INTerview: Russell Rourke

PLACE: Annapolis, MD

DATE: August 9, 1995

DW: This is a continuation of the interview with Russell Rourke; we’re once again at his home in Annapolis, Maryland, and in a lovely garden on an unusually temperate August day for this part of the country. We appreciate the opportunity to come visit again. We talked a good bit last time about a codelle you and Mrs. Rourke went on in 1981 with Howard Baker and members of his family and others to the Mideast. You mentioned also that you took a good many of these trips during your time with the Department of Defense. You mentioned a Codel that you accompanied Senator Baker on that involved West Germany. Also on that trip there were stops in Great Britain, the Netherlands, and probably Brussels.

RR: Yes.

DW: So those are two; were there others that you went on in which Baker participated, do you recall?

RR: No, I think those were the only two. We ran across his trail in a number of others, because it wasn’t unusual, that much maligned Codel scene as it was, to have Department of Defense planes criss-crossing Europe during August recesses. It was not unusual to see other people in other cities. We did run into him on various occasions, and then there are a lot of conferences that members will attend and then go their separate ways, separate meetings, separate trips. Senator—who was our pal, he always called himself “the President’s best friend”—Paul Laxalt. He manages to work that into almost every conversation: “Good morning, I’m the President’s best friend.” He’s also a Basque and whenever you’d get into anywhere within five hundred miles of Basque country, he would make a separate trip there and then rejoin.

DW: In regard to the use of military planes, do you recall any occasions in which you had to mobilize the fleet, as it were, to get Senators back to Washington for a vote?

RR: No. You mean while they were overseas?

DW: No.

RR: Yes, that was not highly unusual that that would be done. As a matter of fact, your incumbent, the House member Jimmy Quillen, called on any number of occasions whenever there was a vote on a Friday night. It was usually to states in areas where you did not have a milk run Boston-Philadelphia-New York kind of thing. If you had to get to the hinterlands—for example, to get to Ogdensburg, New York, or Watertown, there are no direct runs there; you have to go to Albany and it’s a real difficult chore to do that, even if you’re trying to be sincere and you’re not just trying to use military aircraft to save yourself the money out of
your authorized travel allowance. So yes, on any number of occasions, I’d say a hundred occasions, we made arrangements to get members of the House and Senate back for a vote. Or indeed to get them to stay over for a vote with the promise that we would then get them to where they to be that night. Otherwise, they couldn’t make the speech, the event, and so on.

DW: When the matter involved Senators in substantial numbers, who did you coordinate with, the Secretary of the Senate?

RR: No, usually the Senator’s office itself. Bill Hildenbrand in Howard Baker’s instance, I’m not aware we ever did it with Howard Baker directly. _____ I don’t know if you remember Alex Sandusky, used to play for the Baltimore Colts? He was an All Pro, seven years in a row. Poor Alex now has two new knees, a new hip, and he just had his only good shoulder worked on. He’s had about everything replaced that the law allows and then some. He’s a dandy guy, he’s tough as nails, and he still looks like he could play ball. He was back when Johnny Unitas, when Baltimore was really on top of it.

DW: Since you brought that up, I will mention this high school football coach in Paris, Texas—he’s still living—was a disciple of Neyland, was named Raymond Berry. His son was Raymond Emmett, Jr., with whom I went to high school. He was a couple of years ahead of me.

RR: Raymond was unbelievable! He had more physical ailments—one leg was shorter than the other; he was just a magician! Not only that, he was a hell of a nice guy. There are a lot of these guys I’ve met through Alex who were just beasts.

DW: Raymond Emmett is a first-class fellow, smart, civilized.

RR: So’s Alex, he’s one hell of a guy. Back to that whole CODEL arrangement, that was an extraordinarily useful tool. We whipped out the rules on any number of occasions on when do we cross the line, who do we bring back; we were always very careful—do we conveniently deny travel back to DC for folks we know are going to vote against our best interests, whatever they might be, or even pick them up and have the plane disappear someplace for an hour or two. We were never accused of that kind of skullduggery; we did it pretty evenhandedly. Requests came from all across the board; usually from the members themselves or from their chiefs of staff, then secondarily from committee counsel or somebody like Bill Hildenbrand.

DW: Let’s talk a little bit about your basic organization for Senate liaison. How did you structure your operation for dealing with the Senate?

RR: It doesn’t work the way the wiring diagram says it should work. That’s like any military or corporate operation, you wind up depending ultimately on people, and you use the best
people regardless of their titles, regardless of their position, regardless of how they got there. The wiring diagram says that in my operation it was an assistant secretary, then for the House and Senate side you have deputy assistant secretaries that are, after all, two-star general ranks. My job was a four-star general rank. Now whether that’s right or wrong, you can have a cashiered out, former lance corporal suddenly by act of Congress made a four-star general, and that position, by the way—and it rankles the hell out of the military, I’m sure—is senior to all four-star generals on active duty unless they are sitting members of the joint chiefs of staff. NATO force leaders and so on, they are senior to them by command, by sitting, and it drives some general nuts who has thirty-seven years of service, three wars, and then a friend of the President or a majority leader gets in that spot and he’s up on top! You have a deputy assistant secretary on the House side and the Senate side, and that individual will have then a military assistant on either side, as did I have a military assistant, because after all many of these people come from civilian backgrounds. It’s usually a bird colonel or Navy captain slot that fills that military assistant role. Then you have some twenty-five to thirty folks with varying degrees of expertise across the board in foreign affairs, on appropriations, on budget, on military construction, on personnel, with vast legislative experience. People who have been in the arena for a heck of a long time and have grown up in that discipline, either with one of the services or in the civilian side of the house. So we would have our structural activity every morning at seven o’clock, preceded by my own very small group. At seven o’clock we would have a 45-minute to an hour-long meeting with all of my people in my office pulling together everything that happened overnight, in the last couple of days, and what’s going to happen this day; then at eight o’clock we would meet with Weinberger and all the other assistant secretaries and the Colin Powell, his military assistant at the time, and the deputy, Frank Carlucci, and the people who replaced him. Once a week grouped into that meeting would be all the service secretaries and service chiefs. That’s what the wiring diagram says, but if you analyze how certain people got to be there, some of them are lumped on you, you find some of them there when you arrive. For example, Jack Marsh, who is my predecessor in that job several years removed, he was there when Mel Laird was Sec Def; Jack had been a former Democratic congressman from Virginia but with conservative leanings. So he came into that administration, and he was, after all, Secretary of the Army for eight years in the Reagan-Bush years, and was my dear friend during the Ford White House days. Jack’s advice, having been in that job, was to keep ______—he named four people—and get rid of everybody else. So many of them are civil servants and are locked into the job. You can’t get rid of them without grievance hearings and so on. Senator Hiakawa, who was a dandy guy, called me one day and said that he had this young lady who he was basically trying to get rid of. He said you’ve got a vast array of people, and she’d be perfect for a spot. Basically he force-fed me, “You’ve got to hire her.” And I did, it didn’t work out too badly. Then the other White House chap who died, Lee Atwater, he wound up going over to the Republican National Committee; Lee called me one day and said, “You’ve got to hire so-and-so over there. She worked in the campaign.” I said, “What’s her background in the military? What does she know about the department?” Zip. “What does she know about the Hill?” Zip. Zip, zip, zip, but you’ve got to hire her. So I did, and that was devastating, so you wind up taking on people like that, you’re just working over, under, and around them. So you work with the best people you have. Then you also have to be very careful. I remember one totally inept, unbelievably useful individual who winds up making, by today’s standards and relative terms back then ten years ago, a
$110,000 a year, ask [him] to do nothing, never in any meetings, anything he touched was a disaster. He came in to me one day and complained that he was not getting enough face time with Cap Weinberger. I couldn’t tell him that we were trying to hide his face for the entire four-year tour that he would be there! You found the most useless individuals caused the most problems, complained the most. You’d think from a political standpoint they would have to brains to accept the largesse that was coming their way and disappear, but they didn’t, they caused great internal problems. Anyway, that was the person structure. In terms of doing the job, it was the responsibility for those individuals to maintain daily contact with the people with whom they worked in the Pentagon, who were the experts and so on, but then had to be in the pockets and pocketbooks of all the staff members on the Hill and all the relevant committees. It’s amazing how many committees do become relevant, it’s just not Armed Services and Defense Appropriations. The requirement really was for these two-star general types and their deputies, the military deputies, to be on a first name basis with Senators and with House members, so that when a vote came up I didn’t have to call, or Weinberger didn’t have to make a hundred phone calls. We didn’t mind making the calls, but there just isn’t enough hours in the day to be able to do that. I probably spent 12 or 13 hours a day on the telephone, every day. When we would have a vote coming up that was an important issue and a testy one like an MX or a second nuclear carrier or the chemical weapons, which was always very controversial, knowing they were integral parts of the President’s program, it became so critically important early on to find out—and this is ABC in both of your books—who’s for us for sure, who’s against us for sure, and where is the gray area, those who we can work on? We had a very sophisticated operation that utilized all the resources available to us. It wasn’t long, maybe six months or a year, before we were able to find out where the people who can really push a button, really be of assistance in influencing an individual Senator—where’s Bernie Rogers when he was over NATO? What’s his hometown, what Senators went to school with him? What relationships might have been established? Did he meet Scoop Jackson, when Scoop was on a trip to Europe. Did they have some unusual relationship, more than just a hello, how are you, here’s the briefing, and that guy’s gone from that military area. Trying to create a mosaic so that when an important vote came up we could—I hate to use the words, but I guess that’s what it amounts to—put pressure on that individual from a myriad of sources, always being careful obviously, you put too much pressure it would blows the guy in the other direction. This one must really stink if they’ve got this many people calling me, this must be a real dog; I don’t know anything about it, but I do know I’m going to vote against it. But having said all that, we would get Bill Crowe to make calls, you’d always get the service secretaries to call; some service secretaries and chiefs were extraordinarily good at making these kinds of calls. Some were extraordinary bad! You’d be shocked at how the head of a service, a secretary having risen to that level, would drop the ball on some of these calls and actually would hurt your case. The thought was always there that, using the personal example that if you were Secretary of the Air Force, you know that if you get a requirement to call five or six Senators and you say, “Senator, I know you are in the gray area. I know you voted against this before. You gave some indication in subcommittee that you might bla-bla-bla. So I’m urging you on behalf of a grateful nation...” whatever talking points you gave that individual to make, you know that you’re opening that service secretary up to a call back in about three days or three weeks, when there is a possibility their unit is going to be moved from here to there, or this base is going to be closed, and you say, “Mr. Secretary, this is Senator so-and-so. You remember
three weeks ago you called me and I gave you a vote on MX? I’m asking you now.” So you’re always opening yourself up. Some very politically astute is the nicest way I can put it service secretaries and others, even military officers and people in the private community, would make all the calls and they would all say, “You have to do what you have to do. I have a list of calls I’ve got to make, so if anybody calls, just tell them I made the call. Now you do what you want on the MX, and I respect your position. Now, how about some golf_____?” You need that kind of call like you need a goddamn hole in the head. So it wasn’t long before we found out who were the people who would make a call such as I’ve just suggested, and you drop him from all lists. I would usually rat on them also, just so we were all very, very clear. I ratted on a service secretary one time. I was so damn mad, because I had been up all night long working on this particular issue. Just changed my shirt, took a shower at the Pentagon, went right back into our 6 a.m. meetings and my staff meeting at 7, the Weinberger meeting at 8. I got into the Weinberger meeting and he said, “How are we doing on such-and-such an issue?” We were two votes short the day before, the vote’s coming up in the Senate in about three hours. I said, “Secretary so-and-so hasn’t made one goddamn call of any value.” The meeting ended and that service secretary called me; he had a guy in the meeting who immediately called him and said, “Russ Roarke just finked out on you.” He said, “I understand you just reported me.” What’s the military expression? Whatever it is, I had said he wasn’t doing anything, which he wasn’t, but I can also tell you, and I was very honest with him, I said, “You are right. You haven’t done your job. We are in danger of losing this vote this afternoon.” It was the MX, and we won it by one vote that afternoon. About a month later, this individual secretary was down on Vieagas, off Puerto Rico, you do maneuvers, bomb the hell out of them; we’re always killing their cows with the artillery, but we reimburse them. He was out in the field; I had another critical vote coming up and got word to his military assistant that we would like five calls made. It shows you how it works if you’re willing to take the chance, and I was at the time. He was out on a hilltop watching Marines do their maneuvers and so on, when he got word that that rat Rourke wanted him to make these five or six calls. He got an MAY 40, one of these big field backpack telephone things, to patch him into a ham radio operator in Pennsylvania, patched in from this hilltop in Puerto Rico off Vieagas, got all the calls made to these Senators and turned a couple of them around. So the threat thing really does work, being made to look less than helpful to your fellows. With that whole mosaic, the bottom line is naturally your final crushing blow in all this is the President, and Ronald Reagan was obviously extraordinarily effective at this, magnificently effective. But so critical, because other departments and agencies are using the Def and he’s being asked to make so many calls a day and so on, you had to filter all that through at the time Don Regan. So you better make damn sure that the call he’s being asked to make is a viable call; if he calls some Senator and the Senator says, “Well, hell, I told them, I’m already on your side. I voted for him the last time.” The President hangs up the phone because he’s already then—the President might get a call then three weeks later from that same Senator saying, “I’d like you to come down to Tuscaloosa and give this speech at the VFW Annual Ball,” so he lays himself open. Or on the other side of it, somebody who’s so locked in, they wouldn’t change their minds in a million years. So it has to be a very, very viable opportunity, and we refined that to a fare thee well. Superimposed on that whole thing, we would ask people like Howard Baker, and be very, very careful in doing that, because you magnify thirty times these callbacks that you get, being asked to make a speech, don’t close my base, and so on. In Howard Baker’s life,
everything revolves around trading this for that and the art of compromise, one hand washing
the other. So we would be very, very careful and very chary about how many times we
would lay that burden on him. But he was always extraordinarily helpful if he was
sympathetic; he was not shy—if he was not enthusiastic about the program, he would tell
you, “Hell no,” in a very nice way, “I won’t make any calls on that issue.” We were honest
and friendly enough with each other that we respected that and there was never a problem.

**DW:** When something important was percolating at the committee level—the Budget Committee
was working on a budget resolution, the Arms Services working on an authorization bill,
Stevens’ subcommittee working on an appropriations measure—how did you handle the
relationships with committee chairmen, subcommittee chairmen, ranking members? Who
would be working with Tower, talking to Tower and his staff people? Who would be talking
to Dominici and his staff people?

**RR:** I would, but again depending on the individual who was in the number two slot at the time
would get back to the so many minutes in the day routine in the day. For example, we had an
individual who was the ranking Republican on the House Armed Services Committee and if I
didn’t talk to him every single day, every single day, he felt unloved, unwanted, abused, and I
hired a guy just to talk to him. Just to talk to him, and it didn’t work; I blew a very, very
high-level job and used it up for no good reason. This guy was good for no other purpose; he
happened to be from that individual member’s home state, he was from his home town, they
had been in a business together. I thought what an ideal spot, because I don’t have the
minutes in the day to talk to this guy for thirty or forty minutes about everything under the
sun. Then this individual also accused the Defense Department and Weinberger, and I guess
it was partially true, of catering too much to the Senate side. There’s always this kind of
Napoleonic complex that occurs; the average House member, I can say this now and never
would back then, always felt like a second class citizen viz a vie the average Senator. That’s
just the way it was, and I guess if you’re looking for how do things stack up from a
promotion standpoint, I don’t know too many Senators who give up a Senate job to work for
a House seat. But you’re looking always for an opportunity to head the other way. To say
that the average House member is equal in terms of strength, power, respect—it just doesn’t
even make any sense. But you can’t tell them that. So this individual always thought we
paid too much attention to John Tower and not enough attention to him. Hiring this
individual to talk to him didn’t do any good at all. Again, depending on who is in what spot,
I had staff directors at the time, two of them, Rhet Dawson and Jim McGovern, Rhet having
preceded Jim McGovern in that spot, and I would ask my guy, my civilian deputy assistant
secretary, two-star general rank, to call Rhet. and then Jim every day to ask how we could be
helpful. And not just take up his time but maybe throw him a little bauble, “I just thought
you would like to know that such and such is going to happen today,” and increase his
knowledge of what’s going on at the Pentagon today so that he can look that much better
with his colleagues and his Senators. Be useful, not just a waste of time, but useful, helpful
information. Both Rhet. and Jim told me in a very nice way, because they were both very
dear friends, “Please don’t have so and so call me anymore, I don’t have the time to talk to
that guy. I know he doesn’t have any clout. If you want somebody to call me, have
Weinberger call me.” So that was the end of that drill. The same individual is another one
who wanted more face time with Weinberger. I think we discussed in our last meeting that we soon found out everything related to phone calls. There were only so many minutes in the day and you could only make so many personal visitations. It’s so nice at the end of a long day at, say, 10:30 at night, if you can jump in your limo, [like the movies that we show], slide up to the Russell Office Building, slip out of your car, someone meets you, and you go into this nice little meeting with a Senator and have a twenty-minute conversation, maybe a drink in his office. It only works in the movies, there aren’t enough minutes in the day to do that. So everything was telephone, and it wasn’t long before I found out, as we mentioned the last time we got together, that there were so few people—in uniform, out of uniform, and those in these critical spots in my operation, or even the Deputy Secretary of Defense—who were on a first-name basis with the average Senator. Those relationships just weren’t there. So when you were really trying to find out how the Senator was leaning, what are the pressures on him from home, what are the pressures on him from industry, from his own staff, percolating up from his other Senators on that committee—in other words, how the hell are you going to vote, because if you are with us I can save you a lot of time and me a lot of time. But life isn’t that way, you just can’t push the Senator’s button and it comes up green and you say, “Fine, I’ll go to the next button.” You have to be a little bit more delicate like “the only reason I’m calling is not to find out about how you’re going to vote, I’m wondering how your health is, how everything else is going, how can we be helpful to you and so on.” You usually get around to finding out how he’s going to vote. There were so few people I found who felt comfortable with making that bottom line inquiry and finding out for sure how that individual Senator, man or woman, is going to vote so that we can do all these other things that I have suggested. I’m sure there isn’t any easy for to do that, it’s got to be a long, kneeling on rice, painful process of just hours spent in the day and weekends. I usually also found out that one of the best ways to keep conversations short, so you could make greater use of your time, was to call people, and it was very rude according to rank and according to everything else, I would get back to my office after say being up on the Hill or being at an event, get back to the office there at 8:00 or 9:00 at night, and I would have as many, everybody has this problem who is in an active life, there would be thirty phone messages. Some are must calls immediately, obviously if the call is from the White House I’d have to call them. Some of those were real rats too. White House congressional liaison staff; some of them were very, very good, some were extraordinarily bad, who only wanted, and I don’t blame them, everybody has to make a living, to look good in their meeting the next day at 7:00 at the White House, here’s what happening at Defense. They would keep you on the phone for forty-five minutes to an hour, asking secondary, tertiary, useless questions while you have another thirty phone calls to make. They were rude, were not accept a callback from somebody else in your office to give them the same information, they wanted it from you because you might be able to add some other little nuance. Anyway, one of the other ways I found out to deal with that was the next morning at 5:30 was the earliest I would do it, I found that people were far less verbose at 5:30 in the morning than they were while they are sitting at home and you’re still at your office at 10:00 at night, they are at home with a martini at 10:00 and they just want to chat. But at 5:30 in the morning, it’s a minute and a half conversation, it goes just like that. I would do that with great frequency.

DW: Where is McGovern now?
RR: With Teledyne.

DW: Is he in DC?

RR: No, he’s wherever the hell Teledyne is.

DW: Corporate headquarters.

RR: Yes. In fact, I was told not that long ago by a girl by the name of Mary Bell Batchger, she was one of the head personnel types at the Pentagon and then did go to the White House with Colin Powell. She and—what’s his name, played football at the Naval Academy, Colin Powell’s closest confidante—reports have it that there’s never a day that they don’t have at least one or two conversations. I’ll think of his name in a minute. In any event, Mary Bell was no great fan of McGovern’s, in fact she despised him, and I guess that’s the reason she told me, in some distress, that he was being groomed to take over as president of Teledyne because he got quite an attractive package when he left the Pentagon to go with Teledyne. But then Don Rice, one of my successors as Sec. _____, just came on board in the last year as president of Teledyne and so that scotched the plans that were presumably made for Jim.

DW: Perhaps you can clarify something for me or educate me in this matter. I understand, roughly at least, what is going on when an authorization bill is coming out of the Armed Services Committee and onto the floor. You have to work on Senators who have not been deeply involved in the process of putting that legislation together, and I assume that in the time you were there that roughly speaking the authorization bill was basically in line with what the Department of Defense wanted and your job was to _____ support for that bill that the committee reported.

RR: Yes.

DW: How does the Department of Defense get involved in the intra-committee politics of the Armed Services Committee as the members are struggling to put that bill together and the conflicts associated with that? Do you have to back off and let the Senators do what do, or are you in there trying to influence votes?

RR: No, if you did the latter you would probably—you always have to be aware of the staff members—you’ve heard for years that it isn’t the Senators and it isn’t the House members who run it, it’s the staff. In large measure, that’s true. You might have, especially on the House side and especially in the modern era when nobody stays any more, the jobs are just not that attractive, they are a pain in the neck. It used to be fun, it used to have some dignity and respect. You used to enjoy great prestige and whatever, now you’re just a dartboard target for so many interest groups and so on. So the staffs were there for twenty, thirty, thirty-five years in many cases and are really looked to by these members and are welcomed. It’s almost a narcotic, especially on the House side and to a lesser degree on the Senate side, a Senator might say, “I would really like to get educated in this stuff, but I cannot figure out
this Star Wars to save my life.” This big loop, they are coming in, they are going out, this one guy says it will work like a charm, all we need is twenty billion dollars more. The other guy says that it doesn’t have a snowball’s chance in hell of working, it’s just a figment of some movie producer’s imagination. But this staff guy who used to work in the Star Wars operation at the Pentagon for fourteen years is now our expert, I’ll take his advice. Isn’t that the easiest way, rather than go home with fifteen manuals, because I also have sitting on my desk all the alternate programs on welfare, on Medicare, on the budget, on highway construction, all of our bridges in the United States are falling down, then every other discipline in the world. So there’s a great tendency to say, “I think I’ll just go with Hillary’s view on this thing. She’s written three books on it, who the hell am I? I’ve got all these other problems to deal with.” So especially on the Senate side, we were very, very careful about going directly to a Senator during the formative stages of some of this stuff and trying to influence him without looping in the staff types in some way. There were many, many discussions of, “I didn’t call him, he called me directly, and while we were on the phone we went through such conversation.” The problem usually arose with minority council and majority council, chief minority and chief majority, especially on the SASK. Rhet. Dawson was a very strong leader when it came to that; McGovern was strong, but I’m not so sure he was a leader. Arnold Panero, Sam Nunn’s guy who was in the minority for that entire time, then majority, now back to minority, would frequently take great umbrage at you going directly. So for each one of them you would have to work some separate arrangement, and that was true for all the other committees and defense appropriations subcommittees. I had set up a program also of bringing individual Senators and House members over for these little breakfasts with Weinberger, because Cap was by all accounts a rather difficult person to get to know, and was not a light chit-chatty kind of guy. It was either business or no conversation at all. Don’t talk about the weather, don’t talk about the Redskins or the Orioles, that was not the way to his heart, talk business and when you’ve finished your business let’s go our separate ways, we’ve all got a lot of work to do. So during my little tenure there we set up probably seventy or eighty or more breakfasts. What I always wanted to do was just get them to love each other. We did it with great success with John Tower. They were two very unusual folks, Weinberger and Tower. From the point of view of background, of interests, how they handled themselves, one of their common grounds was they were both great Anglophiles, they both loved the Brits, they both loved to quote Churchill. So we used that as a pull-them-together routine. I must admit, and it wasn’t because I thought I was any great organizer, but to keep things from falling apart, remember our discussion on the Howard Baker-Cap Weinberger meetings and so on, I spent so much time crafting these little arrangements that I wasn’t about to see them go down the drain, so I was at everyone of the breakfasts, just the three of us. I would do my level best to keep the conversation going, keep the love affair blossoming. Trying to be invisible but keeping that moving. Without getting into their names, I had great difficulty in keeping a certain staff guy from coming to these breakfasts. That would only violate what I was trying to do, I wasn’t really trying to get a great exchange of substantive knowledge, I was trying to create this relationship. Mind you, there was always also the talk we partially referred to the last time of since Cap was in some deep water in certain circles for a part of his tour, Tower was always the likely replacement. So the more I could do to create a personal relationship—it’s so easy, part of the problem in the same administration, Cap Weinberger and George Schultz had a great division going for awhile. They had both come from Bechtel, they had worked together
for years and they had a mutual respect. But you will find the staff of the State Department is always in a spitting contest with the staff of the Pentagon and vice versa. Our guys were just as bad as theirs. They are always telling George Schultz what Weinberger is doing to violate his turf, and George Schultz is doing so and so. And they wind up hating each other without ever having had a common discussion on the subject at issue. You know the drill. We saw it so many times first hand, and it would bring you down. It wasn’t long into the administration where Weinberger and Schultz were hardly talking to each other, having both been fed such negative stuff by their respective staffs. In any event, I succeeded in large measure with most of these many, many breakfasts in getting these one-on-ones with me hovering over my little nest, with the least success when it came to the SASK in keeping those guys out. There were some other sidebars to that which made it difficult; on one occasion they even brought even a third staff guy who was looking for some face time with Weinberger. They dragged him along and further corrupted that little meeting. With Tower we did arrange to do a breakfast every other week, so important was John Tower in carrying the President’s water, and he did a magnificent job. We would do home and home, hosted by Tower up in his office and then two weeks later at the Pentagon, it worked out very well. Did I tell you the last time that we even got Tip O’Neill to come over. He mentioned to me when we were either in China or the Soviet Union and yet he never voted for any defense bill ever. He was a grand guy, I liked him, but he never voted for us. We struck a very close personal friendship. My people on my father’s side are all from Boston and Worcester, so that served as a starter. He’s so easy to know and to love, he has a million jokes. He was really a nice, nice fellow to be around even through he didn’t vote for anything we were for. I remember on one of these trips I told him that I used to put breakfasts together, larger ones, at the Pentagon; every month or so we would have the entire membership of a House Armed Services Committee or SASK or the Appropriations Committee or the budget types and so on. I said, “You know, you’ve never come to one of our breakfasts.” He said, “I’ve never been invited.” I said, “That part’s easy, but when was the last time you were at the Pentagon?” He said, “I couldn’t find the Pentagon with a search light! I’ve never been there in my life.” I said, “How long have you been in Washington?” He said, “Thirty-six years,” or something. I said, “How could you vote against all of this stuff?” He said, “On faith, I vote against in on faith.” I said, “If I set up a breakfast with Cap _____”; he said, “I’d love to come.” He came and he was an absolutely delightful guest. He and Cap were obviously from two different schools; here’s the tough wardhealer politician and Cap more of an aristocratic type, Harvard. He came close to Boston at Harvard but not that close from a warmth standpoint, but it went very, very well. I must admit, because he can’t deny it now, the poor soul is gone—and that wasn’t the only purpose, the principal purpose really was sincere—but he moderated his opposition in a lot of respects to some of our defense programs in those several years, not because of one lousy little breakfast, but there are a lot of other things we did together. It was traditional for the Speaker after a long, cantankerous debate for the Speaker to take the well and deliver the final blow for or against something. And he stopped doing that on a number of these important votes. So that would help us, I must admit; we had a little pocket of nine or ten or eleven House members who were a little squishy here and there, especially on his Democratic side, who, if he didn’t take the well and they were a little bit inclined, to say, “Well, if he’s not that violently against it, maybe I can go along with them on this one.” So it had a measurable effect.
Other than in testifying in hearings and making telephone calls in the face of a pending vote, were the service secretaries and members of the joint chiefs and other top level Pentagon officials, even including Weinberger, involved in back room negotiations and cutting deals as to actually what would or would not be in legislation?

RR: No, no, because it’s too easy to get your nose in the wringer. And it’s so difficult, so difficult, to cut a deal and to make it stick; you might cut what you think is a deal and you figure cutting, and then you wind up with “Who the hell made this arrangement? There’s no money in the budget for that, that base is being closed! That’s out.” Maybe someone with illusions of grandeur or power would say, “If you go along with us on this proposal and so and so, that base will not be closed,” and they would have no more authority to make that pledge than the man in the moon. So you only make one false, unkeepable promise one time and you very quickly lose all your credibility. This might sound too simple, but we would go to extraordinary lengths because we really believed in the program, we really believed that the Soviet Union was the bad guy and that we had to match them in certain areas and get a deterrent capability. Chemical weapons was always the great example; we had no more intention of using chemical weapons than the man in the moon, we firmly believed that the only way to keep the other fellow from using his capability was to go through this disastrous routine of spending a hell of a lot of money to develop a capability equal or better than his so that he wouldn’t use it. That seems to be awfully dumb, but I wonder if there were people back in the early 1940s talking about how much money the Manhattan Project was costing us? Was that worthwhile? We will lead to these revisionists to decide whether that was a terrible thing to do. I have to meet any POW from a Japanese prison camp who didn’t think it was a pretty good idea, or a guy who is scheduled to be in the first wave who is scheduled to land at Yukuska or Yokohama who didn’t think it was the greatest idea in the world. But, no, cutting deals was not –

What about in negotiating legitimate differences on major policy issues like MX missile basing. The administration had a position, Senator Tower had a position; there were differences there that had to be worked out. When such differences arose, what was the process used to try to work those differences out?

Just pulling all those parties together. We had some top, crack people in the MX arena, guys who had worked on the project for many, many years. There was an Air Force general by the name of Jim McCarthy, for example, who was weaned on MX, thirty years ago. He had twenty years in the business by the time we were able to utilize his wisdom. This doesn’t come into the deal making routine, it was here’s how we can use the MX missile to our best advantage. Here are the three different things, the rail mobile, the stationary, the this and that. It was really trying to convince people based on extraordinary personal expertise on the best application of dollars to get the best possible results. He was only trying to exhaust them with information and knowledge that presumably the people doing the business, they provide the money on the hill, but unless they’ve stolen, and there was a lot of that, some former Air Force, and maybe renegades who think the program stinks, who were then employed by not enthusiastic types to torpedo you. You always had that. They were feeding them the point-counterpoint routine, you ran into that. There were some half dozen during my time there, disaffected military types who had been passed over and who also were
experts on nuclear carriers or whatever the discipline might be whose sole goal in life was to disembowel the service that ruined their lives. We played with that agony all the time, and some of them got into very, very substantial positions on the hill, so we worked with it. But in terms of influence, I don’t [know] whether it’s true in the other agencies or not but our principal goal, before you got to this final telephone calling bit, that was really—to try to classify it honestly, it had to be called pressure, because it was friendships, it was this, it was that, it was personal knowledge and relationships—but just exhausting them with the best possible arguments we had. And then they made up their own minds, because we didn’t have any leverage, there’s no voter constituency other than, John Layman on the second nuclear carrier was a pretty good example. John was so sophisticated from a political standpoint. An awful lot of people thought he was the biggest rat whoever came to Washington; he was mean, he was arrogant, he was cruel. He was probably all of those things, but to say he wasn’t smart was not right. John had created a mechanism that had it said that they had entered into contracts for the construction of this second nuclear carrier after the authorization bill passed but prior to the appropriation, it’s been twelve years now and it might get a little thin, but the point is still there that there were subcontracts that were in probably forty-eight of the fifty states. John let the word go out that when there were people trying to kill this, it might have been even after the appropriations went through, there were still efforts to try and kill it through recision and so on, and John let the word and didn’t deny it that the cost of termination of those contracts would have exceeded the cost that it would take to build the damn thing in the first place. This cost the taxpayer a hell of a lot more money than it would otherwise, there isn’t any question about it.

There are so many sophisticated types now with experience on the hill, experience in appropriation and budgeting, who worked for the corporations and so on, so that there are few major involvements now where you don’t have subcontracts in at least thirty-five or forty states. The helicopter, the Cobra gun ship, the new tanks; there are pieces that come from all over the world. On MX, for example, going back and I think we might have touched on this the last time, one of the things that made a tremendous impact on Tip O’Neill, he was heavily against the MX for a variety of different reasons, most of which are readily apparent, but when we convinced him a billion and a half contract dollars would go into the state of Massachusetts and showed him this whole mosaic, and we normally say in those days that a billion dollars in defense spending equates roughly to a hundred thousand jobs, you’re talking about a hundred and fifty thousand jobs. Tip, who used to say he was just a local politician, he was just the wardhealer, a hundred and fifty thousand jobs, that really meant something to him. That was the kind of pressure, if you will. I can’t tell you how effective a good, smooth, precise, surgical telephoning calling operation is. In fact, the final pinnacle of that whole thing is, as I said, getting the President to make a call was the final touch on a lot of these things, and even how that call is made has a tremendous impact. Did we mention the last time, we used to make an extraordinary effort, if it fit the whole program because there are obvious problems with trying to do it this way, with having the call made from Air Force One?

DW: No, you didn’t talk about that.

RR There’s a difference. If you think about it, the President calling from the oval office on a Friday night or from the residence, that’s one thing, but when your secretary comes in and

RR: That’s a call from the President on Air Force One. He’s somewhere over Turkey on his way to such and such,” makes you say, “I’ve got to take that call!” Then they do the little hookup, you know, the special secure operator gets on and does this little arrangement. In that moment you are in this little bubble of crisis and of importance. The President of the United States thought enough to be calling you. Ronald Reagan did that dozens and dozens of times with an extraordinarily effective impact.

DW: Did Senator Hatfield attract any special handling on the part of the Department of Defense as the chairman of the Appropriations Committee who was not among the most enthusiastic defense appropriations?

RR: That’s the kindest way to put it. Yes, he did.

DW: Let me give you my impression. My impression is that he had his individual views, but he refrained in most instances from trying to impose his views on the committee, even if he could have, which he probably could not have.

RR: True, that’s it in a nutshell. He just did his own thing. He believed a stronger conscience than most other members, that he didn’t fall prey to domestic politics and those kinds of influences but had a greater calling and was very, very difficult to deal with from that standpoint. Certainly we did try to create a personal relationship with him, but it was virtually impossible. I think he viewed with suspicion anybody from the Defense Department who came into his orbit. So you just treated him in a slightly different way, in a very different way, and it was just one of those things you put up with. He’s usually against us on most issues, but neither did he go out of his way to pick up the standard for the opposition. He just voted his way, and there were enough issues that it becomes important that people don’t take those opposing viewpoints personally, because then you get into another difficult arena. This is a little off-touch, but I remember Ron Nessen of the Ford White House; Ron is a brilliant guy and very able, but Ron got off track, in my modest view, with starting to believe that he was part of the message instead of the messenger. He got into such spitting contests with individual members of the press that he forgot what his function was. His function was, naturally, to try and create warm relationships as this guy Mike McCurry does now, he’s got a great personality, they like him personally so he’s able to be a far more competent, welcome messenger than a Ron Nessen. Ron got into such spitting contests that you’d find good guys—I remember Tom DeFrank, John Mashek, and Fred Barnes, three extraordinarily competent individuals did not care for Ron at all, so even though the message coming from the President through Ron Nessen to them might have been in their view a rather welcome message that they might have given good coverage to in their respective publications, because they liked Ron so little they gave it a negative spin, whatever. He got himself in between the President and the media, and that affected how Ford was treated. That’s not uncommon in any public relations operation where the conduit becomes a little cancerous themselves. In dealing with a guy like Hatfield who ran into some difficulty currently for much the same reason, he’s always been a difficult character to deal with. Fortunately he gets re-elected. I had gotten to know, fortunately, one of his top staff guys who was engaged to a former staff person in one of my previous offices, so that was the best way to find out which way he was going. For example, if you tried to call Mark Hatfield
directly, how are you going to vote on this or that, he wouldn’t even be enthusiastic about taking that call and would be more inclined to keep you guessing than even to do you the favor of saying, “Stop struggling, I’m with you on that one—surprise, surprise.” So I don’t know anybody in my arena during all the years I was at the Pentagon who had established enough of a personal relationship to make that a workable thing. So you just went in other ways, you just asked Howard Baker or one of his guys to find out how he was on those issues, instead of going from the suspected Pentagon approach. That worked, there were ways around those kinds of things. He wasn’t the least of the problems, there were many others. There were some members who would throw you off the track by saying, “No problem, I’m with you on that issue,” and then would spend the next three hours making phone calls to other members to influence them to vote against you. If you made the mistake, and you were honest about it and that’s always a question, to say we were very close on this one or we are behind by two votes or we are only one vote ahead, then that would increase their enthusiasm to undermine you. It was far more delicate, obviously, working with a member of your own party than it was working with Democrats who were questionable types. Because you couldn’t call a spade a spade, and it was very, very difficult. But that was what made that part of the job so interesting.

DW: With what frequency did you do business with Howard Baker and his staff and what was the nature of that business?

RR: With great frequency, not only the travel end of it. And there was a lot of that, not only traveling with Howard Baker but especially with Bill Hildenbrand and some of his others: Howard Liebengood and Howard Green, they served as a kind of conduit for other Senators who wanted to go on trips and wanted to get aircraft. I don’t want overstate, but in view of all of the problems and all of the involvements we had with CODELs, you would be amazed at what a large factor this became in the whole world of congressional/defense politics. I think, and certainly even more so today, the job is so difficult, as a House member and a Senator and so on and even from a staff standpoint, and for the honest people, there are some slugs up there, staff and members, as there are at the Pentagon, as there are in any other involvement, who were not worth the powder to blow them to hell with. All they do is travel and suck up taxpayer dollars and waste it. But there are an awful lot of those people who worked their tails off, and the public has such a contorted view of how hard some of them do work. In the eyes of some of these people, in the lives of some of these people, who really work themselves damn near to death and its institutions and psychiatric assistance and so on, the opportunity to get the hell out of town on a two-week trip to Europe, whether you call it a junket, whether you call it a substantive trip and so on, is just an enormous benefit. It’s what saves a lot of their lives; I’m convinced that some of them didn’t get the hell out of town because either they are in Washington or they are at home in their home state or home district being berated even worse than they are in Washington, and so there is no relief anywhere. The mass media routine now that pounds them to death with faxes and phone calls and personal visits and so on, so understanding the enthusiasm with which people view that particular narcotic...Bill Hildenbrand and others in Howard Baker’s operation really understood how useful that kind of benefit could be and how they might turn it to their own use. With all due respect to Bill and company, they had the impression that it was within their authority to see who got an airplane and who didn’t and what trips were approved and
what weren’t. We never disabused them of that idea, but it didn’t work that way. The planes went the way we wanted them to go. Our only commitment, quite frankly, as I mentioned the last time, was from a personal standpoint that Howard Baker got to go wherever and whenever he wanted, and the Speaker of the House, Republican or Democratic, got to go wherever and whenever he wanted. But if, for example, someone were ever to call me—if Howard Baker ever did, and I think he did on one occasion because he was put up to it, but I’m not certain so I would forget that—but if someone on Howard Baker’s staff called and said, “I understand that Senator So-and-so has asked for a plane to go to Egypt and Israel, we don’t want that plane to go, if it was in the best interests of the Defense Department and the President’s program that that trip occur, it occurred. It was left to me to sort out the bodies and see how the feelings would be handled, etc. There were a million different ways to approach that, none of which I ever found satisfactory because it always involved a bump. I just can’t say enough about the benefit, not from my standpoint, I worked as hard on those as I did in Washington for the reasons you can imagine, trying to establish these relationships, trying to subtly get our message through. In fact, one of probably the most aware people that I’ve ever known who really found me out was Tom Foley. We went to the Soviet Union with Tom and it was a long trip, almost three weeks. After two weeks they get endless. This was a long trip. He wrote a three-page letter to Weinberger—I hate the blowing my own horn routine, but he said in essence, but I don’t know where it would be, that “I have never found a more effective guy who from the standpoint of promoting the defense program who gave you the superficial impression that he couldn’t care less about the defense programs but he seems to always be working it. You get the impression at times that if he had the capability, he might vote against it himself, but having said that,” bla, bla. He said something about that I turned around four or five House members on that trip on a certain issue without them even knowing it. He found out that we really did work hard on those trips, and enjoyed them too, because it was good to get the hell out of the Pentagon and out of Washington and away from the White House staff.

DW: Beyond questions of travel, what were the types of situations in which you might look to Senator Baker and his people for information, for advice, for help? What kind of resource were they for you?

RR: It really always boiled down to votes. If we got an indication, for example, that Senator Dominici was not going to treat us too well on the Budget Committee, then I would ask Senator Baker if it did look a little thin there. Even though Pete Dominici was a hell of a fine fellow and nice guy, Steve Bell, who was his chief of staff at the time, was not the most approachable person. I think he’s now the Solomon Brothers guy.

DW: He’s associated with them.

RR: He’s a very, very brilliant guy and very, very able, not your political type. He was more the professional type, he’s not a hail-fellow-well-met kind of a guy. Even though you both spoke the English language, you’re passing each other in the night intentionally at time. Pete was more the down-home politician type, but Steve was always there. We had Pete and Steve over to some breakfasts; they were very courteous, they were very formal, they were very nice, and they accomplished nothing. In a situation like that, you go to Howard Baker and
ask, “Would it be useful do you think to have a sit-down with Weinberger and Pete Dominici, or would it be a waste of time? Would we be treading on your turf?” I remember on one occasion he said, “No, I think it would be very useful,” and we did on several occasions, maybe three, and got up there and Cap went through his whole budgetary discussions, which tend to be extraordinary dry. There’s a big difference between getting into the substance of some program where you’re showing the arcing effect of the rocket and how this is triggered and that happens and you can shoot four planes down at the time or this over-the-horizon kind of shot, the fire-and-forget thing. There’s a gee-whiz to that, you don’t even see the enemy, you just crank one off and then you zip. Then three and a half minutes later there’s an explosion in the sky somewhere. But when all you’re talking about is numbers and none of the program, you can nod off very, very easily. In these three efforts with Pete Dominici, it was dry as dust. It was very useful and Howard Baker was very helpful in suggesting to us that on this one occasion anyway Pete was looking at a real growth figure, substantially below what we had in mind, but it was just numbers. We did achieve something of a favorable result as a result of one of those breakfasts.

DW: Do you recall if that was the time when Dominici, in late 1982 perhaps or early 1983, there was something of an impasse on the Senate side on the budget that had developed and he went to New York, as I recall, and made a speech. He was going out on his own, making a public issue of the level of his spending, saying something to the effect that no more than seven percent could be accommodated. That was about half of what the administration was looking for.

RR: We ended up with something substantially higher than that. But that was the time. But there were other times also. Pete was always very helpful, and he was an extraordinarily pleasant guy to work with. Again, the thread through this whole thing is not the members themselves, they were easy to figure out, and after all they are politicians. There are so few in the business, somebody like Hatfield aside, they are the exception that proves the rule. Politicians—what you see, in most cases, is what you get; they have been through the fire. In our dealings with them, they had nothing to lose, they could tell you to shove off or welcome aboard. They have been through the fire and heat back home and have taken all that grief, but we didn’t control any votes with them. I know some people who made the tragic mistake of suggesting that if you’re not with us on this one, we’re going back to the state of so and so and we are going to tell the people just how negative you are on defense. In fact, I remember one guy, I’m sorry I can’t tell you his name, but he was a multi-multi-multi millionaire who was involved in Republican fundraising activities and so on. We were in a meeting one morning, a Weinberger meeting, and he was substituting for his assistant secretary. I was going through votes on various issues, how far behind or ahead we were in an upcoming House floor vote, and this individual said—we’re talking about a recalcitrant Republican we had approached on any number of occasions, any number of phone calls made—this individual said, “I know how that so and so can be handled.” It sounded like what probably occurred in the early years of the Nixon administration. He said, “We’ll cut his water off, we’ll strangle him”—as Tip O’Neill said, money is the mother’s milk of politics—”that guy won’t get a dime. And we’ll finance his opponent in a Republican primary.” That’s the kind of stuff, Weinberger just rolled his eyes. Then I talked to Cap about it later, and I called the individual and massaged him a little bit, “We’re handling this in another way, but those were
great ideas.” You wouldn’t do anything like that! That’s how you get into the pit in this business and blow yourself up in the bargain.

End of tape 46 side B