

Timothy Naftali

Hello, I'm Timothy Naftali. I'm Director of the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum. I'm here today with Jerry Schilling who is going to participate in the Richard Nixon Oral History Program. Jerry, I'm delighted that you could be with us today.

Jerry Schilling

Thank you, Tim. This is certainly a big honor for me, and I know my friend would be very happy that this was going on. He was very, very, very proud to have met President Nixon, and they had a very, very mutual respect, so I'm glad to be here, Tim.

Timothy Naftali

Well let me start by asking about your friend. When and how did you meet Elvis Presley?

Jerry Schilling

Well, you know, it was kind of the birth of rock 'n roll, if you will, in 1954. I was a poor, kind of orphaned kid. My mother had died when I was a year old. I was 12 years old, and I'd lived with different families as a child, and I was at my father's. And I went to the local playground, and there were five older guys trying to get up a football game. This is how unpopular -- Elvis couldn't get six people to play football with him in '54. And that was the week that he recorded his first record, which I had listened to two nights before. And the Sunday afternoon I go to the playground, and one of my brother's older friends says, "Jerry, you want to play with us?" And I said, "Sure." I go into the huddle, and I went, "Ooh, that's the guy I heard on the radio." I just -- Elvis was just different, and he was 19 years old. He had recorded the record that week, and I met him 7/11/54, July 11th, 1954.

Timothy Naftali

So local DJs were already playing the record?

Jerry Schilling

One, a guy named Dewey Phillips, who was this crazy DJ. He played mostly rhythm and blues records. He was a white guy, the first that we knew of that played black music at the time. And that was so unusual when he played Elvis because he said, "A boy from Humes High School," two blocks from me. That's where my mother went to school and all my relatives. So I knew, "Wow, this is a white boy on this show." That night the phone lines lit up. The next night they played it. Dewey had Elvis come on the show, do an interview. When Elvis was getting ready to do the interview, Dewey had already done it. He didn't tell him the mic was on. And it went like wildfire. Within two weeks you couldn't get on the football field.

Timothy Naftali

You mention in your memoir that Elvis had a presence, even at 19 years old.

Jerry Schilling

You know, Tim, over the years, working with Elvis and having a management firm myself and managing the Beach Boys and different ones, I've met a lot of people. And I think artists, as they have hit records or they become movie stars and they start getting this aura -- when Elvis didn't have a hit record in Memphis, Tennessee, and he was 19 years old, when I saw him, he reminded me of James Dean and early Brando. And I went, "Oh, my God." I mean I wanted to be like him. He'd laugh if he heard me say this today, because, you know, we became peers over the years as friends, but he definitely had something special. And it wasn't wild clothes back then. Just he had this look; it was amazing.

Timothy Naftali

Was it just intense self-confidence? Did you get a sense that he was very confident about himself and his talents?

Jerry Schilling

There was a part of self-confidence and a part of vulnerability, which made a beautiful combination. He was this guy that you thought had everything, but then he kind of had this little opening that you could get into him as well, and --

Timothy Naftali

Tell us about -- I mean, give us some examples of the -- sort of that opening.

Jerry Schilling

Well, you know, first of all, I was intimidated at 12 years old playing with 18- and 19-year-old players. And I was trying to be, you know, tough, and I was a good little football player. So, and you know, I was going to be one of the tough guys. I had to be tougher. But every once in a while, you know, if I was having a rough time, I'd get a little wink, a little smile from Elvis, who, you know, his dream -- he didn't make it in high school football. So when the record started taking off, he started using it for all of his childhood dreams. He had his own football team. When he couldn't get into the amusement park, we would rent the amusement park all night. When he didn't have enough money for the movies, now he rented the movies until daybreak after they closed. So playing football was this. And he had a innate sense about human beings where he knew just when to give you that little maybe -- he could give you a little smile, and man, you'd feel like a million dollars.

Timothy Naftali

Was he shy?

Jerry Schilling

I think he was very shy until he walked on stage. You know, I never will forget seeing the first television appearance with him. It was Tommy Dorsey Show, which was a summer replacement for the

Jackie Gleason Show. And from when he walked out of the curtains to the microphone, that was worth paying for the performance right there. He walked out like this wild animal. I mean, I'd never seen anything like this before, you know? And got the microphone, and it was like -- I mean it was electrifying, just the walk up to the microphone. And he knew everything he was doing.

You know, Elvis was very eclectic. He could pick up little things from everybody, not just movie stars. He would do that, too, or a recording artist. He'd pick up something from the guy that was, you know, over here working, painting. He'd see a certain thing. He really had a way of taking on things, and then they became Elvis. And you would've thought, "Man, Elvis just got that." There's a funny story that my brother likes to tell. But the first time I went up to Graceland, a few months after Elvis bought Graceland, his father came down to the gate. And he was walking down to the gate, Vernon Presley. And I went home and I told my brother, I said, "You know," I said, "everybody's trying to act like Elvis now. His father's even trying to walk like him." And my brother said, "Did you ever think that maybe Elvis might have gotten that walk from his father?" I never did think that, but obviously, that's what it was, so.

Timothy Naftali

So he had the skill of a good actor?

Jerry Schilling

Yes, absolutely, and I think that's where he was going. I get a lot of questions about, "If Elvis were alive today, what do you think he would be doing?" The last couple of years of his life, he and I were co-executive producing a karate documentary. We had a team that already went to London, France. I had offices on Sunset and Vine. And I used to, when I first went to work for him I used to sit in the screening rooms with him when he would look at the dailies. And that's how I got interested in film editing, because Elvis had a timing, you know, more so than the people who worked on his films.

Timothy Naftali

He hated his own films, though.

Jerry Schilling

Most -- a lot of them. I deal with that very extensively in the book, because the log line in my book, if you will, is that we lost Elvis way too early due to creative disappointments. And I show various examples, whether it's when Elvis, myself, another of the guys, Jo Esposito and Barbara Streisand and John Peters met in a walk-in closet in Vegas. And she offered him "A Star is Born," and he was so excited. You know, he was tired of playing the pretty boy.

Timothy Naftali

You mean, instead of Kris Kristofferson?

Jerry Schilling

Yeah, before Kris was ever considered. Barbara's idea from day one was Elvis Presley in this, and Elvis loved it. He wanted it.

Timothy Naftali

Ah.

Jerry Schilling

You know, he felt that this could've been his Academy Award winning performance. Just like when Sinatra was not happy with what he was doing, and, what's it, "From Here to Eternity." He got this not star billing, but second star billing, and it turned his career around. Elvis knew these things, and I have in my book a little audio section of Elvis in his own voice talking about Hollywood never got who he was. He said, "I don't think anybody was trying to hurt me, but they really never understood me." And I have a lot of examples. And he did have some good films. "King Creole" is a perfect example. It was written by Harold Robbins, a book called "A Stone for Danny Fisher." And it was about a fighter, and it was being prepped for James Dean. James Dean had the unfortunate car accident, and Hal Wallis went to Michael Curtiz, who had directed Bogart and all these people --

Timothy Naftali

Hal Wallis is a famous Hollywood producer.

Jerry Schilling

Oh, yeah.

Timothy Naftali

He did, I think, some of the early comedies of the -- I mean, he was an older man by then.

Jerry Schilling

Yes, yes, Hal Wallis was a giant. He also did "Becket" with Richard Burton. I never will forget, one day, Elvis -- he read in the trade papers an interview from Mr. Wallis saying, "You know, I finance a lot of these huge productions off the money I make from Elvis Presley movies." So Elvis walked up to him and said, "Mr. Wallis, when do I get my 'Becket'?" which was a great line.

Timothy Naftali

He said that? Great.

Jerry Schilling

He said it to Hal Wallis, oh yeah. When Hal Wallis went to Michael Curtiz on "King Creole," Michael Curtiz said, "There is no way I'm going to have an Elvis Presley in one of my movies." And Mr. Wallis

said, "I just want you to meet him." He met him. Got the part. Curtiz fell in love with Elvis, and at the end of the movie, here's how bright Elvis was: It was his fourth movie, and he went up and he said, "Mr. Curtiz, thank you. Now I know what a director is."

Timothy Naftali

Wow, I think Hal Wallis did the Laurel and Hardy film.

Jerry Schilling

He did those and he also did, what was the Mickey Rooney real famous one? Oh, God --

Timothy Naftali

Well, you mean the early -- the Andy, those -- with Judy Garland.

Jerry Schilling

Right, and there's one that got an Academy Award. I'm trying to think of the name. It was --

Timothy Naftali

Well, that's where the boys -- "Boys Town."

Jerry Schilling

That's it: "Boys Town."

Timothy Naftali

"Boys Town."

Jerry Schilling

Exactly.

Timothy Naftali

That's where he got --

Jerry Schilling

That was Hal Wallis as well.

Timothy Naftali

I think Bing Crosby. Who is the plays -- ? It was somebody very -- no, it's someone very famous, but -
- in any case, so. Let me ask you about the karate films, since that's sort of an interest of mine. Did you
meet Bruce Lee?

Jerry Schilling

You know, ironically, I did meet Bruce Lee. As you know, when we had the meeting back in
Washington that we'll talk about --

Timothy Naftali

We'll talk about, certainly.

Jerry Schilling

-- I was at Paramount Studios. I quit working for Elvis to learn film editing. I quit --

Timothy Naftali

What year?

Jerry Schilling

Oh, God.

Timothy Naftali

It was late '60s.

Jerry Schilling

Probably early '70s.

Timothy Naftali

Early '70s.

Jerry Schilling

And Elvis's makeup man, who had done four or five pictures, six pictures with Elvis, a guy named
Mickey [phonetic sp], good guy, tough guy, and makeup guy, and he saw me on the lot. I was taking
some film to a screening, and he said, "Jerry, I'm down on such and such stage. You got to come and
meet Bruce Lee." And I said, "Are you kidding?" So I went down there, and Bruce was in the director's
chair. And that's when all the press came out and the trade papers that day about he was going to have
a TV series and all this stuff. And Mickey said, "Feel his arm." And I said, "I'm not going to do -- "

Bruce said, "Okay, go ahead." It was like this table. I got to meet Bruce Lee. I got to meet a lot of people because of my friend.

Timothy Naftali

Wow. Let's talk a bit about December 1970. So you --

Jerry Schilling

Excuse me.

Timothy Naftali

You go to Paramount. You are -- the sense I had from the book is you're a little out of Elvis's life at that point.

Jerry Schilling

I was. What had happened at that point, I had decided that I really kind of wanted my own career. And I had done Elvis for 10 years from '54, meeting at that football game, until '64. I was in my senior year of college, and I was going to be a history teacher and a football coach. And I was chosen out of the education class to be the one student to practice- teach my last semester. And I get a call from Elvis; I get one of these calls that I couldn't refuse. Now I had dreamed of working for him way back, but after 10 years, you know, I was doing my own thing and I still spent a lot of time with him every time he came home to Memphis. I went to work for him, and it was great. And, you know, but at a point, I still felt there was something more I wanted to do, even if it was something that I wanted to do that hopefully I could come back and even incorporate that with Elvis. But at that particular time, if you quit working for Elvis, the relationship was over. That was the group of people, the Memphis mafia if you will, that he trusted. You worked for him. You live with him. You did everything.

So after a long period of time, I actually started at ABC as an apprentice film editor. I would go down - - it was very glamorous. I'd go down in this basement and scrape off the labels of the syndicated films that would come back to ABC. That's what I had to do to get into the union. I did that for a year to get to Paramount, which put you on a feature level. In that period of time, though, a nice thing happened was, about six weeks into it, Elvis doesn't like to be said "no" to. Most powerful people don't. And he calls me, and he said, "Are you doing that editing stuff on the weekend?" And I said, "No." And he said, "I'm on the way to pick you up. We're going to Palm Springs." I was living in Culver City. So I started spending every weekend with him, and then he started going to Vegas. So I would leave the basement on Friday afternoon. I would go to Santa Monica Airport. A Lear jet would pick me up, fly me to Vegas. I stayed in the suite on the 30th floor of the International Hilton Hotel, fly back Monday morning back to Santa Monica Airport; go back to the basement. So we had kind of had this relationship where I wasn't working for him, but I was still around. I was spending weekends in Palm Springs, in Vegas.

Timothy Naftali

All right. So as a setup to what's going to happen, because people will, people notice the belt buckle that he has.

Jerry Schilling

Yes.

Timothy Naftali

Were you there the night that he gave that performance at the International Hotel, which is described as the largest concert they ever had?

Jerry Schilling

That was --

Timothy Naftali

That was '69. That was in 19 --

Jerry Schilling

'69, I was there that weekend. The opening night I was doing my film editing. I flew in Friday night. I think the opening night was either Wednesday or Thursday night, and I think that's when the hotel presented -- well, no. The belt actually came a year or so later, because that belt represents the top attendance record in Las Vegas. And I was there when he got the belt.

Timothy Naftali

You were there when he got the belt?

Jerry Schilling

Yes, yes, and he was very proud of it, obviously. He wore it when he went to meet the President.

Timothy Naftali

Well, he certainly was proud of it.

Jerry Schilling

Yeah.

Timothy Naftali

So, what caused him to go to Vegas? How did he decide to go to Vegas? Because that's sort of a new phase in his career, and it happens in the late '60s, right?

Jerry Schilling

Yeah. Vegas came about -- as we talked about the films, Elvis had one, in the last, I would say, three years, he had one thing in mind: finish his long-term film contracts, and then he didn't want to see another film, especially since he didn't -- he was negotiated out of "A Star is Born." And he was -- you know, Elvis was a bright guy. If Elvis was the type of person who was just a good-looking guy with a good voice, I'd say he had a great career, which he had a great career. It just wasn't used to its fullest potential. And the first thing he wanted to do was go back to live performing. That was always the one thing he could control and do best. And I think the prelude to that was the meeting of Steve Bender, for what is now termed -- it was the Singer Special. Now it's called the '68 Comeback Special.

And again, there was always a creative conflict. Colonel Parker wanted it to be a Christmas show, because it was going to be around that time of year. Nothing wrong with that, but Elvis wanted to go back on the road. And Steve Bender had some ideas of Elvis in black leather and Elvis doing these great songs. And so against all the wishes of the powers that be, the '68 Comeback Special, Elvis came back better than ever. He was -- as he walked out on that stage in 1954, and he was such a wild animal, he was a professional, trained artist now, but he still had the animal in him. And it all showed in the '68 Comeback Special. And that set the stage for him to go back on the road. That, and a recording session back in Memphis, where a new producer came on board for Elvis. And there's always business. You know, I think the biggest part of the story is the creative side versus the business side and what compromises need to be made to have a successful career and also still be an artist that, you know, that you feel good about your art.

And this producer said, "Elvis, I have a stack of hit records over here. And your publishing company has brought -- you own all the publishing on this. What do you want to do?" And he said -- the producer's name was Chips Moman -- he said, "Chips, I want to go on the road. I want hit records." I think there were seven hits out of that one session: "Suspicious Minds," "In the Ghetto," and "Kentucky Rain." So those two things set up -- he was on the air again. He was being played on radio, and that set up the Vegas engagement, which Colonel Parker put together with his Vegas ties. Originally, we went back to the hotel while it was under construction. It was the International Hotel, which is now the Hilton Hotel in Vegas. And Elvis actually was the second act to open it up, though. Colonel Parker had a great idea: "Don't go in there as the first act," which they wanted him to, "'cause there will be too many bugs," you know. Barbara Streisand opened it up, and Elvis followed.

Timothy Naftali

Wow. I want to ask you about "In the Ghetto."

Jerry Schilling

Yes.

Timothy Naftali

In your book, you don't talk much about politics in your book, which is understandable, but you do have this phrase -- you say that, "I was more liberal than Elvis, but I really felt that his inner concerns were expressed in 'In the Ghetto.'"

Jerry Schilling

I think I was outwardly more liberal than Elvis. I think Elvis's heart was extremely liberal, and I think that's one of the reasons he put up with me and my so-called liberal views. I don't know how liberal I am, Tim. I am very human-oriented, and so was Elvis. And I don't think you can talk about the birth of rock 'n roll or about Elvis Presley without talking about where it came from. And you know, just as great people have rough times, as President Nixon did, as Elvis Presley did, you know, you're going to go through those rough times if you're a great person. And he came right out of the chute being criticized, because it was real simple. He was a white boy doing black music. And our whole society down in Memphis where we grew up was based economically on a racial situation, you know? If the black people started mingling with the white people and you started going to the same schools, you know, who's going to pick the cotton, you know?

Timothy Naftali

There wasn't a black person in your high school, right?

Jerry Schilling

No, gosh no, not in our high school. Not in our church. I mean, it was kind of fear of the unknown. And, you know, I remember drinking out of a water fountain when I was six years old and my aunt beating me because it said, "Colored." I had no idea what it said. I got spanked in Moon Lake, Mississippi, because I was playing marble with some kids, and they were kids to me, but to my aunt and uncle who took me down for vacation, they were black kids. So it's hard to picture in the 21st century what things were like back then. And all that being said, you know, my city, Memphis, Tennessee, has really come a long way from there. We have two great mayors that are both black. Black people didn't vote when I grew up. We've made a lot of progress. But Elvis Presley came out of that, and the young people at that time like myself, you know, all the music and stuff is what our parents had. It was the hit parade. It was "How Much is that Doggie in the Window?" And kind of Elvis came along and sang, "Hound Dog." It was a big change. And as far as I'm concerned, the music did more to bridge the gap between people than religion or politics.

Timothy Naftali

Did Elvis ever talk to you about this?

Jerry Schilling

Oh yeah, yeah, but, you know, Elvis's thoughts were very private on it. But let me tell you what he did, things he would do. First of all, Elvis was -- I don't think he had a prejudiced bone in his body. I don't think his father did either. I didn't know his mother that well, because she died pretty early. And you talk to the people who worked with Elvis in films or at Graceland. He gave me the opportunity to be able to live how I wanted in his own house, because he was not prejudiced. I mean, you talk to the girls that worked with him on stage, The Sweet Inspirations, if you want to talk about -- I mean, they would die for this guy. I mean they were very close. There was not a time when he did a show that the first thing he did, he went back, closed the door in their room, and they talked. They talked, they laughed, they prayed together. And, you know, it's important and I'm taking this pretty serious because there is a rumor out there, you know, that Elvis was prejudiced. That's the most unkind thing that could be done

to a person who he was. I mean, he is the guy -- when Martin Luther King was shot in our hometown, and we were doing a movie at MGM and we saw on this monitor TV. And I never will forget a tear rolling down his eyes, and he said to me and always told the truth, he did and could recite the "If I Could Dream" speech. He had two speeches he could do verbatim: General Douglas MacArthur and Martin Luther King. Now, Elvis was a multi-faceted human being, much brighter than the world knew, and he was cool with that. You know, he wasn't trying to say he had a way of connecting -- just kind of like that first football. He had something special, and he was fine with that.

Timothy Naftali

Wow. Those are two very different speeches.

Jerry Schilling

Yeah.

Timothy Naftali

That's why I asked you about "In the Ghetto." I wondered where that came from. It's a great song.

Jerry Schilling

It came out of that session with Chips Moman. It was, you know, and I'll tell you what happened. It's a very good question, Tim. Now I remember the situation. When the song was brought up, you know, Elvis would go in. He never prepared. He liked to go in and listen that night and record whatever he chose. He felt very spontaneous, and he liked to record with all the musicians. And the song was played, and a good friend of ours who was a disc jockey and went to Humes High with all of us, George Kline, said, "You know, Elvis. I don't know. It's a pretty message-y song." But Elvis said, "I know." No decision made. The next night, George went home, and George said, "God, I really felt bad, because it's a great song." And he said, "I went to the studio the next night, and I said" -- George said, "Elvis, I think -- " He said, "Are you kidding? It's the first one we're recording tonight." Elvis loved it. And there were people around Elvis nervous. But he knew it was a true message, and I don't know. I have this great idea. I would like to see, this year, "In the Ghetto" be sampled with a hip-hop rap song.

Timothy Naftali

Oh, but, I was actually -- I was in Brazil, and Sérgio Mendes's stuff has come back because Black Eyed Peas have done it.

Jerry Schilling

I want to do this. And I think -- it's the 30th anniversary this year of Elvis's passing, and I can't get it out of my mind.

Timothy Naftali

Wow.

Jerry Schilling

You know? I told Priscilla Presley, a couple of weeks ago, and she goes, "It's a no-brainer." I was just -

Timothy Naftali

It'd be great.

Jerry Schilling

I was just with Sam Phillips's son for the Grammys, Knox Phillips, and we went with Mike Post, who does all the -- and I think we're going in the studio and see what we can do. I don't know all the legal things.

Timothy Naftali

Have you got a rapper to do it?

Jerry Schilling

No, you know, I mean I've thought of everything from Three 6 Mafia, because they're from Memphis. Elvis is from Memphis. They got an Academy Award last year.

Timothy Naftali

They're fantastic.

Jerry Schilling

So I'm saying all this stuff. I have no rights, no anything, but we're going to work on it next week.

Timothy Naftali

I hope you'll give some of the money, a little bit, to New Orleans.

Jerry Schilling

That's a great idea. That's a terrific idea.

Timothy Naftali

I mean, I think --

Jerry Schilling

Yeah, yeah.

Timothy Naftali

I think that's -- that would be really, really -- it would be in the spirit of the song.

Jerry Schilling

I'm going to present it that way. That's a great idea, because it's right down the river from us.

Timothy Naftali

Memphis's economy benefited a lot from that [inaudible] and from the Mississippi.

Jerry Schilling

Yeah.

Timothy Naftali

All right, so let's talk about -- thank you for sharing with that.

Jerry Schilling

Sure.

Timothy Naftali

You get a call out of the blue; it's Elvis. Tell us about it. Set it up.

Jerry Schilling

Well, I was in Culver City, California, actually across the street from MGM Studios. I quit working for Elvis. I was doing my film editing stuff. I had gone to bed. I think, yeah, it was Saturday, and the phone rings. And I go, "Who is this?" "It's me." So I realize it's Elvis Presley. Nobody else would say, "It's me," and call in the middle of the night. And, I don't know, I was always glad to hear from Elvis, so I perked up, you know. He said, "Jerry, I'm changing planes in Dallas," and, "Could you pick me up at the airport?" I said, "Who's with you?" He said, "Nobody." This is a guy that hadn't traveled without an entourage in 15 years. And he said, "I don't want anybody in the world to know where I am." I said, "Okay." You know, I said -- and Elvis is giving me his flight number and, you know, what time. He doesn't do those things. People do those things for him, you know? But he had it all down, and I said, "Okay, you know, I'll come in my car. It will not draw any attention, for sure." And he said, "Well, if you want to -- " we had a limousine driver named Gerald Peters that Elvis trusted because he used to drive for Winston Churchill, and Elvis, when Elvis found that out, from then on, Elvis knighted him Sir Gerald. So I called Gerald, and we went. And I guess it was two o'clock in the morning, American Airlines flight coming in from Dallas. And at that particular time, a big VIP, you could drive up to the plane, and we actually did.

Timothy Naftali

This is less than a week before Christmas.

Jerry Schilling

Yes.

Timothy Naftali

This is December 1970.

Jerry Schilling

Yeah, that's right.

Timothy Naftali

Two in the morning.

Jerry Schilling

Yeah.

Timothy Naftali

You go with Sir Gerald --

Jerry Schilling

Sir Gerald.

Timothy Naftali

-- to pick him up. Now, he's flying commercial.

Jerry Schilling

He's flying commercial, yeah. He's got a credit card. He doesn't have any money, but he's got --

Timothy Naftali

He's got a credit card.

Jerry Schilling

You know, he's kind of identifiable with a credit card.

Timothy Naftali

I was going to say, that's a pretty darn good credit card. American Express would --

Jerry Schilling

Yeah, we should do a commercial with Elvis Presley and American Express.

Timothy Naftali

He did not leave home without it.

Jerry Schilling

He did not leave home without -- He left everything else, but he had his American Express card.

Timothy Naftali

Did you ever find out why -- why'd he do this?

Jerry Schilling

Elvis as we all -- as history knows that he was a very generous guy, and it was Christmas time, and he was doing some big shopping. You know, when Elvis did big shopping, it was buying cars for people, you know, and things like that. And his father and his wife talked to him about it and were telling him he had to slow down, and he couldn't. And he got very upset. He told me the next day. He ran this all down to me. He said, "You know, it's my money. You know, I understand why they, you know, are talking to me, and I appreciate all that." And I think what really ticked him off is then they called Colonel Parker on the West Coast about his spending, and he said, "It's none of his business." And he got in a car. I think he went to the airport, got on the first plane out of Memphis. I don't think he knew where it was going. It wound up in Washington. He checked into a hotel, and then thought, "What the hell am I going to do?" So then that's when he decided to call me, because I wasn't working for him.

So I wasn't part of, you know, the whole structure at that time, and decided to come out and get me at Los Angeles. And I thought that was kind of it. You know, I picked him up, and I never will forget. He's walking down the steps of the plane, and he's got this little box. And I said, "Elvis, what's that?" He says, "My luggage." Don't forget this is a guy never traveled and took care of things himself. Well back at that time, you know, if you were first class, they give you a little box with a washrag and a toothpaste and maybe some mouth -- that was his luggage. He was traveling light. And so he had a home in Los Angeles on Hillcrest Drive of kind of a part of Beverly Hills. And we -- after Elvis, who did not want anybody to know where he was, had promised to take a couple of the stewardesses home, so we had to drive them home. And then we went to the house. And it was very late at that particular time, and he was tired. He said, "You know, I think I'll turn in." And I said, "Great." And he went to bed, and then it hit me. I'm the only person in the world who knows where Elvis Presley is. I mean, I'm thinking of Priscilla, Vernon Presley, these people, even the guys, you know. Has he been kidnapped? Has he been killed? I mean, you know, this was unheard of. And so there was no way I was going to sleep.

So the next afternoon was Sunday and he gets up. He's in a great mood. That's when he tells me what went on in Memphis. And on this flight from Dallas to Los Angeles, he had a big problem. The steward, male steward on the flight saw Elvis's guns. And Elvis showed him and his badge and everything to carry a concealed weapon. The guy said, "You can't do it." So Elvis just walked off the plane. The pilot came after him: "Mr. Presley, it's okay, you can bring your weapons." He had three guns. "You can bring your weapons on." Can you imagine that today?

Timothy Naftali

So.

Jerry Schilling

You know, so I'm hearing all this stuff. But we had this nice Sunday afternoon. We made coffee. We're looking out --

Timothy Naftali

What'd he wear on that flight? He didn't wear the Vegas outfit, did he?

Jerry Schilling

He wore the same outfit on the flight that we wore to Washington.

Timothy Naftali

The same outfit with the International Hotel belt, the velvet.

Jerry Schilling

Yeah. Don't forget, he wasn't used to -- I mean, he doesn't pack a suitcase. He was mad. He left in a hurry. You know, he had a change of clothes at the Hillcrest house, but then basically wore the same thing that he had worn in to go to Washington the first time, which all he did was check into a hotel and then check out.

Timothy Naftali

Now at the Hillcrest house, is that where he picked up the ceremonial pistol that he would give for -- ?

Jerry Schilling

Yes, yeah, he had bought that for himself. Elvis was a -- he was a historian nut. He read history books. Down the street from us was Omar Bradley, and Elvis was just blown away. So he took me to meet not on this -- earlier. I have a signed picture from Omar Bradley. He was a little, old man, very old at the time, but Elvis knew his history. And Elvis would go and -- this sounds weird, but he would pat Omar Bradley on the head. They really had this great relationship. And now I look at war films, and I

see the Bradley tanks, and I go, "I know this little guy," who was a great general, and Elvis knew that. It is amazing.

Timothy Naftali

Well Elvis must have watched the movie "Patton," then.

Jerry Schilling

Oh, I watched it probably seven times with him. That's another speech that he could probably have done too, when George C. Scott gets up there. Yeah, we went down to Hollywood Boulevard to the Egyptian Theater, I believe it was, sneak in after the show would start and watch "Patton" three nights in a row. Finally, by the third night, people knew. The word was getting out that Elvis was showing up. So yeah, he was a real history buff. Elvis knew his history. When Elvis walked into the Oval Room of the White House, he knew where he was. He knew what it meant. And he knew that he was in the presence of the President. He knew very much what all that meant.

Timothy Naftali

All right well let's get to that, then. He's with you in L.A. You know that you're the only person in the world who knows where Elvis Presley is. You're not getting much sleep that night.

Jerry Schilling

None.

Timothy Naftali

Okay. It's the next morning; it's a Sunday morning. You're chatting with him. You've been told the story. When do you find out you're going to Washington, D.C.?

Jerry Schilling

Well, now keep in mind this is Elvis time, so it's actually Sunday afternoon. It's our morning, it's coffee, but, you know, it's three in the afternoon.

Timothy Naftali

All right, it's Elvis time.

Jerry Schilling

It's our normal hours, our nocturnal hours. You know, we have this nice talk. He tells me, you know, what's been going on. It was really great: good friends, one on one, coffee, and whatever. And I'm feeling pretty good, you know, and he's in great shape 'cause he had a good night's rest and he's not mad at the situation in Memphis. He's kind of laughing about it, you know. And then, he springs this on me: "Jerry, I'm going back to Washington tonight. I want you to go with me." And I said, "Here I'd scraped these labels off these boxes for a year to get to Paramount as a film editor. It's Sunday night. I

got to be at work Monday morning." I said, "Elvis, I can't, you know, I got this job as you know as a film editor. I have to be at work in the morning." And he -- God, he was hard to say no to -- he got this look on his face, and all the fun we had had, he just kind of sunk. And he was like, "All right, I'll go by myself." Well, of course, in my mind, I'm thinking, "Maybe the next pilot may not run after him and tell him he could take his gun."

And so many things could've happened. And he said, "Jerry, I will charter a Learjet as soon as we get there to fly you back." And I go, "You know, Elvis, Learjet's not going to get me back any faster than a commercial plane." And I know part of the problem is he's been spending all this money. So I said, "I tell you what I'll do, Elvis. You know your wife and your father and everybody, they have no idea where you are or what has happened to you. If you let me call Graceland, and if I could have one of the security guys, either Red or Sonny come up and meet us, I will fly back on the all- nighter to Washington with you if I can make that call." And he said, "Okay, you can make that call." And so I immediately had to go into this. I call Graceland. Sonny answered the phone. I said, "Sonny, you know, here's the deal." I had checked the airlines. I knew there was an all night flight. I had Elvis's American Express card. So I booked us a couple of tickets on the all night flight. And Sonny, I told him when we were getting in. I said, "You know, just get on the first plane and meet us up there, because, man, I got to get back." I was worried about my assistant editor. I had no idea that his story -- had no idea what we're going to do. He just said we're going to Washington, you know? And so I started making arrangements and everything, and got Sir Gerald to come pick us up again. Charged everything on the American Express card, but we had no cash.

Timothy Naftali

Now Elvis will bring with him a signed photograph of Lisa-Marie and of Priscilla. So did he pick that up at Hillcrest? Did he pick that up?

Jerry Schilling

No, I think this was pictures that he carried in his wallet, carried with him all the time. I think he signed it to the President.

Timothy Naftali

These are things he carried all the time.

Jerry Schilling

Now, he carried a picture of Priscilla and Lisa with him in his wallet, I think --

Timothy Naftali

These are a little bit bigger than that.

Jerry Schilling

Okay, then he picked them up at the Hillcrest house.

Timothy Naftali

But he also picked up the gun at the Hillcrest house.

Jerry Schilling

He picked up -- I think it was a World War II memorial gun.

Timothy Naftali

Yes.

Jerry Schilling

That was at the Hillcrest house, and he took that. I didn't know why he was taking it. Elvis, you know, you didn't just -- well, when you were used to being with him and not knowing where you were going or what you were doing, that was kind of normal. I had been doing that for years with him, so I -- you know, he's going to Washington. I knew there was a girl he knew back there. I mean, there was all kinds of things that -- and you know, he wanted me to go back with him. When he's saying he's going to charter a Learjet, and when I saw how important it was that I went back with him, I didn't ask questions. I started making arrangements: hotels, airlines, limos, all that kind of stuff. And he was doing it. I wasn't watching everything he was doing, you know? I mean, at this point, as funny as it sounds, you know, Elvis was my friend. He was just another guy. I've been around him where he's bored with me, I'm bored with him sometimes. We just hadn't seen each other in a while, so it was really great. But you know, on a day-to-day basis, you don't watch what your friend does, you know, all the time. So I didn't know what he was doing. I was busy, you know, making arrangements, worrying about if I was going to lose my job and all those kind of things. And so anyway, it was I think the flight left at, I don't know, 11, 12 o'clock, midnight.

And like I said, we didn't have any cash on us, and I found a checkbook of Elvis's at the Hillcrest house. He had a desk, and in the drawer there, I thought there was a checkbook. And, you know, I called Gerald Peters, it was a Sunday night, and I said, "Gerald, we don't have any cash. Do you have any suggestions where I could get a check cashed?" He said, "You know, I know somebody at the Beverly Hilton Hotel that might take a \$500 check." So I made out a check and had Elvis sign it. So here we go to Washington. You know, we're on the way to Washington. We only have \$500, you know, and I'm traveling with Elvis Presley, you know? We go. We get the check cashed. They pre-board us on the American Airlines flight to Washington, the all-nighter. We have two seats in first class. And then they started letting the passengers on. And I couldn't help but notice that it was a lot of young boys in military outfits, you know, coming back from Vietnam. And Elvis was always very cordial if somebody recognized -- you know, he was speaking to certain people. Certain people walked by. They didn't know Elvis was sitting there. I was by the window. Elvis was on the aisle seat. And there was one young soldier that struck up a conversation with Elvis. So I was like reading a magazine. You know, they seemed to be getting along fine, and I get this little elbow nudge: "Jerry, where's that money?" I said, "What money?" He said, "The \$500." I know Elvis. I'm saying, "That's all we got." He said, "Man, you don't understand. This guy's coming home from the war to see his family. I want him to have it." So there went the \$500, and we go to Washington penniless. But, you know, Elvis, you know, we could get by with a lot. He was, you know, he was fairly well known, so we were okay.

Timothy Naftali

He decides to write a letter.

Jerry Schilling

Yes, one of the stewardesses that was making sure, you know, everything was okay with Elvis and everything, told him that Senator George Murphy from California was on the plane. And after we took off, Elvis went back in coach and introduced himself to George Murphy. And I always kind of look, see what things, you know, what's going on, because, you know, he's a public figure, and they seemed to be having a nice conversation. So I guess they probably had a 20-minute conversation. Elvis came back up and sat down next to me and said, "Do you think there's any stationery on the flight?" I got the stewardess's attention, and she said, "Let me go check." And she came back with American Airlines stationery. I had known Elvis at this point for, I don't know, close to 20 years, you know, 18 years, whatever it was, never saw him sit down and write a letter. I think he wrote maybe four or five in his entire life. Most of those were when he was in Germany. He wrote his girlfriend. He wrote a couple of guys: Alan Fortas, George Kline. That was the letters. And he sat and wrote the letter.

And then he said, "Jerry, I just wrote a letter to President Nixon. Would you proofread it for me?" I was honored, you know, that he thought that much of me to proofread a letter from him to the President of the United States. And I said, "Sure." And I read the letter and gosh, knowing Elvis and knowing him as well as I did, you know, almost brought tears to my -- because I know what his thoughts were. I knew where his heart was. And then I had this other emotion, like, God, is he going to sound like some right-wing fanatic? And then I thought, "You know what? Who's writing the letter?" It is Elvis Presley, and it is very reflective of Elvis Presley. And, you know, we could screw around with it, but I said, "Elvis, it's beautiful. Send it like it is." He kind of smiled. He sealed it up. And as we were flying, he would put, "For the President only." I mean, he kept writing things on the outside envelope. So that's how the letter came about.

Timothy Naftali

He also included a list of all of his telephone numbers.

Jerry Schilling

Yes, yes, and he also included my name and Sonny's name as contacts. He also included his name, John Burroughs, an alias that he would use to check in hotels with.

Timothy Naftali

Where did that come from?

Jerry Schilling

You know, I don't know actually. I think there was a character one time in one of the movies, and then, his manager sometimes he would call him Colonel Burroughs. And I think it was just a combination and something different: John Burroughs. And I know I love a letter that says to the

President of the United States, "I'm under an assumed name." You know? It was great. Only Elvis could do that, you know?

Timothy Naftali

So the original plan was that he would give it to the Senator, right, to send?

Jerry Schilling

Right, yeah, you know, Elvis was a doer. He liked to delegate, but by the time he did, he was usually already doing something. And this was so important to Elvis that this letter get to the President that the only way he knew to make sure is if he did it himself. I tried to talk him out of going to the White House that morning, because it was dawn. It was still dark. I'd been up two days. I wanted to go to the hotel and clean up, take a shower, and I expressed that to Elvis. I said, "You know, it's too early." He said, "No." He said, "I want to go by the White House." And, you know, when he said something like this, you know, there's no debate. I knew we were going to the White House. And the driver, the limousine driver, took us to -- I forgot which gate it was -- north gate, White House gate. And Elvis said, "Jerry, just stay here. I'm going to take this to the guards at the gate." And I said, "Fine." Well, I'm keeping a pretty close eye on Elvis. And he gets out, and, you know, the world knows what he was wearing. You know, it was pretty normal for me, but he had a high-collared topcoat. His hair was a little longer than usual. He had a cane. And it's not full daylight, and he jumps out of the back of a black limousine. The White House security guards were pretty stiff, and I think they were, you know, like, "Who is this? What is this?" I see it's not going well, so I jump out of the limousine, and I go, "Excuse me, gentlemen, but this is Mr. Elvis Presley, and he just wanted to drop off this letter to the President." And they immediately -- their whole demeanor changed. And, "Oh, Mr. Presley, you know, Senator so-and-so's coming up at seven a.m. We'll make sure the President will have the letter." And then we went to the Hotel Washington.

Timothy Naftali

So they hadn't recognized him?

Jerry Schilling

Well, I don't -- you know what? If it would have been broad daylight, of course they would, but no. And you've got to understand, it's dawn. You know, you're not expecting Elvis Presley to walk up to the -- And he didn't look like he did in most of his movies. You know, he's wearing more of a -- you know, it's the early '70s -- it's more of the -- oh, God, what was the --

Timothy Naftali

Well it's a Vegas costume.

Jerry Schilling

Yeah. It's a -- blaxploitation movies that were real big at the time, too, you know? Oh, I forgot what you call the dress there, but it was more of that. So it's quite understandable why he wasn't recognized.

Timothy Naftali

Was he carrying weapons?

Jerry Schilling

Always, yeah, he carried a little Derringer in the boot. He had another, like a .38 here. You know, we deal with it in the book, but you know, it was pretty heavyweight death threats on Elvis's life, and as foolish as this all may sound, here's a guy that passed the test, both written, that went to the firing range, that took it serious, and also had a reason to carry a gun. And never had an incident with it. So it sounds bizarre; the meeting sounds bizarre.

Timothy Naftali

Oh no, no.

Jerry Schilling

Okay.

Timothy Naftali

This is the era when you could actually fly with a gun.

Jerry Schilling

Yeah.

Timothy Naftali

There weren't any metal detectors at airports in 1970.

Jerry Schilling

I flew with a gun. I had concealed weapon credentials. So it was really -- that was weird for me, 'cause I didn't even like to wear, you know, a coat. I'd get on an elevator, and Elvis -- "Where's your gun?" So he wanted me to carry a gun when I was with him, so. I didn't have one back on that trip.

Timothy Naftali

You didn't, on that trip?

Jerry Schilling

Because I wasn't working for him at that time, so I didn't use guns.

Timothy Naftali

You go back to the hotel. The White House tells you anything when you go? Do you know that you're going to get an appointment with the President?

Jerry Schilling

No, when I proofread Elvis's letter I thought it was a great letter, but I didn't think we'd have any chance whatsoever meeting with the President. And why I thought that was because I kept up pretty much with the news, and I had been reading that some of the senators were complaining about not being able to have time with the President at that time, and I remember that distinctly. I don't know if I was reading it in the "Washington Post" or "L.A. Times," but -- so I remember thinking, "He's not -- you know, we're not going to have a meeting. But, you know, the letter's great, and I'm sure the President will get the letter." So we leave the White House. We go to the hotel and check in. And I'm feeling pretty comfortable.

I don't know, you know, what Elvis' agenda is. So after we're there, I don't know, 30 minutes or so, he goes, "Jerry, I want you to stay here and wait for the call from the White House." And he had no question that it was going to be a call from the White House. I knew there wasn't going to be a call from the White House. He said, "I'm going to the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs to see Mr. John Finlater, who's the head of it. I'm trying to get the badge which" -- I was at the dinner in Los Angeles when he saw this badge by a guy named Paul Frees, who we had a dinner, and through friends of Elvis'. When Elvis saw that badge, that was the ultimate badge that he wanted in his collection. And for various reasons, because it was respected overseas, he was planning on touring overseas, it was the ultimate. It was like -- it was kind of a James Bond thing to him as well, but with a lot of respect for it. And he gave me the number of where he would be. These are things that I didn't think Elvis was capable of.

Timothy Naftali

So he already knew the person that he needed to meet.

Jerry Schilling

I think that maybe Senator Murphy on that flight had given him the contact. It was either that or a private investigator, John O'Grady, who had worked on some cases with Elvis and who had introduced us to Paul Frees, who was a member of the Bureau of --

Timothy Naftali

Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs.

Jerry Schilling

-- Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs. That's the forerunner to the D.E.A., right?

Timothy Naftali

So, Elvis had hired -- I guess he always had a private investigator working for him?

Jerry Schilling

No, not always, but at a few times, this was the same guy that through his attorney was recommended. And they kind of became friends. The guy would come to the shows in Vegas and tell Elvis these great stories, and -- about clients. And then I would go -- you know, Elvis and I would have a few arguments from time to time, which I loved, because it was a real friendship. And I never will forget, I said, "Elvis, if he's telling us about this guy, do you think maybe he may be -- ?" And Elvis got real mad at me, 'cause he loved the stories. But so anyway, through that guy is how this badge came into Elvis's mind at one of the few dinners Elvis ever went out to at Chasen's in Beverly Hills.

So that was a year earlier, and he had been trying to find a way to get that badge since then. And so he went off to his meeting, left me a phone number, and I kind of started reminiscing of the Howard Hughes books I had read, where Howard would have some of his guys or a guy and say, "Wait here in the hotel." And Howard may not come back for a year or so. So I'm thinking, "Boy, hope they got good room service and a nice gym and stuff, 'cause I could be here a long time." And I don't know, only 30 minutes or so later I get a call asking for me. And I said, "Yeah, speaking." And he said, "This is Egil Krogh on the White House staff. And the President has read Mr. Presley's letter and would like to meet him in 30 minutes." And I said, "Great." I don't know if I had to deal with scheduling, or whatever. I said, "I know where Mr. Presley is. I will get that message to him immediately." So I called Elvis, and this guy picks up the phone. And, "Hello." And I said, "Yeah, Mr. Presley there?" "Who's calling?" It was Finlater. And I said, "Well, I'm a friend of Mr. Presley's." And he said, "Okay." Elvis gets on the phone, and boy, he is down. He said, "Jerry, I'm not doing any good here." Finlater wouldn't give him the badge. So I said, "Well, Elvis, you just got a call from the White House, and the President wants to meet you in less than 30 minutes."

Now here's the kind of friend Elvis Presley is. Most people would've beelined it to the White House. He said, "Jerry, go downstairs, and we'll swing by and pick you up." He always included, you know, his friends, and that was a big one. And so I go downstairs. Ironically, Sonny's coming in from Memphis. And I see him getting out of a cab with his luggage, and I say, "Give it to the bellman," 'cause I see the limousine coming, too. I said, "Give it to the bellman, here's Elvis. We're going to the White House." Sonny's like, "Oh," jumped in the car, and we head up the street to the White House.

Timothy Naftali

So you get to the White House, and this time they let you in.

Jerry Schilling

We got in, yeah. Guards were friendly.

Timothy Naftali

Do they -- you don't expect actually, you personally don't expect to go to the Oval Office.

Jerry Schilling

No, in fact we are told, because Elvis is the first one to mention it, and they said, "Well, only Mr. Presley can go." Oh, and after Elvis left, there was some conversation, you know, Sonny and I said, "You know, Elvis is really hard to say no to." And the White House aide said, "You know, it's not even up to the President. It's the Secret Service. There has to be a certain Secret Service contingency to, you know, how many people there." I don't know. Anyway, the phone rings. And the same guy that told us that answered the phone, and I just saw his face; he was dumbfounded. And he said, "The President wants to meet Mr. Presley's friends." And of course we go to the White -- I mean, to the Oval room.

Timothy Naftali

Now, before Presley went into the Oval Office, before Elvis went into the Oval Office, they took his gun away from him, didn't they?

Jerry Schilling

Well, Elvis was sharp enough to know. First of all, he did two things. Number one, he said, "I'm carrying weapons," and he showed them. And I don't know if he kept them. I think they were left in the office that we used. Because Bud, Egil Krogh -- there was an interrogation. That's a tough word, but, you know, "Why do you want to meet the President? What do you want to talk about?" And it was a real nice, serious conversation between Bud and Elvis. And Sonny and I were there, but you know, this was really -- and I was really proud of my friend, because he knew what he wanted to do. Everything he had said in the letter he was really putting meaning to it in this conversation with Bud.

Timothy Naftali

In the letter, he talks about the role he wants to play in helping bridge the gap between the administration and young people to move young people away from drugs.

Jerry Schilling

Yes.

Timothy Naftali

That's what he says in the letter.

Jerry Schilling

Yes.

Timothy Naftali

Had you heard him talk about this before?

Jerry Schilling

Oh yeah, this didn't -- it's really funny how observing history -- when Elvis came on board he was the controversial; he was the threat to the youth; he was, you know, politicians, religious people were speaking out against him in the early '50s, mid'50s. It was real serious. And I produced a lot of documentaries on Elvis, and I know this history really well. That's hard to believe too, just as we talked about the segregation situation. Elvis went through all of that, and then he went into the Army and he came back, and people are saying, even those establishment people, "He's a pretty cool guy. He's a responsible guy." And Elvis, when he started seeing, ten years later, rock groups and stuff, he felt somewhat obviously responsible for the new rock 'n roll movement. I mean, he kind of -- if you had to pick one time, one person, and arguably there was a lot of influence, but if you had to pick one it's Elvis Presley, okay. So he felt he was proud of that, and he felt a responsibility toward it.

And when he started hearing lyrics that condoned drugs and seeing -- he hated to see a rock group or something walk on stage with torn jeans back then and messy t-shirts. He's saying, "People pay to see a performance." I mean, he really wanted it to be a respected art form. It's just, you know, the youth, the rebel becomes the establishment. And that's kind of what was happening, but also it was a very tough time in our history. And for one of the first times, what I had said earlier, young people, this music gave us a voice for this first time.

This was being used politically as well. And Elvis never believed in using the music politically. That's just the era he came up with. So with all of those things, that's what that letter meant. That meant he really did want to do something. And Elvis -- he had a way he could talk to people. People would talk to him. I mean, big stars, politicians, they would talk to him and tell him things that, you know, they wouldn't say publicly. And there were a couple of big name musicians that I'm not going to mention, but where Elvis felt one of them in particular was a great artist. And he was kind of going through this period and changed his dress, and you know, and kind of his music. Elvis talked to him and said, "Man, you know, that's not who you are." And the guy changed back. So Elvis had influence. He knew he had influence, especially in the music business. And he knew he could talk to anybody, you know. He could go to the worst section of town and wear all the diamonds that he wanted to, and he was cool. People accepted Elvis Presley. And he really wanted to get -- I mean, this is a worn-out phrase, but he wanted to give something back. And if you're Elvis, this is how you do it.

Timothy Naftali

So it wasn't because -- some would say that he wanted the badge, but it was more than just getting the badge.

Jerry Schilling

It was more. He wanted the badge too, but it was more than that. I think both things were equally important, if you will.

Timothy Naftali

So the call comes in; you're sitting there; the Secret Service guy is very surprised. You've now been invited into the Oval Office, you and Sonny. Tell us what happens.

Jerry Schilling

Well, I never will forget. The door was closed, and we get to the door, and who opens the door? Not Secret Service, not the President, but Elvis. And I kind of -- you know, it was kind of like being at Graceland. There are some similarities in the two buildings, if you will. So, and he opens the door real wide, and he's beaming. So I know whatever -- things are going well. But I, just a second or two, I see this oval room, and I realize that the Oval Office is oval. That's why it's called the Oval Office. You never think about that when you see flat pictures, you know? And down at the end, the President was over his desk, President Nixon signing something. I was going to be a history teacher. And I -- oh my, so I was stunned. Elvis thought I was afraid, and he kind of pushes me in and says, "It's okay, you know, don't be afraid. Come on in." And then Sonny came in behind me. And the President hears this, and he -- he wasn't sitting down at his desk. He was leaning over the desk. And he came over, and Elvis -- you know, he made this great introduction, so I could tell he was proud that Sonny and I were there with him. And, of course, Bud was there, and Elvis and Bud had gotten along really great. Bud really got what Elvis wanted to do, where he was coming from.

And so President Nixon came over and kind of, like a guy's guy, hit me on the arm and said, "Elvis, you got a couple of big ones, here." And he said, "You guys play football?" And we talked a little bit about football, and Elvis kind of -- oh, and then the President went and got some cufflinks, Presidential seal cufflinks for Sonny and I, and then came back and gave them to us, and just a real warm feeling. And another thought I had: I was in the presence, very different feels, but two guys, greats, at the top of the their field who had both come through some tough times at recent. And I really saw what the bond was: they both related to each other, and they were both very -- it was an honest thing. Neither one was trying to impress the other one. They both -- and that was a remarkable thing to experience, to be there and see that. And, you know, these guys stayed in touch for the rest of their lives. When President Nixon had the phlebitis and went to the hospital, Elvis called him in the hospital. They had a nice talk. When Elvis was in the hospital, President Nixon called him. And they -- I mean, it wasn't just a one-time thing, that respect. And I remember after Elvis's passing, a long time after, and I saw President Nixon doing a speech, and I could still tell, the way he talked about my friend, there was still a respect. He, you know, you can read. You can talk. I understand the iconic image, and there was a movie made that they had actually asked me to produce. It was a comedy. But this was a true American story, and these guys -- this really represented what I think this country is all about, and it was a real, sincere, wonderful American story.

Timothy Naftali

When you get the cufflinks, Elvis decides that they're not good enough.

Jerry Schilling

No, he -- and you know, again, bless his heart. He doesn't forget anybody. He's thinking of our wives. And he goes, "Mr. President," -- he called him "Mr. President" -- he said, "Mr. President, you know, they have wives too." And the President said, "Oh, well let's see what we can, you know, let's see what we can find." And he walks back over to his desk, and he's rummaging around. This is how comfortable Elvis felt. Elvis is rummaging in the President's desk with him, looking for things for our wives. So -- and then there were some pennants that had a Presidential seal that the President and Elvis gave us. Actually, the President gave it to us.

Timothy Naftali

Did the President look a little bit awkward when this was happening?

Jerry Schilling

Yeah, he did, body language, but I don't know. I just remember a smile in his eye, you know? And Elvis gave him another hug, you know? Elvis is hugging the President of the United States, and as somebody that has just given him his Christmas present, if you will, I don't think President Nixon or Bud or anybody was used to -- but we're in show business. That was, you know, that's how Elvis expressed himself. I mean, there's one thing about Elvis: he was himself, you know. There was no -- and he had a big heart. And it meant so much to him, you know?

Timothy Naftali

What does he say to you when you leave the Oval Office?

Jerry Schilling

Well, first of all it was kind of like, "The President got it, and I want to stay around here because the badge is on the way." So they start taking us on a tour of the White House, but there was just too much commotion. The girls that worked at the White House were peeking out of the offices. And Elvis kisses one of the secretaries, and they're trying to -- and at this point after meeting the President -- the tour should've happened before meeting the President, you know, if that would've worked. But that was, I would say, outside of the birth of his daughter, probably the second most important moment, maybe, in Elvis's life. I've never said that, and I hope it's right. But for him meeting his President and being accepted that way --

Timothy Naftali

What does he say when he sees the situation room?

Jerry Schilling

Well, you know, another one of our favorite films was Dr. Strangelove with Peter Sellers. And I don't know if you will remember, but they have this big war room, and one of the characters is Bucky Turgidson. I'm trying to think of the actor that played that part. And he is like the military commander. And Strangelove is like this guy in the wheelchair that Elvis could emulate, totally, and do that scene. But there was a great line in the movie, which we hadn't seen in a long time, and Bucky Turgidson goes, "You can't fight in the war room!" So when we went down to the situation room, and it looked exactly like the war room, and Elvis turns over to me and says, "You can't fight in the war room." And we're dying laughing, you know. So it was that kind of movie, you know.

Timothy Naftali

You actually decide -- you end up having lunch in the White House mess.

Jerry Schilling

Yeah, the tour wasn't going to happen seriously, you know, and with all the commotion. So while we were waiting, Egil Krogh said, "You know, we could have lunch in the mess hall," and Elvis immediately said "Yeah." He's not one to really eat publicly a lot, because it's just too confusing or whatever, but Elvis was not going to leave the White House until that badge came, so that made sense to him. And the only table for four was like right in the middle of the White House mess hall, which I think was served only by the Navy. I'm real impressed, I mean, this is -- I'm looking at every piece of wood and everything, because I'm in the White House, you know? This is huge. I'm 28 years old, you know, and I was going to be a history teacher. So we have a nice lunch, just talking about nothing even, you know, that much. And then I think is when Bud got Elvis' -- somehow, I think at the end of the lunch, Bud was notified. I'm not sure that the badge was there. You know, it was a great line when Elvis had told the President about why he wanted the badge or whatever. And Bud, Egil Krogh said, the President said, "Well, Bud, do you think we can do this?" And Bud says, "Well, you know, you're the leader of the free world." And so the President called Finlater and said, "I want Mr. Presley to have the badge."

Timothy Naftali

So he gets his badge that day.

Jerry Schilling

Get the badge that day.

Timothy Naftali

You're leaving the White House. Where do you go?

Jerry Schilling

We go back to the hotel because -- you know what? I don't remember even going back to the hotel. I want to say we go straight to the airport. I've got to get back. Don't forget, I've got a little job as an assistant film editor that I'm really worried about. I got to get back to L.A. So Sonny and myself and Elvis are in the limousine, they are going back to Memphis; I'm going to Los Angeles. And that's when Elvis proceeds to talk to me about coming back to work for him. I think he was very pleased with how I'd handled the Washington stuff. He was very happy that I went back, you know, with him, even with the possibility of losing my job. And he offered me a really great job as a personal PR and record promoter for his new records. And he wanted me to be the guy that would take his new recordings to program directors around the country, and, you know, kind of just put a personal touch and try to get his records more attention. So I never gave him an answer if I was going to go back to work for him or not. I was really thrilled that he wanted me to. And about two weeks later, I get this box of business cards, and they're red. And in black, it goes, "Jerry Schilling, personal public relations for Elvis Presley," and under it, "Special Deputy." And I think I meant to bring one today, and maybe my wife did. So I thought, you know, everything he had done for me, and I really love the guy, and I thought, if he really wants me to come back that much then I'm going to go back. So I went back to work for him, and -- for a number of years again, so.

Timothy Naftali

Did he talk to you about Nixon, President Nixon?
Did he tell you about what it had been like when it was just the two of them or the three of them,
'cause Bud Krogh --

Jerry Schilling

He talked about it a lot. And I know that's all he talked about when he went to Graceland from talking to my friends. Don't forget, I had left and I'm in Los Angeles and I don't see him for a little while after that. I really think he had this real love for the President, you know? I mean, I think he understood how it was to be in that position. And the fact that the President was so gracious to see him, to listen to him, and to actually agree with him. And you know they both made -- this tells where they both were coming from. The President could have used this for publicity. Maybe as Haldeman or someone said, this could be a great way to reach the youth. Elvis could've used it, you know, just a pride and all that. They never told anybody. This was a private meeting between these two giants, and only, I think it was over a year later, did it come out in "The Washington Post."

Timothy Naftali

Do you remember Elvis's reaction when it became public?

Jerry Schilling

Honestly I don't, I don't. But I know -- it was probably fine, because he was so proud of the meeting. He talked so much about it I'm surprised it didn't come out prior to a year.

Timothy Naftali

'Cause he would tell people about it.

Jerry Schilling

Well, yeah, yeah, I mean, and you know what? I did notice as other badges he had, like a chief of police badge -- and these were real badges, okay, and he would show them a lot. This badge he was much more conservative with. He never went anywhere without it, but he didn't flash it. If it was somebody, maybe a friend of his in law enforcement, then in private conversation, he might. But it wasn't -- he really had it. And, you know, we would get a call like every six months from the Bureau. "Does Mr. Presley still -- just wanted to check on the badge. Make sure he still has the badge." That kind of -- so we'd get a call down at Graceland.

Timothy Naftali

So he'd carry it in a suit jacket? I mean he'd carry it in his jacket?

Jerry Schilling

Yeah, yeah.

Timothy Naftali

What did Elvis think when he watched Watergate happen, given that he felt a certain sympathy for President Nixon? They both were in a glass bowl of sorts.

Jerry Schilling

Mm-hmm.

Timothy Naftali

Do you remember him saying anything?

Jerry Schilling

I really don't remember him saying anything. I kind of feel I know his feeling.

Timothy Naftali

Well, that's all right if you don't remember him saying anything.

Jerry Schilling

Yeah, I don't, yeah.

Timothy Naftali

Did Sonny say anything about this trip to you? What did he say during this? I mean, was he just completely awestruck?

Jerry Schilling

Well, see Sonny, he got there like as we were on the way. And, you know, I think first of all, Sonny was getting over the shock of where was Elvis? You know, Sonny was official bodyguard.

Timothy Naftali

And he'd lost him.

Jerry Schilling

And lost him, you know? That's why he was the first person to pick up the phone down at Graceland. He didn't know where, you know, where Elvis was or anything, and then we're immediately in the White -- and Sonny, you know, he was, as I was, very happy for our friend. I mean this was a big day, and not only did he meet and talk with the President, but he got the ultimate badge. Just like, you know, somebody giving us a Maserati or something, the thing we really wanted and by somebody that,

you know, was special. And you know, after lunch and stuff, we were just smiling and laughing and having a good time, on, you know --

Timothy Naftali

Did people ask for his autograph as you were walking through the White House?

Jerry Schilling

We walked through pretty darn fast, and he did sign some autographs, yes, yes.

Timothy Naftali

I've heard that he went back to the White House again. He didn't see President Nixon, but he went back, no? Did he ever? I've heard that he --

Jerry Schilling

He went back to Washington, and he went to the F.B.I. He went to see J. Edgar Hoover, but he wouldn't see him.

Timothy Naftali

J. Edgar Hoover wouldn't see him?

Jerry Schilling

That's my understanding, and I didn't go on the second trip because I did keep my job as a film editor at Paramount, but I don't think he ever went back to the White House. This is the first time I ever heard that.

Timothy Naftali

Okay, did he send Finlater a present when he retired? I'd heard that he --

Jerry Schilling

Sounds like something he would do, but I'm not aware of it.

Timothy Naftali

Not aware? Okay, another White House staffer from that period remembers that. But he did go back to Washington, but this time to see J. Edgar Hoover.

Jerry Schilling

Yes, and he did do a tour through the F.B.I. and brought some of his friends from Memphis, the former sheriff of Memphis, Bill Morris [phonetic sp.] You know, another kindred thing that Elvis felt with that was getting ready to happen to him that he felt with President Nixon was that he was going to be one of the Ten Top Outstanding Young Americans, which President Nixon had been earlier. So as the little footnote or P.S. to the letter, he writes that, I think he tells him, "I've been nominated for one of the Top Ten Outstanding Young Americans, and I think you were one of those as well, Mr. President," however he wrote that.

Timothy Naftali

Did he participate in any events to build that bridge between the administration and the youth to talk about drug issues? Did he -- ?

Jerry Schilling

I don't know, because, you know, again, I went back to my world. And since it was all he wanted it done unofficially -- you know, he didn't want a title, he didn't want anything like that -- I don't know the answer to that.

Timothy Naftali

Don't know. But you do go back to him? I mean you go back to Paramount for a while.

Jerry Schilling

Yeah, and then I do go back to work for him. And I think soon after that was the ceremonies, which they had in Memphis for the Ten Outstanding Young Americans, which that again I would rank up there with the Presidential meeting, because this was the first time -- you know, Elvis had done a lot of humanitarian work. He had done things to preserve the ship that the Atlantic Charter was signed on. I mean, this guy was -- yeah.

Timothy Naftali

He did?

Jerry Schilling

Yeah, he read in the paper where it was going to a junkyard, and he goes, "Jerry, the Atlantic Charter was signed on this ship." You know, he bought it and gave it to Danny Thomas for the St. Jude Hospital to auction it off or whatever.

Timothy Naftali

He gave the ship?

Jerry Schilling

It was like a yacht. It was the yacht that the charter was signed on. He felt it's a piece of history that should not be destroyed. Yeah I think, or was it Frank Sinatra he gave it to for the charity? But he definitely bought it, and there was a big ceremony. It was brought to, I think, Long Beach. But he always had, you know, these historical things in mind. And what reminds me about the ceremony for the top Ten Outstanding Young Men was this was the first time he was recognized not as an entertainer but as a human being. And on this panel were the other people where there was a person who had made some big breakthroughs in cancer research, there was an astronaut, there was -- I mean, your heavyweight people. And Elvis had to make a speech, and he made a beautiful speech. I didn't -- how could Elvis make a speech? But he did it. And we went to dinner. Elvis gave a dinner for all of the nominees and whoever was with him. I sit with Ron Ziegler, my wife Ly and I, and I was thinking, "There again, it still never got out about that meeting that had just happened a little bit before between President Nixon and Elvis." And, you know, Ron didn't say anything. I didn't say anything. We had a nice dinner, you know?

Timothy Naftali

Ron Ziegler would later go to Graceland and visit with Elvis, I understand.

Jerry Schilling

I don't know about that.

Timothy Naftali

There are some pictures of that.

Jerry Schilling

Oh, good, good.

Timothy Naftali

So, can you remember any other instance where Elvis gave for history? That's amazing, the story about the Atlantic Charter.

Jerry Schilling

Yeah, I think one extremely important -- they were trying to raise funds for the Arizona Memorial, and they were getting nowhere. And I have to give his manager, Colonel Parker, a lot of credit on this as well. But he came to Elvis and said, told him about the situation in Hawaii, and that this memorial didn't look like it was going to happen. So Elvis and the Colonel decided to do a benefit show, with all the proceeds going to the Arizona Memorial. And when Elvis did a show for charity, there were no free tickets. He paid for the band. I mean, it was totally -- It's not like what a lot of artists do today, and there's write-offs and there's plane -- they pay for everything. So I think back then at that time, you know, ticket prices were like six bucks or whatever, but I think \$50,000 dollars was raised for the Arizona Memorial. And I went over to do a film with Elvis years later, first time since it had been

constructed, and the Navy Admiral took us, because he knew the history. I think there's a little plaque there that says something about Elvis and Colonel Parker.

And we went to the Arizona Memorial, and I just remember how moved -- I was standing there, and it's a beautiful memorial, and it's built on the Arizona ship, and you can still see oil coming up. And Elvis stood there by himself for a long time. But yeah, this man contributed a lot to American history. He respected it; he knew about it. He never got the opportunity to have formal education, but he -- any chance he got he always educated himself. He was a real reader. And maybe this is appropriate. I was asked to accept, after he had passed away, a star on the walk of fame in Palm Springs for Elvis Presley, and Colonel Parker was getting one at the same time. So I flew back with the Colonel, and there became a big controversy, because this was like the main place was in front of the Palm Springs Library. And some of the people were saying, "But why Elvis Presley in this prominent space?" And some bright person went back and did research. And back in 1956, there was a campaign to get youth to read, and guess who was the poster guy? Elvis Presley. So when I accepted that star, I said, "You know, and there is a reason why, because Elvis lent his image and likeness to the libraries of the United States back in 1956 to promote reading with the youth."

Timothy Naftali

Wow. Is there a story you'd like that we haven't touched on that you'd like to --

Jerry Schilling

I doubt it. No, go ahead.

Timothy Naftali

You doubt it? Oh, I'm going to ask one because I'd like this to be part of the collection. Were you there when Elvis went on the Ed Sullivan show?

Jerry Schilling

No, I was with him right before he went, but I was in Memphis. I was still in school.

Timothy Naftali

Because you talk about, I mean next to the meeting with Nixon, the other most iconic moment of the Presley for my generation, the whole era, when you think about it now, is when he went on television. Because it -- oh, well, it changed television. He didn't just change rock 'n roll. He changed television.

Jerry Schilling

Yeah, I produced a show on that called "Elvis from the Waist Up" with Andrew Solt, who has a beautiful DVD that just came out about the original three shows with Elvis in its entirety of the show. So you see where America was entertainment-wise back then. You know, there's jugglers, and there's -- and then, out comes Elvis. But we did a show about that, and actually, I got my friend Bono from U2 to narrate the show, and it talks a lot about America at that time and how Elvis was really changing, and how different it was. But the Sullivan thing was extremely important, and here again is a guy who

had publicly stated that he would never have Elvis on his Sunday night show. Well, it's amazing what ratings will do, because he was on Steve Allen and Tommy Dorsey, and killing Sullivan. And Sullivan had him on, three appearances, and there's a great moment at the end of the third appearance. First of all, another first for Elvis, he wanted to do a gospel song. Here he was, the great rock 'n roller, the sex symbol, the dangerous guy, and he promises mom he was going to do a special song for her. And they said, "You can't do a gospel song." And Elvis, "Oh yeah, I'm going to do 'Peace in the Valley.'" And after he did that song, Ed Sullivan walks out, puts his arm around Elvis Presley, and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I have never had a finer big-name star. He and the guys with him are truly -- this is a great guy, Mr. Elvis Presley."

Timothy Naftali

Did Elvis understand how much he was changing American culture?

Jerry Schilling

On a day-to-day basis, no, I don't think so. And you know, on a day-to-day basis, you have high points, and he feels great, but there are more days where things are not happening. There were seven years where he didn't get a hit record. There were ten years of movies he wasn't proud of. No, I don't. Did he know he was an important figure? Yes. Did he question a lot about who he was and why he was chosen to be so adulated and all of these things? Yes. But I really wish that he could see today his impact, his body of work that's still out there being produced. I mean if you just knew the things that were going on this year and next year, some 30 years after he's left us and 50 years after his career started, it's never happened before to any artist. You know, when Peter Jennings did the 20th Century show, and he had ten moments that he felt that changed history in the 20th century, there was only one hour -- there was ten hours -- and only one hour went to entertainment, and that was on Elvis Presley.

Timothy Naftali

Well, that's a great way to stop.

Jerry Schilling

Thank you.

Timothy Naftali

Thank you very much, Jerry.

Jerry Schilling

I enjoy speaking with you.

Timothy Naftali

This has been really wonderful; it's been wonderful.

Jerry Schilling

Thank you.

Timothy Naftali

Thank you for being so kind and helpful, and future generations will benefit from today. Thank you; it's your contribution to history.

Jerry Schilling

I have one thing that I don't know if we want to add or not.

Timothy Naftali

Well, go ahead.

Jerry Schilling

Well, but maybe it's better not said, but while we are here, and because it has been said, and originally it was on AOL on the Internet, a picture of Nixon and Elvis. And it says, you know, "An obvious high Elvis with President Nixon." You know, it is one of the most -- one of the two most unjust things ever said about Elvis Presley. And there was a writer who died a few years ago who came out and said that Elvis went to the White House, you know, and he was high and everything. Never talked to anybody that was there. But Elvis Presley was not -- he was strictly the sharpest that -- he was not on any medication or anything, and there -- have you ever heard those rumors?

Timothy Naftali

No.

Jerry Schilling

Let's leave it out, then.

Timothy Naftali

Well, it's just, no, I've not heard them.

Jerry Schilling

Yeah, yeah, I mean, you know as well as I do he would've never got to the President. He would never gotten through the conversation with Bud Egil Krogh.

Timothy Naftali

What I've heard is that some people, what they find somewhat contradictory is they know Elvis had some troubles with --

Jerry Schilling

Right, yes, and they get it confused.

Timothy Naftali

Well, they wonder, here he is, offering himself as a symbol to get people off drugs, and yet didn't he have a drug problem?

Jerry Schilling

Yeah, well, you know, that happened later. And unfortunately, you know, again, it goes back to my book. He had a problem. He didn't have a drug problem. He had a big-time creative problem that eventually, drugs became the band-aids to that problem, but it wasn't at this particular time. And that's what I always want to be clear on, because it's not fair to the President. It's not fair to Elvis. This was a great meeting, and a great American story.

Timothy Naftali

And you were there.

Jerry Schilling

I was there.

Timothy Naftali

Thank you for sharing it. Thanks, Jerry.