

**Timothy Naftali**

Hi, I'm Timothy Naftali, the Director of the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum.

**Senator John Kerry**

Glad to be with you.

**Timothy Naftali**

It's July 24, 2007, and I'm delighted that Senator Kerry has agreed to participate in the Nixon Oral History Program. Senator Kerry, let me start. When you were at Yale, what did you think about the Vietnam War? What did you know about it?

**Senator John Kerry**

Well, we were becoming more and more aware of it, as undergraduates, and concerned but still relatively supportive of the idea of a careful involvement, a careful escalation, if you will, that was geared towards what we could achieve. I think most of us at that point had not yet reached opposition, but there was a lot of doubt because of the draft and concern at that point in time. It was growing.

**Timothy Naftali**

So you opt -- you do your duty. Why do you decide to do a second tour?

**Senator John Kerry**

Well, I had, first of all, I volunteered to go into the military in 1965, not long after Lyndon Johnson called for some 500,000 additional troops. And I thought it was important for people to serve their country. My dad was a pilot in the Army Air Corps during World War II, didn't go overseas, but he was in the service and he got sick and was discharged. So I had a sense of, you know, what was required of you; that you ought to serve and be involved. At that point, as I said, we were set up for a quiet, careful escalation and I was committed to doing my part. In 1967, I think the first major march on the Pentagon took place. At that point in time, I was in uniform. I was a newly-minted officer, I'd just been sworn in December of the preceding year and reported for duty in January of that year. And that was a year of beginning of transition. I reported for duty on my ship, and in 1968, in the winter, my ship went over to the Gulf of Tonkin and I'd already put in for what was called "swift boat duty," which was the way, as a young officer at that point in time, to have command and be a skipper of a boat. And that came through while I was over there during the first tour. So it was almost automatic in that sense. I also was not then yet opposed to the war. I had questions, serious questions, but it hadn't risen to a kind of moral quandary or to a sense of clarity about what was wrong or how the policy wasn't working. And that really didn't hit me full force until I actually got in-country, when I went in the fall of 1968, which was after Gene McCarthy had challenged Lyndon Johnson in New Hampshire. It was after Martin Luther King had been assassinated, after Robert Kennedy had been assassinated, after even the Convention of Chicago. So there was an enormous amount of transformation that was taking place in all of us at a time when I had already received my orders and was on my way and committed to go.

**Timothy Naftali**

So, were you in the United States when those things were happening, or were you hearing about them through –

**Senator John Kerry**

I was not in the United States during part of it. I was on ship, I think either crossing the Pacific or on the Gulf of Tonkin. I think Martin Luther King was killed in March or April, I can't remember. I think April, yeah. So I would have been on station, in Yankee Station in the Gulf of Tonkin at that point in time. And the -- I think we went over in February, if I recall correctly, something like that, late January, February. And we came back in June, and at that point I was separated from my ship and had a period of leave. I was here in the United States for that part of the summer, in the period of leave, and then I reported for duty in the late summer to Coronado in San Diego.

**Timothy Naftali**

So were you actually in the United States when Robert Kennedy died?

**Senator John Kerry**

I arrived back from Vietnam. My ship was docking. In fact, the night before we were working on the so-called yearbook of our tour of duty and we heard the radio from the Ambassador Hotel that particular night. The next morning as we docked, he had not yet passed away, and I retreated with friends of mine to this home where we spent the vigil till we knew what had happened and then spent the rest of the weekend watching the sad events unfold.

**Timothy Naftali**

How did that affect what you thought of the war in Vietnam?

**Senator John Kerry**

It made me listen to Robert Kennedy and read some of the things he'd been saying and to take note of his campaign more than I'd been able to because I'd been away. And it certainly made me question what was happening in America, that after Martin Luther King, here was Robert Kennedy after John Kennedy, three major assassinations in our young, formative political years; that had a profound impact on us, but not specifically about Vietnam, per se. That really didn't, as I say, begin to go through its full transformation until I arrived in country and began to see firsthand things that disturbed me and things that had an impact on me.

**Timothy Naftali**

Could you –

**Senator John Kerry**

-- just wait one minute, please.

**Timothy Naftali**

Yes, sorry. You're supposed to go over, I think.

**Senator John Kerry**

No, I think there's a quorum call --[buzzer] Go ahead.

**Timothy Naftali**

Could you describe one or two of these incidents that had this profound effect on you when you were in --

**Senator John Kerry**

Well, it was cumulative. It was all kinds of things ranging from the degree to which I saw we Americans carrying the brunt of the war, the degree to which I saw either corruption or incompetency in certain functions that the Vietnamese were supposed to be carrying out, the degree to which the Vietnamese were really sort of in a sub-status with respect to the engagement, and then many of the realities of the missions that we went on, the kinds of -- you know, when you did a board and a search for instance trying to discern who was who, reading the papers, which were indistinguishable from other papers, names that you couldn't distinguish, names that were sometimes repetitive and lists that were duplicative and so forth and so on. It was kind of chaotic. Then, later on as the missions became transformed into what were called search and destroy missions, we began to see, you know, the great difficulty of trying to win over the hearts and minds of people that you're trying to persuade who were running from harassment and interdiction fire or free fire zones or other kinds of things. There was just a real confrontation with what we could achieve. And I began to see the things that I would later read in Neil Sheehan's "A Bright Shining Lie," where you began to see reports of the events that we were in greatly exaggerated in the press, the events we had actually taken part in or the numbers of enemy killed, much larger than those that we thought we had reported and so forth. And it began to raise very serious questions about what kind of information was reaching whom and who was saying and doing what.

**Timothy Naftali**

What were your crewmates saying to you? Were they also beginning to have doubts?

**Senator John Kerry**

There were mixed feelings, like not everybody -- there were great debates. There were real differences of opinion. There were folks who, you know, didn't share the same perception of what might or might not be wrong or working and others who just felt it was their duty to go straight ahead and not ask any questions and perhaps not even take note of some of those things. And then there were a lot of people

who agreed, a lot of folks who wrote diaries or wrote home. I've had guys come up to me 30 years later who said, "You know, I disagreed with you back then when you said what you said, but I went and reread my own diary and by God, everything you had said was in my own diary."

**Timothy Naftali**

Did you talk to any of your superior officers about these –

**Senator John Kerry**

Oh sure. We talked, absolutely. We talked to people about them. It was difficult for everybody and it was a very difficult time, not just at home but obviously over there, too. And after that, you know, that obviously – that impression grew among many of the soldiers over there and you began to see a lot more people returning from the -- as you do from Iraq today. There are many more people coming back from Iraq today who see a different thing from what you hear some of the administration officials reporting. It was very similar in that regard.

**Timothy Naftali**

Tell us a little something about your decision to be public once you got home in your office?

**Senator John Kerry**

Well, the decision to be public when I got home, I actually made over there. I mean, that was why I decided when I was offered the choice, when I was told, you know, "You've won your third Purple Heart; you can go home." And it wasn't an immediate, instant decision. I went through some uncertainties, but then I thought it was the right thing to do. I believe today that it was the right thing to do because I said, "This is wrong. I have to speak out about it, and I have to oppose it." I went back and I began to do that the moment I got back by writing, writing a lot of stuff, beginning to circulate it among some friends in New York, working quietly. And ultimately I went to the admiral that I'd been assigned to as an aide and explained to him that, you know, I wanted to get an early release, and he permitted me to do so.

**Timothy Naftali**

How did you become involved in Operation RAW? How did you get to Valley Forge?

**Senator John Kerry**

I went to Valley Forge only tangentially. I was not on that march. I was asked to come down and speak by somebody -- I can't even recall who. And so I drove down and I went to the final rally at Valley Forge and I spoke. That was the extent of my sort of involvement in the Valley Forge event. But I did speak at that rally.

**Timothy Naftali**

And then you decided to witness the Winter Soldier Investigation. You were there –

**Senator John Kerry**

Again, I was asked to, by somebody or told by somebody that this event was taking place. A great friend of mine was A VISTA volunteer out in Detroit and he thought it'd be terrific to come out and see what was happening in Detroit and see what they were doing at VISTA, which I saw, and see what was happening in the streets of Detroit, which I saw, which was then a relatively chaotic, even dangerous place in many respects, and attend what was called the Winter Soldier Investigation. And I came, and I took part as an interested party listening. I think I presided over one of the panels and asked questions of people, and was somewhat struck by the absence of a lot of reporting on it, which is one of the things that motivated me to think about going to Washington because I thought it was important. I thought it was worthy that people listen to this. Whether you believe it all or don't believe it all, it should have been investigated. It should have been listened to. It should have been of concern to anybody in authority. When people who produce a DD-214, which is your legitimization as a veteran, are sitting there with their credentials as a veteran, honorably discharged, saying this is what happened, the least you could do is ask some questions about it, and that's what I thought ought to happen.

**Timothy Naftali**

So what role did you play in organizing Dewey Canyon?

**Senator John Kerry**

I played a big role in organizing that. I was very involved. [Unidentified Speaker] You have five minutes.

**Senator John Kerry**

I became very motivated sort of as a -- you know, even upset that those questions weren't being asked and people weren't seemingly concerned about the kinds of things that these folks were saying. In addition to what I knew to be the truth about the war as I had come to know it and see it and live it firsthand, and I thought it was really important to stop the killings, stop the dying. I felt that it was a craven policy, empty at that point, which history has proven was a correct judgment, proven by even Robert McNamara who has written subsequently that in 1971, he knew years before that it was a mistake, that it wasn't going to work. So I thought it was just a moral, compelling responsibility to go to Washington and talk to the people who could stop what was happening or change what was happening.

**Timothy Naftali**

Did you ever fear you'd be treated like the Bonus March?

**Senator John Kerry**

Not a -- not a dream of that, not even a nightmare, as the case may be. But I mean, I didn't have any inkling that veterans would be met with that kind of almost stupid reaction. I mean, it was silly. I mean,

for heaven's sakes, they should have come out and listened. They should have come out and said, "Well, if you're an honest, legitimate, bona fide veteran, and we have all the ways of the world of making sure of that" -- and they did, and so they checked countless numbers of them hoping to expose everybody as not being legitimate -- "that we ought to listen to you." It seems to me that's one of the great lessons that I learned and have tried to apply as a senator, as a public official, which is sometimes it's uncomfortable, sometimes it didn't sit well, but it's important to listen to people even when you disagree with them. I've had people in here on Iraq who have looked me in the eye and shouted at me saying, you know, "What happened to the guy who opposed the war then?" and this and that. And I've said, you know, "I do oppose it, but you have to do this in a responsible way." That's one of the lessons we learned in that period of time. So, I was shocked that there was that kind of paranoia, that kind of not just suspicion, but willful desire to attack and discredit and smear and impugn the quality of the service of many of these people who came down there.

**Timothy Naftali**

Were you -- you were just discussing --

**Senator John Kerry**

Give him a minute more.

**Timothy Naftali**

If I may.

**Senator John Kerry**

Yeah, we've got to be quick because -- I'm sorry, I apologize.

**Timothy Naftali**

That's okay. Did you know that the Nixon administration had chosen John O'Neill?

**Senator John Kerry**

Yes. I didn't know then, but I learned it later --

**Timothy Naftali**

You didn't know then?

**Senator John Kerry**

I did not have any idea then. I didn't have any idea then that another fellow was spying on me during the time I was in Washington, had been sent over by Mr. Colson, Chuck Colson. But I learned it in a rather rude way in Philadelphia, where I'd been invited to go talk to the mayor's conference, and I'd heard that John O'Neill was there, so I actually went up to their hotel room and knocked on the door.

And it opened, and there was not just John O'Neill but this fellow who'd been spying on me who I learned was working with Chuck Colson. So the two of them were in there, you know, talking about our mutual appearance before the mayor's conference in Philadelphia at that period of time. And we learned subsequently through many different people that he had been sort of handpicked and selected to come in and do the counter job.

**Timothy Naftali**

How did you -- how was it that you gave this testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations --

**Senator John Kerry**

Purely by accident, totally by accident. I had no expectation of testifying to Congress, I had no schedule to testify before Congress. We came down here, we were demonstrating and talking and meeting with senators and congressmen and doing various things around the city with the media, et cetera. But we also had to raise some money, so I happened to be at a fundraiser that Senator Phil Hart, former Senator Phil Hart from Michigan, and his wife Jane put together at their home. And it was in the evening and I was there making a presentation to the people who were assembled there. And in the back of the room, unbeknownst to me, was J. William Fulbright, the Chairman of Foreign Relations Committee, who heard what I was saying. And the next thing I knew, I was down on the Mall in the evening and somebody came and said, "You've been invited to speak to the Foreign Relations Committee tomorrow morning." This was Wednesday, next morning Thursday, and I said, "Fine," you know, "What time do I appear?" and so forth. And I stayed up most of the night pulling together my thoughts --

**Timothy Naftali**

Where did you do it? Where did you write it?

**Senator John Kerry**

Down on the Mall, in a tent. We were sitting down there talking with the guys who were there, and I think Teddy Kennedy came down that night.

**Timothy Naftali**

Did you talk to him?

**Senator John Kerry**

Oh, yeah. I did, I met him and there's a photograph of me with Ted down there at that particular time, which I still have. And we sat around in a tent and talked late into the night. It was a pretty interesting evening.

**Timothy Naftali**

You're facing a tough challenge now. What did you learn about pulling out of an unpopular war? You said something very powerful before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee about asking someone to be the last person to die for a war –

**Senator John Kerry**

Well, I think it's obviously that -- that is a pregnant question. How do you ask somebody to die for a mistake? And the key to that lesson to me today is to not have it be a mistake, to try to find a way to avoid the mistake part of it. I still believe you could do that in Iraq, but it's going to take some forceful diplomacy, some enormous lift diplomatically and politically in order to do it. I also learned that you want to honor the sacrifice of the troops, you want to honor that service and you want to try to find a way that does honor it legitimately for the long-term. The way to do that, I believe, in Iraq is to try to achieve a level of stability that gives the Iraqis their best chance to be able to make something of their government, to avoid the Iranian influence, to end this strife between Shi'a and Sunni and ultimately they will turn on Al Qaeda, I believe, because I don't think they want foreign jihadists in their country. So I think there is a path, and the key to me is to be thoughtful about our long-term strategic interests. We have those interests in the Middle East. We have clear interests in supporting Israel's, clear interests in fostering democracy, but we have to do it in a far more intelligent way than misleading people about things that are happening and attracting more terrorists to the cause rather than lessening them.

**Timothy Naftali**

So you don't see a parallel between Vietnam and Iraq?

**Senator John Kerry**

Sure there are parallels. There are huge parallels. There are parallels in that the government hasn't been altogether candid with the American people. There are parallels in that facts have been distorted, cherry-picked. There are parallels in that not a lot of thinking was done about history and culture and the nature of terrain and what we confronted, not a lot of planning. All of those things are parallels, but there are also huge distinctions. I don't believe that Iraq is Vietnam in the larger strategic interests. Obviously, there are differences in terms of what the stakes are because of Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda is real. I just believe there's a better way to fight Al Qaeda, a smarter way to fight Al Qaeda. And I think that what we're doing now is counterproductive to that fight, but I can find a way -- I know a way to be able to provide that honor and meaning to the service and sacrifice of those soldiers so that we wind up putting Al Qaeda on the defensive and not isolating ourselves. That's what we ought to be doing and I think there are ways to do that. So in the end, and there also is another parallel, which is not unimportant incidentally. I'm proud that those of us who were part of the effort to try to end the war, who are veterans, always put our brother/sister veterans up front in that struggle. And we are the ones who started the first psychological outreach efforts with Dr. Robert Lifton at Yale in order to have what we were then called rap sessions, but which evolved into the understanding of Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome. And we ultimately created the veteran's outreach centers and the clinics that have been a critical element of service to veterans for the last 35, 40 years. In addition to that, we got the Agent Orange recognition and designation. We got the GI Bill extended so that veterans were able to go to school even after they've come back and kind of dropped out for awhile because of the nature of

the war. We got allowances for books and for living allowances raised. Almost every single thing that happened with respect to Vietnam veterans, including the Vietnam Wall, the memorial to the veterans, came through the effort of fellow Vietnam veterans who went out and fought for those things, not just a government that spontaneously said, "Here, thank you." And that's one of the biggest lessons. Never confuse the war with the warriors. Unfortunately, in Vietnam, it was confused and a lot of folks got hurt as a result. And I'm resolved that never, ever again should that confusion take place, and I'm proud that as a result of that lesson, being well-learned by everybody in this country, the veterans returning from Iraq and the veterans -- those guys serving in Iraq, all of them, that the gratitude of our nation is so clear and so different, and the way in which they're being thanked and now, finally, hopefully taken care of as they come back and that's another parallel, that is what happened at Walter Reed and some of the mental health issues and other things they're going to face are gigantic as they were in our generation. We have an obligation to make sure never again do they have to go out and be the ones to fight for what they're due. We have to deliver it and that's one of the things that I hope I can do as I remain here as a senator.

**Timothy Naftali**

Thank you, Senator Kerry. I appreciate the time.

**Senator John Kerry**

I appreciate it. Thanks.