

Timothy Naftali

I'm Tim Naftali. I'm Director of the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum.

David Kennerly

I'm so sorry.

Timothy Naftali

Take two -- no, that's all right. I keep a sense of humor about it.

David Kennerly

[unintelligible] Yes, I think so.

Timothy Naftali

It's January 28, 2008.

David Kennerly

And tonight, George W. Bush is giving the State of the Union --

Timothy Naftali

That's right --

David Kennerly

-- his last one.

Timothy Naftali

-- so if you want context, you've got it now.

David Kennerly

Yep.

Timothy Naftali

I'm fortunate enough to be with David Hume Kennerly, a Pulitzer Prize winning photographer. I can't thank you enough for agreeing to participate in our oral history program, David, thank you.

David Kennerly

It's the least I can do for my country. And the Richard Nixon Library.

Timothy Naftali

And the Richard Nixon Library.

David Kennerly

Yes.

Timothy Naftali

There's some vignettes I want to get on tape for historians and the interested public. I wanted to ask you about Los Angeles, June 1968, Ambassador Hotel. Tell us where you were and what happened.

David Kennerly

Well, I was 21 years-old, working for UPI. I had just moved down from Portland, Oregon, where I worked on "The Oregonian," and I'd covered Robert Kennedy's campaign a little bit. He's actually the first big-time politician that I photographed for the first time, two years earlier in Portland, in fact. And primary night, I was over at the Ambassador Hotel, and I'd actually gotten to know Kennedy a little bit. I went on a trip with him to New Mexico and to Arizona. He went to Window Rock and visited some Navajo kids. So I knew some of the players, and so I got upstairs, I actually have a photograph of me and Robert Kennedy together that one of my friends took in the hallway of the Ambassador Hotel up where he was staying. He had done some interviews upstairs, and then I went downstairs and there was another UPI photographer there, also from Oregon. We flipped a coin to see who would be up on the podium and then who would be in the back on the risers taking the photos, and I lost, so I ended up on the risers. But I had a picture, if you saw the film, he had just won the primary. It was a huge victory for him, and he gave the V for victory sign, but he flashed it so fast -- I didn't even realize it until years later how quick it was. But I have a picture of him going like this, and it was literally like this. It was that quick. And then they went off the stage and back through the kitchen, and that's where he was shot by Sirhan. And I had already started down to an overflow ballroom where Kennedy was going to go to speak to some other people. Of course, he never made that. And I heard that there'd been a shooting, and I went outside, and an ambulance came up. And I got a picture of Ethel in the back of the ambulance, but I never really saw Robert Kennedy. And then went over to the hospital and was on a stakeout over there, and of course, he died at the hospital. But in my whole career, I think that was one of the worst nights I've ever had, because I really admired him very much, had become friendly with him a little bit, and he was a great subject, very charismatic. And that's why all those pictures of the Kennedys are good, you know, they exuded this personality, and I think they had a particular affection for photographers and photographers for them.

Timothy Naftali

Tell us a little -- because of course we're interested in the '68 campaign here -- tell us a little bit about what you remember of the trips to Arizona and New Mexico. What was he like to cover? What was Robert Kennedy like?

David Kennerly

Well, I'll tell you one story. Because I was so young, and I was really new on the national stage, UPI out of L.A. had sent me to cover his trip. And he was flying around on an old DC3. I mean, it was really kind of fun. And I was supposed to get on the plane to fly from one stop to the next, and they wouldn't, his staff wouldn't let me on the plane because they didn't know me from Adam. So finally I got really mad about it and said, "I'm from UPI," and finally, they reluctantly let me on board. They figured I was, you know, who I said I was. And I was sitting there, and Kennedy came walking on to the airplane. And he walked by me, and then he looked over and realized this was somebody he didn't know, so he said, just stopped and said, "Hi, how are you doing? How's it going?" I said, "Well not very well, Senator." I said, "Your people almost didn't let me get on this plane, probably would've cost me my job." He said, "Who did that?" And I told him who it was, and so I blew the whistle on the guy. And afterwards the staff was really nice to me, but he was great. You know, he just -- you know, in a way it's like covering John McCain now, a different character, certainly, a different personality, but it's as close to that kind of a campaign where you don't have all the security hassles and everything else. There are just, the modern campaigns, because of the inherent danger that these folks face now when they're out there, has just changed dramatically. And I think the Robert Kennedy assassination had a lot to do with that.

Timothy Naftali

Since we want to give people context, were you in South Carolina with McCain? You were in New Hampshire with McCain, weren't you?

David Kennerly

This year, in the 2008 campaign, I was with McCain election night in New Hampshire and a debate down in Boca Raton with all the Republicans. But in the year 2000, I covered his whole campaign, and so I was like, I was permanent party on the Straight Talk Express, which is his bus and really enjoyed it. And we have the Vietnam connection, I mean, I was never a POW, but I spent two and a half years there, and so -- he's older than I am by about 10 years, but I found him to be extremely down to earth and a little cantankerous, which is okay. I mean, he's got his own personality, which he doesn't hide. I think being around him is as close to how things used to be in terms of access to a candidate.

Timothy Naftali

This is a great segue to Vietnam. How do you end up in Vietnam, and what year did you get there?

David Kennerly

Well I was -- in 1968 -- well, backing up, I graduated from high school in 1965, and so a lot of that was the first year, I think, that we were really looking down the barrel of that Vietnam situation in terms of the draft and all that. I was 1A, meaning very eligible for the draft, and that was before they had the lottery. And I actually ended up getting into a National Guard unit, and probably, in the back of my mind, not that I didn't want to go to Vietnam as a military person. I was not your typical draft dodger, but, at any rate, I later made up for that where I have a very unique story where I had to get out of the Army in order to go to the war and had to get out of the National Guard to get a leave so I

could go to Vietnam as a combat photographer for UPI. And as the Chief of Staff for the Army put it, he didn't think, by allowing that, that he was creating an ugly precedent.

Timothy Naftali

You mentioned that your friend actually knew the Chief of Staff of the Army.

David Kennerly

Well, the guy who helped me out was a two-star general who was a reserve officer in Washington, D.C., and he thought anybody who was crazy enough to want to go over to Vietnam of his own accord probably should be allowed to do so. And so that's what happened. And I was -- it was very important for me to go to Vietnam. I was the same age as the soldiers who were there. Certainly, my friends, a lot of my friends were over there, and some had been killed. But as a news photographer, I could not let that story go by. And I knew if I didn't go, years later I would be wondering why I didn't do it. And I didn't want to be one of those people, and I know a lot of them who made excuses, saying, "Well I couldn't do it because of this or that." I'm talking about people in my own business. I've never made excuses about anything. And so I went over for two and a half years and won the Pulitzer Prize for the work I did the first year I was there. When I was 25, I got the Prize, which is something I didn't even know I'd been put up for. And then I joined "Life" magazine, and then they folded not too long afterwards, and then "Time," and then I came back to Washington. But one of the things that happened to me as a UPI photographer, this gets back into the Nixon time, I had covered Nixon to some degree in 196 -- I'd covered Nixon to some degree in 1968. Actually, the first time I believe I saw him was when they came after the convention in Miami out to Mission Bay near San Diego and putting together a campaign strategy. And back in those days, nobody really cared that much about the Vice President, and so Dirk Halsted was the chief photographer at UPI, the chief political photographer, and he was covering Nixon at the convention and all that. And so I came down from L.A. to really help develop his film and anything I could do to help. And so one Sunday morning they said, "You should go cover Spiro Agnew going to church." And it's like, these days even the VP candidates have all the press around and all that. But then, I mean, A, nobody really knew who Agnew was, to speak of. He'd just been picked by Nixon. .

And so I went over, and I was waiting outside where Agnew came out, and he said, "Good morning," and he was very friendly to me. I said, "I'm Dave Kennerly. I'm here from UPI, and I want to go and take a picture of you. You know, watch you go into church, but your staff doesn't have any car for the press. And he kind of looked around and he said, "Well that's okay, you can just ride with the Secret Service," and those guys flipped out. This was not something you did, and so they begrudgingly allowed me into their car. But I always thought Agnew was very nice after that, you know, because I was kind of panicked. I didn't know where they were going and all that. And so I covered Nixon a little bit, particularly on the West Coast, and then I moved to New York. Then, of course, he was elected President, and I moved to New York and then to Washington, D.C. in early 1970. And as a part of the press pool, as a UPI photographer, I think I was 23 years-old, I had my first ride on Air Force One, because I have a certificate. It was May of 1970. I can't remember the exact date. And I think he came out to San Clemente or something, and whatever the ride was, which was pretty exciting for me. And I also remember that the press corps, we loved Coors beer, and you couldn't buy it back in Washington, so I know for a fact that a lot of Coors beer made it back on Air Force One from California back to Washington, D.C. So I was flying pretty high then as a UPI photographer. But one of the best stories I had about Nixon was Christmas Eve of 1970, and the wire service photographers and reporters are just

always there until they're told by the press staff that they have a lid for the day, meaning no more news will be committed by the President. And it was getting late, and we were in the press room, everybody else had gone home. It was I and Harvey George [phonetic sp], the AP photographer; Gene Risher of UPI, who was filling in for Helen Thomas; and a couple other people I can't remember. And we were just sitting there, and Ron Ziegler came into the press room, and he said, "Okay, you guys, come with me."

And so I grabbed the cameras, and Harvey and I both took up our cameras and he said, "No, no, no, no photos. You can't bring your camera along." And so it's like, okay, we have no idea what's going on. So he leads us out of the West Wing, down the stairs, up the stairs to the Executive Office building to these big doors, and inside there was an unmarked door there, and it opens, and it's Richard Nixon's private hideaway office. And he's standing there, and he says, "Come on in, Merry Christmas." And I said, "Wow, this is, like, unbelievable." I mean, I've never talked to the guy, you know, he's always at the other side of the lens. He ushered us in, and he said, "I just wanted to say Merry Christmas and have you over." Now, anybody who knows anything about Nixon would find this kind of peculiar, I think, that he would be choosing to spend time with some press people. And so he looks at everybody and says, "Well I want to have you, get a drink for you," and he looks right at me and he says, "What would you like to drink?" And, you know I was not, like, a big drinker. I'm thinking what in the I'm thinking what -- what in the world, the President of the United States just asked me what I want to drink and I just thought, "My dad drank martinis." "Mr. President, I'll have a martini." And he says, "Good choice." And he goes into this little hideaway kitchen, and he pulls out all his implements and he takes a bottle off the shelf and it was Beefeaters™, and he held it up like this, like an ad, he says, "Can't make a good martini without Beefeaters™." And I'm going, "Wow, this is amazing." And he brings a shaker out and puts the ice in and goes through the whole thing and gets some olives out and a martini glass and shakes it up and pours it in and plops the olive in and hands it to me. And I'm just standing there, and he goes, you know, like, "Have a drink." So I take a sip and he looks at me, he says, "How is it?" And I said, "That's good." He says, "It's the only thing I do well." And that was it. And we stood around and talked with him. And he'd talk about baseball and this and that, and I thought, this is really one of the most incredible things, because I'm just, I'm a wire service photographer, I'm a young kid, and here's the President of the United States. I mean, back then that was like a really big deal because Nixon didn't schmooze that much with anybody, but it's one of the most memorable experiences that I ever had with the President.

Timothy Naftali

Wow, that's incredible. Tell us about --

David Kennerly

I bet you didn't know he was a great martini maker.

Timothy Naftali

Actually, he continued to make martinis well into the post-Presidency --

David Kennerly

He did.

Timothy Naftali

-- and was very proud of that.

David Kennerly

Yeah.

Timothy Naftali

You were here with him and there was a school, I guess, and the birthplace. You have a photo, or there's a photograph of you -- of him at the birthplace in '68, tell us about that.

David Kennerly

That's right. When I was visiting here earlier, we went to the Richard Nixon birthplace. I have a photograph I took of him, I think, and I honestly can't remember, it may have been 1970. You know what, now that I think about it, it was -- because I think I was a pool photographer -- I think it was on a trip in 1970 where he came out, and it may have been his first time to visit since he was the President, and we were inside when he came walking in the door. And I remember Dwight Chapin was in the photo, like he was the one that led him into the door. And he's kind of looking through the door. It's not a spectacular moment. It's not even a really great picture, but the one thing picture, and the one thing I remember is how, just looking, I could see it in his eyes though, looking around in that little tiny house where he grew up, I guess the first seven years of his life. I mean, it kind of reminded me of -- are you familiar with Gahan Wilson, the cartoonist? He was a student of Charles Adams --

Timothy Naftali

Oh, Charles Addams?

David Kennerly

-- doing these macabre kind of, macabre cartoons, but there's one of my favorite cartoons that I remembered of his is this guy, you know grown up person, walks into this house and is looking around and it's his childhood home. And there're like, windowsills are way up there, and the chairs are these huge chairs and he says, "It's just exactly the way I remember it." And so I think, I'm wondering what was going through Nixon's mind. I mean, here he's been, he's the President of the United States, and that house is really tiny. That must have been quite an experience for him.

Timothy Naftali

Did you cover any of the demonstrations before you left for Vietnam?

David Kennerly

Yes, I didn't leave for Vietnam until -- it was March of '71. And in fact, I was, my pool month was when they invaded Cambodia, the Parrot's Beak, and I was in the Oval Office. I have pictures of

Nixon pointing at that area of Cambodia where they were attacking, and that was the time where they surrounded Lafayette Park and the White House with buses, like nose to nose all the way around. And I covered quite a bit of that, of the upheaval. And, you know, for my months on covering Nixon, and it was interesting for me, because as a wire photographer, I was always, we never would really get access of any kind, but I was always asking to do pictures of the President getting ready for his big State of the Union speech or this or that. I was a real pain to these people because I thought, you know, it's just, sitting back outside on the other side of the ropes all the time, you never get any sense of who this guy was or is. And so I became really kind of a thorn in the side of some of these people there in the White House Press Office. And one day, as you know, every Thanksgiving the President pardons the turkey, it's like a tradition. And they brought this turkey into the Rose Garden and Nixon came out and I don't know, I suppose they drug these turkeys or something, but not this time. So Nixon came walking out, and the turkey spread its wings and clipped Nixon on the tip of the nose, and I nailed this picture of that happening, and it ran on the front of -- I remember "The Washington Star" ran it on the front page. And so I immediately get a phone call from, I think it was Bruce Whelihan that was the Deputy Press Secretary or assistant saying, "How could you do that?" You know, blah blah blah. I said, "You know, I would trade any number of photographs of Nixon actually doing something for a thousand of those." I mean, just one picture of Nixon working, of him being himself in the Oval Office. This kind of picture just happened, and I got a picture of it, but I'm not proud of that. I wasn't out to get him or anything, although I think that's how they felt about it.

And then there was another instance too, where Nixon, there was a picture of him. I'd come back from Vietnam, and I was covering him again back in late '73, and Watergate was going on and all that. And so in '74, I had not been over to the Oval Office or to the White House that much. I came over. I was shocked at the way Nixon looked. And I was in a photo op in the Oval Office, one of those in and out quick things, and I think he was either talking, I can't remember, meeting with either Bill Simon, who was Treasury Secretary or Roy Ash, who was, I guess, OMB. And he just looked kind of haggard. And I took some pictures of him, not real tight, but like fairly close-ups of him, and then "Time" magazine in the next week's issue ran this picture of Nixon not looking terribly good. [coughing] Excuse me. "Time" ran the picture, and it created a huge flap. The White House Press staff was talking about how that picture was out of context and really took some hits. And then people on the Hill were very concerned about Nixon's state of mind, and even my former bosses at UPI sided with the White House, saying "Well this is obviously out of context." Well, it was not out of context. If you even looked at the frames, there were some that even were worse than that, and actually, it was pretty representative of what I saw. Flash forward, Nixon has resigned, I'm in the White House as the President's photographer, and Al Haig was still the Chief of Staff at that time, and I sat down and had a conversation with Haig. And one of the things I asked him was about that photograph. He said, "Well, you know that was the day that the 18-minute gap had been discovered, and Nixon had not slept all night." He said, "In fact, when that picture came out, you essentially really caught what was going on with him." I said, "Bingo." But on the other hand, they had no qualms about, like, attacking me for doing it, and it's one of the interesting things about my career and through the eyes of photographers. Photographers are generally never out to get anybody. I don't know one photographer who would've said, "I think I'll just go out and make somebody look as bad as I can today." We don't think that way. I mean, people can look bad in their own right, but stupid pictures like eating or things, we don't even take pictures like that. This was a genuinely important moment, and I was genuinely raked over the coals for it by the White House Staff.

Timothy Naftali

Did they threaten to shut off your access?

David Kennerly

No, no, they didn't threaten me, but I got phone calls about it, and they were complaining to other press people about that. And you know, having just been through two and a half years of Vietnam, I wasn't really concerned about what was going to happen to me from them, but I did -- obviously, I sensed some defensiveness on the part of the White House staff about Nixon's state of mind at the time.

Timothy Naftali

We could spend a long time talking about Vietnam. It's so important as a witness, I mean, you were there, you win a Pulitzer Prize. What surprised you when you arrived there? You'd been in the Army.

David Kennerly

Well, no, I hadn't been in the Army, I'd been in the Reserves.

Timothy Naftali

Reserves.

David Kennerly

I mean, I did six months active duty.

Timothy Naftali

But you'd been on active duty?

David Kennerly

I'd been on active duty, and all those guys, or a lot of those guys were heading to Vietnam. I had been trained as a, you know, the basic training for a soldier, and then I went to Fort Benjamin Harrison for defense information school, but it wasn't like, you know, next stop is Vietnam as an Army guy.

Timothy Naftali

So what was it like when you got to Saigon?

David Kennerly

It was the first time that I'd really been out of the country other than to a quick trip to Europe and Canada, you know, and so there was really not a lot -- I mean, going to Southeast Asia was shocking just by the sounds and the smells, and everything about it was exciting. I mean, I think the best pictures

I took were probably in the first six to eight months that I was in Vietnam, because everything was new, and I was out in the field and getting shot at, and it was all in all. But as a young guy, you know living in Saigon and making these forays out, I couldn't have asked for more as a young news photographer. There was no familiarity to overcome because everything was just brand new and visually stunning, and the people were different, and it was such a rich experience for me. I mean, other than almost getting killed occasionally. You can, like Olympic scores, throw those out, you know, but all the other scores kind of overcame it in a way.

Timothy Naftali

What was your beat? Did you stick with certain units?

David Kennerly

No, my beat was wherever I wanted to go. Generally, we would, if there was a battle going on somewhere or big action taking place, we would just try to get there. And for the most part, the northern provinces of Vietnam were where you really had the action, called I Corps, and up along the border with North Vietnam. So I spent a lot of time up there near Hue and Phú Bài and -- but then as the war progressed, there was a lot more fighting around Saigon certainly and then down in the Delta area. I covered every place. I got around Vietnam everywhere, and I went to Cambodia also, that was part of my area.

Timothy Naftali

For people who are interested in seeing how the coverage of wars, American wars shifts, tell us. You don't have that kind of access anymore, do you?

David Kennerly

Well, I think the difference between -- it's almost impossible to compare today to then. For instance, we had unlimited access to getting space available to go on a helicopter or C130 to fly from Saigon up to Đà Nẵng or up further north. I mean, you could, you were, as a photographer, particularly, you were welcome out there with the troops. I mean, the fact that somebody who didn't have to be there would show up was like a big deal. like a big deal, like a -- I was always being asked, "Well if you don't have to be here, why are you here?" I mean, like, in their mind, "I wouldn't be here for any amount of money on the face of the earth." And so we had the ability to get around pretty much wherever we wanted to go. If a helicopter was flying into a hot landing zone and you had either the guts or the stupidity to go in on it, you could get there. Nowadays, I think the military is much more controlling of what happens. In the case of Iraq, particularly, I think it's really dangerous over there because they really are out to get you. You know, I mean when you what's happened to some of the reporters at the hands of, you know, Islamic terrorists, and I wouldn't feel -- I've been over there several times, but not where I would walk down the street in Baghdad. In Saigon, really it was like, it would've been conceivable -- things did happen in Saigon, but so rarely. It wasn't like you didn't feel comfortable when you were there. It was sort of like coming back from the war. But nowadays, there's nothing good about it, and it's so hard to cover, and you have to be with a unit or be embedded, whatever they call it. Back, you know, we could just come and go in the good old days, and now it's just much more difficult, and it's a different terrain.

Timothy Naftali

What was the morale like?

David Kennerly

The morale with whom?

Timothy Naftali

Well, you gave us a sense of it when you said, "People wondered what the hell you were doing there since you didn't have to be there."

David Kennerly

When I got to Vietnam, of course, American involvement was starting to wind down. And so -- in fact, I was there when the Americal Division wrapped up their flag. The American soldiers, although there were some operations going on, it was really more they were becoming advisors to the South Vietnamese forces. And so I don't suppose there was many draftees there by the time I got there. Certainly the heyday times of Vietnam were '67, 8, 9, and going into '70 before the withdrawal started. I spent quite a bit of time with American troops, certainly. But again, morale-wise, it wasn't bad. I mean, I was kind of surprised reading one thing, and this always happens, and finding out something else. You know, like people all out there smoking dope and doing all this stuff, I know that happened, but I was fortunate enough not to really be around that. I mean, for one thing it'd be dangerous to be out with soldiers who were stoned out of their mind. That wouldn't be the group I wanted to be with.

Timothy Naftali

Did you interact with any officers who later became prominent military officers?

David Kennerly

Well, my favorite officer's name was Jim Hollingsworth, when I met him, he was a two-star general. And in Vietnam, his code name was Danger Seven Niner, and he was a fantastic guy, and he ended up getting a third star. And he was a Deputy up in Korea when we came through, as President Ford, when Ford visited Korea in 1974. But he was one of those, kind of George Patton kind of guys, much better in time of war than peace. So he would always get himself in trouble with the kind of things he was saying. Somebody would ask him, "Well General, what do you do if they come across, the North Koreans come across the DMZ?" He says, "Well, we'll destroy them with violence." He's a very unpolitical guy, but a wonderful man. But in terms of people who really went on to become huge, you know, guys like General Weyand, but he was already Chief of Staff of the Army when Ford was President. I went back to Vietnam with him on a fact-finding mission. The fact was we'd lost the war. That was the big, bad fact, and he was there and I went with him right before the end of the Vietnam -

Timothy Naftali

Oh, actually, since you brought it up, I mean, President Ford talks about this in his memoirs.

David Kennerly

Yes.

Timothy Naftali

He sent you -- I mean, President Ford knew we had lost the war. Did he -- why'd he send you?

David Kennerly

Well I think everybody, I mean it was all kind of folding up and he sent Weyand, who was the Army Chief of Staff at the time, to Saigon to talk to Thieu [and see what, if anything, could be done. Đà Nang was falling, and I actually got out, I mean, because President Ford had sent me along with the Weyand trip. He sort of wanted my perspective. I had spent a lot of time in Vietnam, and as a -- I told him I wanted to go over there and just see, you know, I had a lot of friends who worked for UPI and "Time" magazine and Vietnamese who were there. And I even had the CIA, flew me into Cambodia into Phnom Penh, which was totally under siege because I had top-secret clearance and all that. When I got to the embassy, I asked for a briefing, and I went into their secret room and here was Phnom Penh and here are all these red arrows. He said, "There's your briefing." You know, and like three weeks later, you know if you ever saw "The Killing Fields," I mean, that was it. And I had several of my friends there who were going to stick it out and all that, and they later became big characters in that movie. And they fortunately didn't get killed by the Khmer Rouge. But then I got back over to Vietnam, and I was in Nha Trang when it fell. The Communists were advancing, and the chopper I was on was shot at by South Vietnamese troops. I was with the General Counsel in Nha Trang, and that somehow got on the wire that Ford's photographer had been shot at. And my parents, of course, didn't know I'd gone back to Vietnam, and then they hear this story, and so the President had to call them up and tell them I was okay, you know. But when I got back to the White House, I told the President that anyone who says that Vietnam has more than three or four weeks left is kidding you. I put it a little more strongly than that. But -- and in fact, three weeks later Saigon fell.

Timothy Naftali

What was his reaction, do you remember?

David Kennerly

It wasn't my fault.

Timothy Naftali

No, no, no, but what was his reaction when you told him?

David Kennerly

His reaction was -- it was such a sad time. I think what people forget that we had -- his reaction, once it became apparent that it was going to, that the house of cards was coming down, he, despite advice to the contrary from other people, thought it was really important for the U.S. to get as many Vietnamese

out as possible who had worked, that were high-risk people who had worked for the Americans. And there were some in the Administration who just wanted to get the Americans out and that was going to be that, and he was adamant and really went to the wire on it. And of course Ambassador Graham Martin, you know, kept not leaving Saigon when being ordered out, and I think Kissinger or somebody said that, "Well, Martin has now gotten 10,000 of his last 5,000 Vietnamese out," you know. But the President facilitated, kept the door open as long as possible with all those waves of helicopters coming out. It was chaos, but he is personally responsible for just saving a lot of Vietnamese, and I think the Vietnamese community knows that.

Timothy Naftali

Did you see the strain on his face?

David Kennerly

Yeah, the strain was very evident with him, with Scowcroft, with Kissinger. You know, one of the things that happened was they had signaled -- in fact, Kissinger had given a press conference saying that the last Americans had been evacuated from Vietnam. And then, about a half hour later, I was following Kissinger around because that's where all the action was, and he'd go in and report to the President. You know, he'd be having an economic meeting or whatever, and he got a bulletin that 25 marines had been left on the Embassy rooftop...oops. And so they had to send another, some other helicopters back in to retrieve them. So in between the time they said it was all over with, they got the word that these guys had been left just in a screw-up, obviously, and so they had to go back and amend that situation, and it was interesting to watch what they were saying.

Timothy Naftali

Why don't you take some water?

David Kennerly

But those were the pictures. You see, one thing about my kind of photography, the more difficult the situation, the better the pictures. I mean, you can really read it on people's faces, the drama of a real crisis. That's where the pictures are made.

Timothy Naftali

Let's talk about Mayagüez, since we're talking about crises. I mean, this is where not only are pictures made, but history is made by a photographer. It's a great story.

David Kennerly

Well, the SS Mayagüez was an American cargo ship that had been taken by the Khmer Rouge offshore from Cambodia, and it was an instant crisis. I think there were almost 70 U.S. people on board, and they took them. And so it was up to the President and the U.S. forces to try to figure out how to get these guys back, and dealing with the Khmer Rouge at that time was like dealing with a vacuum that Pol Pot and those guys had come in and evacuated Phnom Penh. They drove all the people out. They were killing people, anybody with education and all that. And if you saw the aerial photos, the satellite

photos of Phnom Penh from that period, there was nobody there. It was like a giant ghost town. And they were taken into surrounding areas, and the Chinese had been close to the Khmer Rouge, but nobody really had any contact with them per se. So here are these Americans that get captured, so the whole apparatus of the American military has to be brought to bay, which meant, also, aircraft carriers had to be shifted and turned around back to the area. You know, we had basically left Southeast Asia in terms of military assets, and so we started pulling it together very quickly.

And the story which you're referring to -- and President Ford wrote about it in his book, I never would've said a word about this. But I -- in the course of this crisis, the military had come in with charts -- and I have the pictures of this, saying, you know, they're bringing TAC air strikes, which are like fighter pilot strikes, or fighter plane strikes, helicopter assault, and B-52s dumping, you know how many tons of bombs at a certain time. And I felt that the B-52 strike -- now, you have to understand, I'm the White House photographer, I do not have a seat at the table. I'm there as a documenting person, but by this point, I'd been there a long time, and I was in all these meetings. I had a top-secret clearance. There was no reason not to be there, except I wasn't saying anything. I mean, our job is, you know, shoot and that's that. I mean, I certainly hear things going on, not to be repeated. But for some reason, I was very concerned about the B52 part of this, and Kissinger had been talking about how they had talked to the Chinese and they couldn't get any reaction back. In other words, the Chinese didn't know who to call because there were no phones, and there was nothing you could do diplomatically. So they're going to blow the crap out of these people, is what it boils down to. And I said something about the B-52s saying if it was a local commander who captured these sailors, then putting a B-52 strike around Phnom Penh or wherever they were going to do it, would really not have any effect and would just kind of be a bad thing to do probably. And I don't know precisely how I put it, but this is a room where you have the President, the Vice President, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Secretary of State, Defense, head of the CIA on down, and then the President thought about it and decided not to use the B-52s, and later in his book said that his rather brash, young photographer had made a point.

And in fact, what happened, they put in local air strikes and that led to the crew being released. And, but more important, the President didn't want to make the Cambodians pay for what the Vietnamese had done to us. And I think there were some discussion in the room at one point about how, that there was a suggestion that the power of the United States, you know, should be brought to bear and all that, and the President just didn't believe that that was the right way to go about it. And he did not make a decision predicated on making other people pay for maybe something else that we had done. And he was very strong-willed that way and I think the "New York Times" asked me, before President Ford died, for an obit item, whenever it was going to come, what was my favorite picture of Ford or what picture of President Ford was the one that I thought was the most significant? And I had to think a lot about it. When I was editing this book that I just finished, I decided to use a picture from the Mayagüez. It was a very firm picture of him. It's not the best picture I ever took of him, but he's got his glasses on the top of his head and he looks very resolved. He's like the USS Resolute in heavy seas. I think it was during that meeting or during that -- his conduct of that particular situation where he truly came into his own as the President and Commander in Chief. I think he made the decisions without leaning heavily on Kissinger or other people. I mean, it was really as a former naval officer himself, who had been a hero of World War II. It wasn't like he was afraid of making decisions, but I think he took that one on his own, and I think that was the moment in his Presidency where he really had it under his own control.

Timothy Naftali

He talks to you after you give this advice.

David Kennerly

Afterwards, he said, "Dave," he said, "I really appreciated your input there, but next time, don't open your mouth in one of these meetings." He said, "Say something to me privately." And he said it in a very joking way, but it was -- I can tell you one other story about precisely that, where I did not say anything in the meeting. Just to shorthand it, he had treated John Connally very well, and Connally, of course, at one point, had been -- Richard Nixon was considering him to be the replacement for Agnew, but it would have been a problematic getting him through Congress and all that. There was a situation where John Connally had been indicted for, what was this milk kickback scandal, something that most people wouldn't even remember. But President Ford had been in office just a short time and had made some trip to Texas, and Connally wanted to see him. And President Ford's staff said, "You know, you really shouldn't see him. He's under indictment." He says, "Look, John Connally's an old friend of mine, and the fact that you're indicted doesn't mean that you're guilty." And so he saw Connally, which I thought was kind of a gutsy thing to do and a nice thing to do. So when it came time to running for the Republican nomination being challenged by Reagan, Texas was huge. It had 100 delegates and all that. Connally would not come out and endorse either Ford or Reagan. He said, "They're both my good friends." And I just thought, "Wow, that is really, that's a bad thing." And the guy, Ford had really done something nice for him and all that. And so when the day that Reagan picked, what was his name, from Pennsylvania?

Timothy Naftali

Schweitzer – Schweiker.

David Kennerly

Right, he picked Senator Schweiker, who was a fairly liberal Republican. All of a sudden, you know the phones were ringing in the Oval Office, and so John Connally calls and said, just happens he's going to be passing through Washington, would love to come by and see the President and all that. And I'm in the Oval Office when this call comes in, and I'm thinking, "He's going to say no. I mean, he knows, like, John Connally just did this thing, you know, and didn't support him." And all, "Sure, John, come on by," and, "No problem." And so I didn't say anything, but I thought, "I'm a really, you know, have a strong sense of the right and the wrong of things." And so afterwards, he was going back up to the residence, second floor, which almost every time I'd walk up and go upstairs and have a drink with him at the end of the day and all that. So I go up, and I'm not saying anything, and he can see that I'm really, like, ticked off about something. We go up in the elevator, the elevator door opens, and walk across to where his, like, kind of a sitting room. He said, "Okay, Dave, what's on your mind?" I said, "Well, you know what," I said, "John Connally, after everything you did and you saw him down in Texas when you shouldn't have, but then he doesn't support you in the primary. Now he calls up because Reagan's picked Schweiker and obviously that's a bad move, and he wants to see you, and you're going to see him?" I said, "If I was the President of the United States, I wouldn't see that son-of-a-bitch." And he starts laughing, and he puts his arm around me and he says, "That's why you're not the President, Dave." And there's a follow-up to that. At the Republican Convention in Kansas, all these guys are coming in, kind of auditioning to be Ford's running mate, because Rockefeller now is off of the ticket. And so who's one of the people showing up? It's John Connally, and Connally comes

up to greet President Ford and all that. And he's shaking hands and all that, then he leaves, and I said to the President, I said, "Are you really considering him as your running mate?" He says, "Come on, Dave, you know what he did to me back there in the Texas primary." I said, "Whoa, don't mess with Gerry Ford."

Timothy Naftali

I've got to ask you about -- well, actually I want to know, were you at the Detroit Convention?

David Kennerly

Yes, I was in Detroit. I was with President Ford that whole time.

Timothy Naftali

How close did the Reagan/Ford ticket come to happening?

David Kennerly

I don't think -- well, I mean, it really was one of those interesting moments. You know, I was back there with Ford, I was working for "Time" magazine, and so I was with Ford, Michael Evans was with Reagan, photographer also for "Time." And this whole thing came up about Reagan wanting to ask former President Ford to be his running mate. And, I mean, what an extraordinary thing. And honestly, I think Ford really was, he was not considering it, but it was just intriguing enough, and Kissinger was up there. I mean, Henry Kissinger was like going back and forth, you know like the Kissinger shuttle of old, you know between the two camps. And you've got like Lynn Nofziger and those guys with Reagan, and, you know, Henry Kissinger and Jack Marsh up there with President Ford. And where the whole thing got torn was, word finally got out, and President Ford was going to do an interview with Walter Cronkite. And so he's in there, the booth, the CBS booth and Cronkite says, "Well, Mr. President, we hear that this thing is possibly happening, that you might be the running mate with Reagan, wouldn't that be like a co-Presidency?" And right then and there, you could see the ducks being, you know, flushed out into the open. At that moment, the idea of co-Presidency, if there was ever a time where it was a serious thought, that was the end of it. And I don't think it ever got to the real serious stage, but they certainly talked about it. I mean, I was in the room when they were discussing it. And you know, Reagan did a really interesting thing. Reagan was a very shrewd guy. Right at the beginning in Detroit, he showed up and came to President Ford's suite, he and Mrs. Reagan, and he presented President Ford with this original peace pipe. It was like, it was an Indian peace pipe, really beautiful. And I thought, "Man that is a smart move," because President Ford, after '76, was not a big fan of Ronald Reagan's and didn't feel that, after he had beaten Reagan, that he had properly campaigned for him and all that. And another time when President Ford, I was with him, visited Reagan when he was President, he gave -- he insisted that Ford sit in the chair that the President always sits in in the Oval Office, those two chairs right in front of the fireplace in the Oval Office. I mean little things like that which really did not go unnoticed.

Timothy Naftali

Let me ask you about August 9, 1974. You were on the south lawn covering Nixon's departure from the White House. How'd you get there? What were you doing? Were you there for "Time"?

David Kennerly

August 9, I was -- well, the night before was the night that Nixon gave the speech, on August 8, and said he was going to be resigning the next day, and I was at the Ford's house in Alexandria, Virginia. And I'll never forget that because after the Nixon speech, Ford came outside and gave a statement, you know talking about this sad time and all that. You can see whatever the transcripts said, but what really struck me about that night was that he talked about how he was going to keep Henry Kissinger on. And, you know, that's assuring the allies and the enemies, the Russians or the Soviets, that this transition is going to be a transition, but most of the same players are going to be retained. And I think, in a way, that reflected a little insecurity on Ford's part about nobody, or a lot of people didn't know anything about him. I mean, he was Minority Leader and then became Vice President, and considered to be a, you know political guy, had been in Congress since 1948. And then the next day, I was out with the rest of the press when he, Nixon gave his talk in the East Room, I wasn't in there because I could only be one place or the other. I chose to be there for that moment. When he came out, and he came walking out with Vice President and Mrs. Ford and David and Julie Eisenhower, and a very solemn moment. And he got up and started climbing the steps and he turned around, and from that point of view, if you were, if I was Richard Nixon here, right over here's the White House. It's the last time that he is going to see the place where he lived as the President of the United States. And the most ironic, and I think the best single photo, was he gave this little wave and his lips were pursed. And out on the south lawn, there are hundreds of White House staffers, and they start applauding him. And all of a sudden, he kind of transforms into the old Richard Nixon, the politician who's out campaigning. And what becomes, in retrospect, probably at the time actually, a rather bizarre display, if you don't know what the context was, and then he starts waving and doing the double V sign and all that. And then he turns and walks into the chopper and sits down, and then the Fords walk away. But the moment, there are two moments, just before he did his little wave, where he looked back up at the White House, and you could see it in his face, where that was where it really was going to be all over with. And the rest of it didn't really matter after that. I mean, then he started smiling, and it was not a happy moment.

Timothy Naftali

Were you surprised when, now President Ford, asked you to be his photographer?

David Kennerly

When President Ford -- well, I covered President Ford -- the first time I ever photographed him, other than I may have, he may have come out in the White House press room with Ev Dirksen and sometimes they would, they'd call it the Ev and Jerry show. The two, you know the Senate and the House guy. But the first time I ever really talked to him was the morning of the day that Nixon was going to name him as the replacement for Agnew, and so I photographed him up in his Minority Leader's office in the Capitol, and I told him that. And he said, "Oh, you're wasting your time." He didn't know at this point. I don't think he had been asked yet by Nixon. But so I posed him, and I called it the Rembrandt Solution, you know, just natural light coming from the window, and I took some pictures of him looking out and then some portraits. Well, Nixon that evening chose him to be the replacement. That photograph was on the cover of "Time" magazine. And it was my first "Time" cover and his, and it was a big deal for both of us. Obviously, he was going to be the VP, but

"Time" wanted me to continue covering Ford. And covering a Vice President full-time is almost unheard of, I mean, quite frankly, it just doesn't happen in the press.

And there was this small group, Tom DeFrank wrote a book about Ford and this little group of seven people, and I was one of them, constantly traveling around with Ford. And we're not really producing much of interest. And of course, he would never talk about the possibility that Nixon might be leaving. He didn't want to appear to be pushing him out the door or anything like that. But I became friendly with him and Mrs. Ford and the family and got to know the kids, and I was about the same age as the kids, a little bit older, but not much. And so when he became President, and actually, we never talked about me working for him, but August 9, that evening he had asked a few people to come over to the house after that rather hectic day. And family, friends, and I was one of the people he asked. And I took some pictures inside, but during the course of the evening, he asked me to stay after everybody else went away.

Now, I'm 27 years old. Now granted, I'd been in Vietnam, but this guy is the President of the United States, and I'm sitting there talking to him. I mean, I know him, but it's like you look at somebody in a different way. And so we're sitting on the couch in his living room, it's really kind of middle-class, small house in Alexandria, and he said, "How would you view this job as White House photographer?" I mean, it was really important for him to talk to me about this, and I said, "Well," and I'd thought about it, too. I'd thought if he asked me, I'm not sure am I going to do this or not because I like being out in the world. I didn't want to become like a government guy or something. And so I said, "Well, if I were going to do this job, there are two things I would want: total access all the time and to only work directly for you." And he said, "What, no use of Air Force One on the weekends?" But he didn't offer me the job, and he said because Ollie Atkins, who was President Nixon's photographer, and he were friends, and he didn't want to like hurt Ollie's feelings or anything. So he said, "Well I'm going to talk to Al Haig about this." And afterwards, "Okay, I'm going to go." He said, "No, let's walk." It must have been 11:00, because he wanted to see the replay of the day's news. So we went into the den and Mrs. Ford and Susan were there and I think one of the other boys, and tried to turn on the T.V. and the T.V. didn't work. And he said, "I bet they work over at the White House." So we went upstairs to their bedroom, and it was Mrs. Ford, I, and Susan, and we're sitting around watching the local news coverage of the day's events. So basically, it was the first time he'd seen himself being sworn in. And so then I got, that finished and I got up, and he took both of -- with both of his hands, he took my hand and he said, "Would working for me be a problem among your colleagues?" I mean, after everything that's happened with Nixon and the bad feelings and all that. It was such a touching moment for me, and I said, "You know, they all know you and they know the kind of person you are, and I think they would be happy to have one of their buddies in the White House." So the next morning I was over at "Time" in the office, and I was sitting in the mail room talking to Hugh Sidey, who was the preeminent Presidential writer, and the phone rings and I'm paged, "David Kennerly, you have a call." And I pick it up and it's the "Time" operator, she said, "President Ford wants to talk to you." And I said, "Tell him to call back, I'm busy." And she goes, "He's on the line." And so I get, "Mr. President, how are you?" And then he offered me the job. He said, "Would you like to do this thing?" And I said, "Yeah." And he said, "Well," he said, "you better get over here then, you've already wasted a half a day of the taxpayer's money." There's the Republican in him, you know, and that started the adventure.

Timothy Naftali

Did you see the strain of the pardon on his face?

David Kennerly

No, he had made up his mind on the pardon, and that was a real tightly-held secret, you know. And the photos I had were -- he's the kind of guy that, once he'd made up his mind to do something, he was just going to do it. He thought it was the right thing to do, and I think history has proven him correct. But of course, his numbers plummeted to right about where Truman was after he fired MacArthur, I think. And after he signed, it was Sunday morning in the Oval Office, he signed the pardon, and then they went into Bill Timmons' office. And one of the nice pictures I had out of that was he's, like, got his hands in his pocket, and he's kind of looking down, and on the wall above him is a picture of Nixon and his VP picture. But he was getting phone calls from people saying that, essentially, they felt he'd done the right thing, but they couldn't support him publicly, which is just part of the ongoing hypocrisy of how you do business in Washington, D.C. But I remember, about three weeks later, and his, you know the polls, we're just getting killed out there, the vitriol and hatred of Nixon and how this transferred to him. And we were in an elevator, and I looked up and I said, "I've just got a question, Mr. President, by pardoning Nixon early on that Sunday morning, did you think no one was going to notice?" And he got mad at me. So that was, like, I mean, I could always take him to a point, but you know, that was it. I mean, he had a temper sometimes, but he didn't fire me.

Timothy Naftali

Last two questions because we, you've got another event to do. One is you changed some of the rules about the use of the White House developing office.

David Kennerly

Oh, when I first came in, when I first -- I mean, Ollie Atkins really was a transitional person. He was Nixon's photographer, and he was great for me because he handled all that admin stuff that I didn't want to deal with initially. But once I became comfortable in the job, I basically felt it was better if I ran the whole operation. And one of the things I discovered was that White House staffers were bringing their personal film in to be developed. Now you have to understand, the White House photo lab was run by military people, so that seemed like a really bad idea. And so right off the bat I said, "No more personal film is being developed in this lab while I'm the boss." And man, people got mad at me. And the other thing I did was, like, because people would just willy-nilly order prints and everything, and I cut back on that, and I made them write notes. And these are all like, you know heads of big departments, people whose names you've heard of. And so I just became this kind of renegade photo man. And in fact, one of the people thought my name should be "His Photoship" because I didn't realize I could be such an autocratic kind of figure. But I had such a defying sense of how this should be and that it was wrong for certain things to be going on, and I think the one that really got me was when somebody said, "Well that's not the way we used to do it." And I said, "Well, if you go and look in the Oval Office, that's the way we're doing it now, and it's a new sheriff in town, and I'm one of the deputies." And that's what happened.

Timothy Naftali

Give us a photo -- give us a word description of Ollie Atkins, please.

David Kennerly

Ollie was like, compared to me, as a bearded sort of blue jeans wearing, improper speaker saying bad words sometimes, Ollie was really a gentleman and always nicely dressed in a pin-stripe suit and was a different generation from me. He'd worked for the "Saturday Evening Post." He was a good photographer. And in fact, in Ollie -- one of the problems that Ollie had was that he did have to work for the chief of staff and for the press secretary. He had so many layers, I mean Ollie could not go and hang out in the Oval Office like I did, that just was unheard of. In fact, people couldn't believe that I was doing what I was doing. I mean, it was stunning that anybody could do that, and then -- but Ollie really had to live under the thumb of some of these other people, and it was very unpleasant for him because he was a news photographer at heart. But Ollie on the day, the night that Nixon resigned, took some of the best pictures there were showing the real human side of Richard Nixon and the family and the anguish of what had happened. And Ollie would not take no for an answer and just went up there and took those pictures, and I think it really made up for everything else that he had to suffer.

Timothy Naftali

Last question: it's the election. It's 1976. Richard Nixon goes to China. You use some of your Kennerly language in a conversation with the President.

David Kennerly

No.

Timothy Naftali

Or who did you say that to?

David Kennerly

No, no, no, no, no, no.

Timothy Naftali

What happened?

David Kennerly

No, the conversation that night -- I just happened -- I was having dinner with the Fords, which I did frequently. I mean, I was treated like one of the family. But Richard Nixon had announced that he was going to China right before the election, I can't remember. It was '76, at a very critical time when people are trying to get around the Nixon, you know, the pardon and everything that Ford had -- it just brought it all up to the forefront. And the President wasn't real pleased when he heard that information, but I was like -- like with John Connelly and, you know, I would personally take on a much angrier demeanor on behalf of the more mild-mannered Ford. I went downstairs and there were a couple of other staffers, fairly senior guys, I was, like, venting about Richard Nixon doing this and how could he do it, you know, this was going to be a disaster. I said some uncomplimentary things about Richard Nixon for which I then ended up appearing in print, to my chagrin. Because it was one thing to be foul-mouthed and nasty, but it's another thing to see it written down. And so I felt badly

enough about it that I actually sent Nixon an apology note, I mean, I was unrepentant about my feelings, but I didn't think that that was -- that was not nice to say, and I felt bad about it.

Timothy Naftali

You were here for the funeral, Richard Nixon's funeral?

David Kennerly

Yes, I was, and it was the second time that five Presidents have gathered together, actually. And the one thing that stood out in my mind, I mean, it was a beautifully done funeral, but when I saw Ronald Reagan, he looked like he didn't know where he was, you know. And later President Ford told me that Reagan hadn't remembered who he was. And that was the first overt sign that something was wrong and really predated that beautiful letter he wrote later about having Alzheimer's and fading away and all of that. But you could see it on that day, and I guess it was sort of in and out kind of thing. On that day, he was confused.

Timothy Naftali

What was it like for you to see the Nixon Administration gather again? You had seen them on the south lawn that day.

David Kennerly

Well the best picture was -- oh, this is great, I mean, it shows you how time flies. There are these two guys who'd come in a little bit early. They were sitting out there, and I'm, like, shooting away. And this young photographer said, "What are you taking a picture of?" I said, "Well that's Gordon Liddy and Spiro Agnew." And he said, "Who are they?" Geez, anyway, yeah, it was, they were all there. I mean, it was something, and Bob Dole, you know, gave a -- it was really emotional. And I thought Bill Clinton's speech was very good, I mean, he's a great speaker, and Dole was very emotional. It was history passing. I mean Richard Nixon, love him or leave him, was just a really interesting, important figure in American history, and I was glad to be there to see the respect paid to him.

Timothy Naftali

Dave, thank you for your time, this has been great. I appreciate it.

David Kennerly

Okay.

Timothy Naftali

Thank you.