and see the thing exploding. But the real truth is that they did only half the job, that there was a great deal of destruction on the ground below. A lot of credit goes to those who were able diplomatically to persuade the Israelis to stay to their original game plan and not retaliate, not come back. But it was very hard for them because there was a lot of destruction taking place over there.

Selverstone: Were we providing Israel with any information as to launch schedules—
Webster: We were trying to. I had, it was kind of funny, what I was telling people at home. I had the usual hot lines to all the places, but I would pick up the phone, I’d get a call saying, “SCUD launched two minutes ago in the direction of Riyadh.” I’d call Scowcroft and I’d just deliver the message. Then I’d say, “Watch CNN,” because we had no idea where it was going to land. I don’t know all the things we may have done for Israel other than to try to provide that level of defense. If we had time or figured something out we’d do it differently, because there are other things that are more effective than Patriots. We had the Patriots, we put them in play and we stood firm, and they absorbed the punishment on the ground. And it did look like we were neutralizing the impact of those SCUDs. Crazy kind of war in many, many respects, unusual kind of activity taking place.

Now what have I missed in discussion? I think the President, after the war, made one of the really great statements about a new world order, that really I found inspiring. But what happened to it? It just went away. And you had an Arab victory, which was always what we said was what Saddam Hussein wanted. You take a lot of punishment and then you’re still standing, that’s an Arab victory. He looks around and Margaret Thatcher gets defeated and George Bush gets defeated and we see all of this sort of *denouement* that doesn’t add up to what was a prompt and resounding response to a serious act of aggression in that part of the world. And now we’re wrestling with people over there who for one reason or another probably, because of our close association with Israel is an important factor, but we’re not really the heroes over there right now. And we have a very serious problem in public diplomacy and we have a long way to go before we’ve finished our work over there.

But anyway, I was proud to be associated with it. I think that the people pulled together, the country pulled together. We had pretty good tactical intelligence. We actually had good intelligence, but of a very limited nature, quantitatively, inside the Saudi headquarters camp. We were getting important information at great risk to those who were supplying it. All kinds of little adventures taking place. The Poles, who had been one of our most energetic competitors in the Cold War, rescued some of our people in Baghdad and got them out, identifying them as drunken Poles. They weren’t allowed to speak, but they got them across the border from Baghdad, the Poles did. They became our new-found friends. When I was the first Director of Central Intelligence to go behind the Iron Curtain, here was a whole new group that had given us so much trouble, the Hughes Aircraft penetration, all these things that they were doing over here to us, suddenly they were on our side. But they had helped us in a material way.

That part of the world scene was changing. The President enjoyed an enormous popularity and justifiably so, and then we went into the elections.

Selverstone: In the wake of the war did you start to focus on other issues? I know at one point there was a topic of gathering economic intelligence, or intelligence on economic activity in Europe and elsewhere. Perhaps this is later—to support American business?

Webster: I left in September 1991, so it is right after the Gulf War is over. I said I’d stay until Labor Day. In May I announced my intention to retire and then I stayed on while the Gates confirmation went on and on. I left on August 31 or September 1, 1991, so some of those things came up later.
I had always been a supporter of focused intelligence collection as a part of our arsenal. There were some countries that were engaged in technology transfer activities, and I believe that the best way to combat that was to focus hard on these. Also, I felt that in the great scheme of things, wars usually start because somebody has something and the other guy doesn’t. Identifying shortages as well as surpluses around the world in a more sophisticated way—I’m being very shorthanded in talking about it—would be very useful intelligence. Whether you look at the dispute with Kuwait or any range of a host of other things, you usually find economic motivations at play.

We had already developed, through our intelligence, ways of utilizing our space imagery and other things to be helpful to neighbors about their own places that they didn’t know about and building up relationships that were useful. There were still countries in the world that, as I say, engaged in technology transfer. There were others that were going to make moves that we thought would be useful as far as assessing where they were going or what they were going to do, that I thought we needed to pursue.

On the other hand, I never felt there was any future in trying to steal things in order to give them to our private sector. Just to be on the safe side, I commissioned a study by Randy Fort, who was head of the intelligence sector at the Treasury Department. He and his group wrestled with it, because we said, who would decide who gets it? Who would we give it to? How would we decide between Ford and General Motors? What would we do? This never bothered the French. The French have been active in this for years. Americans were experiencing black bag jobs on their briefcases and hotels when they go out to dinner. I can tell you story after story about it, they weren’t even shy about it. We’d go to the services and say, this has got to stop. We talked to [Jacques] Chirac, we talked to [François] Mitterand. Mitterand would say, “Oh, I didn’t think they were clever enough to do that.” Then it would stop for a while, and then it would start again.

We were the victims in that sense. But I thought that on the other side of the coin, understanding how disputes arise through economic pressures would be very, very useful. Randy Fort incidentally wrote a report, “It’s too hard, there is no way.” And so in my discussions with the administration, I’d point out different things, we’d have these discussions. I said, “We certainly don’t believe we’re the ones to make those judgments. If something falls out of the sky, as it does from time to time, we can make it available. But we do not believe it is our function, our proper role, or even our best skill to pass it along to the private sector as is done in France and other countries that engage in that kind of stuff.” I still think economic intelligence needs to be looked at more carefully and I don’t think that’s quite the same thing as economic espionage, although some espionage is probably involved in it. But it’s not to steal as much as it is to understand where other people are in their scheme of things.

We had one interesting experience, I was at the FBI and there was a famous former head of the French DST [Direction de la Surveillance du Territoire], named Marcel Chalet. He had been a friend of George Bush’s back in their time, at whatever, and George was Vice President and he came to see him. I got a message that the Vice President wanted me over at the Observatory, and with Casey. So Casey and I met with him. They had recruited a KGB general in the directorate which had to do with technology transfer. This fellow was fed up with the Soviet system and
wanted to—I don’t know about the compensation, but he wanted to undermine it if he could. They had a regular budget for stealing high technology. “This is what we need.”

Well, that was important to us because what they needed meant they didn’t have, and that would give us a way of evaluating where we were in relation to where they were. But they also kept book on the value of what was stolen over what it would have cost them to produce themselves. It was big corporate business to the extent they had corporate business over there. So they handed him off to us to work because they were not involved. They didn’t have the secrets that the Russians were trying to steal.

We worked that for two or three years. I kept trying to get this fellow to slow down, he was shoveling it out the door, just shoveling it out there. You’re going to get yourself caught and killed; it didn’t seem to bother him. He finally did get caught and killed, but it was one of those interesting ways in which you get a little bit of cooperation from the French, who were doing similar things themselves, but giving it to us and giving us the opportunity to take advantage of this. We were able to put in a lot of countermeasures and zero in on some of the satellite or surrogate operatives who were operating around the country. It was kind of a good outcome. That was a contribution that we’d have to say if it weren’t for George Bush, we probably wouldn’t have it. It’s because of what he’d done before and how he knew how to handle it. Casey and I got along fine with it. It was a nice role as long as it lasted.

Knott: He wasn’t one of the people that Aldrich Ames—

Webster: No, no. Let me be sure of my thinking, I don’t think so. I don’t think Aldrich Ames knew about him.

Selverstone: Did [Robert] Hanssen?

Webster: Hanssen I would have thought there might have been, but this was not one of those. He just got himself caught. He thought he was bulletproof or maybe he was fatalistic and wanted to have a good time doing it, I don’t know.

Selverstone: How soon after you took over as DCI did you start to hear talk about moles?

Webster: Moles?

Selverstone: Yes.

Webster: I don’t remember thinking about moles. I suppose it’s one and the same thing, but in the conversation it was more, “What are we doing about counterintelligence? What are we doing about protecting ourselves from moles?” Not how many moles have we got in the place, if we have any in the place. There had been some efforts—Wu-tai [“Larry”] Chin was one in Alexandria, I think, that they caught. I’d spent a lot of time in the Bureau because that effort was to see who they were trying—we developed something called a matrix system to watch. We didn’t think we could watch all U.S. citizens, but we could watch them and see who they had contact with. We watched their embassies and we scrutinized who went in, who went out, any
other contacts that these people on the loose, within the 25-mile range would be. That was pretty successful I think. It was a shield as well as a sword. So I was very conscious of this and felt that we were not that alert, although at the Agency we believed in need-to-know and all those other articles of faith, but I formed the counterintelligence center at CIA.

I don’t remember if I mentioned in our discussions, I think the Bureau dragged its feet a little bit about participating. We had all the other members of the community, and we had some participation by the Bureau in doing that. I asked that our polygraph system, which was years behind—the problem with the FBI is they didn’t polygraph at all. The problem with CIA is they had so much polygraphing that they fell behind in their take ability, their ability to stay up with the reexaminations. So I worked hard through the counterintelligence center to improve on all the normal steps.

We had a bad problem with treatment of defectors. The FBI was much better at utilizing, getting along with serious defectors who had switched over. For a lot of reasons that’s a hard shift and too many people at CIA thought of working with defectors as kind of a second-class job, it wasn’t particularly career enhancing. They didn’t like it, they didn’t like dealing with somebody who had been trying to get our country, and they tended to be more like guards than they were developing and getting close, getting more cooperation and help.

So after [Vitaly] Yurchenko re-defected, we took a serious look and I formed a committee headed by Dick Helms to look at what we were doing and to see whether or not we could improve the ways in which we were doing it. I reached up to pick an officer up in Canada, bring him down, put him in place, got more foreign language-speaking people to be participants in the program. Tried to get away from the guard mentality and have people they could talk to in there. As far as I know, that was a successful change in base from it. But it was one of our weaknesses which meant, like many others, we’d be less apt to recognize moles because we weren’t getting the help.

It’s funny, I did this study—if you don’t have a copy of it, maybe I can get it to you—on the internal security procedures at the FBI. I asked for a commission to back me up because I was there during part of that time, I didn’t want the same old Webster, what would you expect from Webster. Had Bill Cohen and Carla Hills and Tom Foley, Griffin Bell and Clifford Alexander—all served with me on the commission. It came out in March of this year. I have it, call me if you want a copy of it, to identify weaknesses in the procedures during that period. But you still kept coming back to the fact that something somebody said to me about the Agency one time, “It takes a spy to catch a spy.” I thought, That’s a cop out. We can improve our counterintelligence procedures, we can do the things that will trip up, more readily identify somebody. FBI had no polygraphs during that period, obviously leaving a vulnerability there. You find out late after a lot of damage has been done, things of that kind.

But the fact of the matter is, in almost every case in which we have caught one of our own acting as a spy, it’s because we had successfully recruited someone on the other side who knew enough—not always the whole story—but knew enough to alert us and point us in a direction. So that was part of our conclusion. We really had to keep our recruitment, we had to keep that going as well as doing more serious examination of our own people. “Trust but verify” became a
meaningful term in both agencies. And people understand that. They don’t understand it when they’re treated as if they’re under suspicion, but they do understand it if we say you have been trusted with much and you have to give up some of your privacy in order to sustain that trust.

**Knott:** I think we’re approaching the end. I don’t know if you have any final thoughts or reflections on either President Reagan or President Bush or your own career as FBI Director or DCI. We’ve already covered a lot of ground.

**Webster:** Now that I’m all worn out you give me the opportunity—

**Knott:** This is your chance to be poetic.

**Webster:** I had a very great deal of respect for both President Bush and President Reagan, for different reasons. I’ve talked about most of those. They had different kinds of qualities. Both of them had a high level of integrity and were straight shooters and were leaders. Both supported the intelligence and law enforcement communities and made that very clear. They enjoyed coming out to the different facilities.

I had a funny experience with President Reagan when I made him an honorary special agent of the FBI in connection with our various—I think it was our 75th anniversary period. We were doing a lot of things. Over the years, until more recently, the only honorary special agents were former Presidents. Not every one, but former Presidents and former Attorneys General, also not every one. I made Omar Bradley a special agent. We got to be very good friends, I was one of his pallbearers when he died, but he loved the FBI and all it stood for.

But these Presidents did too. We had this ceremony out in the courtyard, which if you’ve not seen the FBI—you probably can’t see the courtyard now because they closed it down for security reasons—but it’s an internal courtyard. We had the Marine band and we had all the trappings. But the big event of course was President Reagan. The honorary recipients of the FBI get a walnut stand. Embedded in it is a beautiful obelisk, kind of an obelisk in a case. The Secret Service had left word for me that they did not want him to carry it off the platform. I think they were afraid he would trip or something would distract him, he’d miss a step or something like that. Anyway, that was their instructions to me.

So after we’d had all the applause and everything, the excitement and so forth and he was getting ready to leave, I went up to take the thing. And he looked at me like, what do you want? So I said, “The Secret Service says you shouldn’t take that off the platform.” And with that he grabbed it like a football, and the crowd roared. They caught the whole picture. They didn’t hear what I said, but they caught the whole picture and they loved it, because that showed he was really pleased to have it and they weren’t going to take it from him. So he left with his football intact.

He was quite a guy. I went to see him, he invited me to come out. I saw him twice after his illness—I’d seen him at the Nancy Reagan Tennis Tournaments that she continued to do for drugs—“Just Say No”—out in Los Angeles. Once he invited me to come out to his house in Beverly Hills. He had had a horseback fall, do you remember that? And half his hair had been
shaved off and the other was sort of going straight up, looked like a Mohican, half a Mohican. We had a great time out there. He showed me all around the house and was in very good spirits.

Then when Lynda and I were married he wanted to meet her, so I took her around to his office in Century City. By that time things were starting to set in. He had lost his hearing aid in the swimming pool and that was confusing and distracting to him because he couldn’t really hear. So he solved it by standing up and not sitting down and taking Lynda through all the pictures on the wall with me standing there. She said, “I don’t understand this. He’s standing with his former Director of Central Intelligence and explaining that that’s Mrs. Thatcher in the picture.” I said, “He’s explaining that to you, not to me.” He seemed to be in good spirits but slowly drifting away. Then friends told me that their visits to him were very sad.

George Shultz went to see him and he got up and he heard him outside talking to Secret Service saying, “Now who is that man in there? I know he’s very important, but I don’t know his name.” I don’t think that Shultz went back after that. He was amazing that he was able to do so much with that kind of a thing coming his way and still do it. I shouldn’t comment on what I observed or didn’t observe, but I don’t know any of his decisions that were affected by it. We were lucky to have him when we had him. People were willing to invest money, they were willing to have a strong national defense. We won the Cold War because we were strong, and that was because he had no hesitancy in advocating this at a time when people argued, “We don’t have the money,” and “Do we want to do it,” and so forth.

George Bush was a remarkable public servant, great fun to be with. They both had a cute sense of humor. George Bush had a cute way of kidding people without being sharp. Always a great imitator. He just did it instinctively. His timing, we were at the baseball game with Queen Elizabeth, at the Orioles game. She’d not been to a baseball game before. For reasons we didn’t plan on, we had dinner before there. Lynda and I went to get some food and they came and closed the door behind us and the Royal Family was in there with us and two or three other people. I don’t think we were supposed to be there, but we weren’t supposed to get out either, so we had this lovely conversation and I realized that she didn’t know much about baseball.

So at the next night at the party she hosted, she also talked about horses but not baseball. But the next morning the President was sitting in a box with her and we were in a box with Eli Jacobs, I guess, who owned the Orioles, and I said, “Well how did she”—she threw in the baseball—I said, “How did she enjoy the game?” He said, “I don’t think she really—she enjoyed the evening, she enjoyed being out, I don’t think she really understood all that was going on.” She watched most of it on the TelePrompTer. He said that at one point Prince Philip was in the way and then she said, “Philip, Philip, you’re blocking my view.” [imitating her voice] He could do that with almost anybody. He loved the animals. He would play with the puppies. Great father. Just about everything you’d want in the person of a President. I don’t know whether he’s happy or sad that he didn’t do that second term, but he can look back on that one term with a lot of satisfaction. He engendered enormous personal loyalty.

A few of the people perhaps didn’t serve him as well as they should have, got interested in the perks or personal advancement, but most of them were very decent, loyal people. When you think about it, I don’t remember very many scandals that led to department heads going to jail or
resignations being forced or things of that kind. People pretty much did their jobs. I think that says a lot about the President.

Selverstone: Just before we break, if you could say just a word or two about your own decision to resign, the kinds of issues that were swirling around your head.

Webster: There would be issues periodically, come out of nowhere really. I tried not to figure out where they were coming from or why. I suppose I still have ideas, but my view was I served at the pleasure of the President. If the President wanted me to stay, I would stay; if the President wanted me to leave, I would leave. No explanation needed.

But what was coming through to me after the war was that there was going to be a new stage of requirements. We were going to be in the midst of significant shrink down, reduction in effort. The war is over, the threats are gone, even if they weren’t gone. I didn’t think that my skills particularly lent themselves to that kind of “Mack the Knife” approach, or was something that I was particularly looking for, nor was I particularly interested in major restructuring. I had tried to bring some level of efficiency and integrity in addition to what was already there and improve morale and improve public understanding of the need for intelligence. I felt the next round was going to be not nearly as much about proving our skills as it was how we were going to get along with less and where we were going to go. So I talked to Brent Scowcroft and I said, “Do you think the President would like to have a change? Because I’m certainly not trying to stay any longer than I should or any longer than I’m needed.”

He said, “No, he doesn’t want that. I don’t think he wants that. I know he doesn’t want that.” So I think that same night I went over to visit with the President, and talked about—we’d been doing some long-range planning and I gave him the where we were at that moment in time. Then I talked to him, I said I would like to talk about my tenure. I said, “I’ve been here longer than all but four of the directors, longer than I expected to be. I just wonder if maybe you wouldn’t be interested in making a change.” We talked along and the President didn’t urge me to leave, but he said he recognized that people were asking questions about who ought to be Director of Central Intelligence, or where it should be going. So it was a kind of a, “maybe this is a good time to go.” That’s kind of the way we worked around it. And I said, “Fine, whenever you want, you’re ready, that’s fine with me.” I think he wanted to talk with some other people before I did anything.

But then he did a very unusual thing in the sense that he went with me into the press room to make the announcement. He made the announcement himself, said some very generous things. I joked about the thyroid, said he really had a better thyroid than anybody around here. We had a good time about it. I had planned to leave when my successor was confirmed and that became more and more long-range. Bob was getting through it but it was kind of rough; they were dragging up the same old things. They asked if I would stay a little longer. I was announced in May. I said I could stay till Labor Day. I had this idea from my earlier days in private practice that come Labor Day, lawyers should be at their desk because all the corporate folks, business folks are coming back with all the ideas they generated during the summer and they want to put them right into play as soon as they get home.
I don’t know whether it was a good idea or not, but it made a lot of sense. So I called up the President. I was on my way back from Michigan. I called up the President and requested permission to leave the ship on Labor Day. We had a great talk. Flew home and—I thought my coach might turn into a pumpkin if I left any later than that. They drove me to the house and the detail that had been there—the wartime detail, the security, they didn’t live there but they did shifts—they all came out and told me goodbye. Unlike a lot of experiences I’ve had since, that was my last day, it was the end of security. I became Mr. John Q. Citizen. I had had a very good experience. The President had been gracious, had had a goodbye thing for me, presented me with the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the National Security Medal, always great with my kids.

That was the other thing. He always had time for your little ones. I took my grandson and my daughter by when he was about that big. She was on her way to the airport. Brought the dogs in and played. He’d always find five or ten minutes to be fully focused on family. And we’ve had a warm and pleasant relationship ever since. Talked to him on the phone periodically or dropped him a note. He always answers the letters or cards. So in a way it was a hard thing to go. I was really ready. I’d been ready to leave government, that was 14 years, a long stretch. I’d been ready whenever, time to go. But to answer your question, I wasn’t looking forward to what I thought the next round would involve.

I thought when the President decided on Bob Gates that that was a good choice because he had done those reviews time and time again and really knew. Unfortunately only got a year to work on it, but I thought he was the right kind of person to take that on and that wasn’t why I went to the CIA. If he had said, “You’re the only game in town,” I’d have stayed, but I wasn’t the only game in town. So I don’t know—does that answer your question?

We had some great times. He took me to Kennebunkport the year my wife, my first wife, passed away, which I thought was a very, very thoughtful thing to do. For over the Fourth of July. Had a great time up there. Anyway, I could say the same good things about Barbara. I think I’m more of a fan of Nancy Reagan’s than some people are. With me, I found she was always just right, friendly and fun. She had more involvement inside the White House than maybe she did in other places. But Barbara I’d known forever and felt very much like part of the family and still do. When I get to Houston I go by and see him, which isn’t often. I was with him at the Bohemian Grove briefly this summer and he has had me come down to the Bush Center to talk to the students there on intelligence issues. I was there on one on leadership once, actually. I was there for the opening of the library and participated in a big forum on—it was the anniversary of something, must have been the end of the Cold War. We had a whole group of us were down from all over, including Prime Minister, the one that followed Thatcher.

**Knott:** John Major.

**Webster:** Yes, John Major. And other people. He had some guys who—anyway, I don’t know. I keep thinking of little things to talk about but not in any logical sense of order.

For me it was a remarkable time to be in public service. In those last four and a half years that I was at CIA, the whole world changed. Predecessors of mine had been listening for hiccups, as we talked about before, here suddenly we had the dissolution of the Soviet empire, the end of the
Soviet hegemony in that part of the world. We dealt with Panama and the Philippines and the Gulf War. It was quite a time. Things were moving. I felt privileged to have been a part of it.

**Knott:** We want to thank you very much because the whole purpose of these interviews is to leave a record for future generations, to give them a better understanding of the Reagan and Bush years and you’ve made a tremendous contribution in that regard.

**Webster:** Thank you, it’s been a privilege. I’m having a good time now. I can’t seem to stay off a commission. I took a look at the list the other day, I’d forgotten how many things. But it’s nice, I suppose, for old buffaloes like myself, it’s nice that people think we have something to contribute to the resolution of new problems. And if we can do it as private citizens and go back to our jobs when the work is done and the contributions are made.

**Selverstone:** It’s that kind of perspective that you bring, having been in these kinds of positions previously.

**Webster:** Well, when people say I’m the only person who has ever been both the FBI director and the CIA director and for that many years, I say, “Yes, the proof of the pudding is whether they ever have another one or not.” [laughter]

**Knott:** Thank you very much again.

**Webster:** You bet, it’s nice to be with both of you, and thank you, Hannah.