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Arkansas Oral and Visual History**

University of Arkansas
1 East Center
Fayetteville, AR 72701
(479) 575-6829

Arkansas Memories

Wesley K. Clark
Interviewed by John C. Davis
January 25, 2022
Fayetteville, Arkansas

Objective

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Transcript Methodology

The Pryor Center recognizes that we cannot reproduce the spoken word in a written document; however, we strive to produce a transcript that represents the characteristics and unique qualities of the interviewee's speech pattern, style of speech, regional dialect, and personality. For the first twenty minutes of the interview, we attempt to transcribe verbatim all words and utterances that are spoken, such as uhs and ahs, false starts, and repetitions. Some of these elements are omitted after the first twenty minutes to improve readability.

The Pryor Center transcripts are prepared utilizing the *University of Arkansas Style Manual* for proper names, titles, and terms specific to the university. For all other style elements, we refer to the *Pryor Center Style Manual*, which is based primarily on *The Chicago Manual of Style 17th Edition*. We employ the following guidelines for consistency and readability:

- Em dashes separate repeated/false starts and incomplete/redirected sentences.
- Ellipses indicate the interruption of one speaker by another.
- Italics identify foreign words or terms and words emphasized by the speaker.
- Question marks enclose proper nouns for which we cannot verify the spelling and words that we cannot understand with certainty.

- Brackets enclose
 - italicized annotations of nonverbal sounds, such as laughter, and audible sounds, such as a doorbell ringing; and
 - annotations for clarification and identification.
- Commas are used in a conventional manner where possible to aid in readability.

Citation Information

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John C. Davis interviewed Gen. Wesley K. Clark (ret.) on January 25, 2022, in Fayetteville, Arkansas. The first part of the interview was conducted by Bill Schwab on January 24, 2022.

[00:00:00]

JD: So Bill had mentioned there was a question from yesterday that you wanted to revisit?

WC: Yeah.

JD: Would you like to start—you want me to s . . .

WC: Yeah. I'll just start talking, and . . .

JD: Okay.

WC: . . . you can get it on there. Okay?

JD: Sure.

WC: One of the things I didn't talk about—uh—that I—that's very personal to me is—uh—"What's your purpose in life? How do you get a purpose?" And so when I was a young person, of course, as I mentioned—um—there was a lot of patriotism. But in 1956 the Hungarians revolted in Budapest against the Soviet Union, and the Soviets crushed them with tanks. And this made headlines for several weeks in the United States. There were lots of articles about it and the aftermath, and—um—and—and—*Reader's Digest* did a long series on this. Of course, *Reader's*

Digest—uh—we know now was a very conservative publication. Um—but—um—but I took it as—uh—gospel truth and I read everything, and believed it. And—um—it set in my mind [clears throat] the connection between the Soviet Union, Russia—um—Europe, and oppression, and domination, and conquest. And that combined with [clears throat]—then Sputnik the next year—um—and then—um—our failures with our missile program. And then in 1960—[19]59, the visit of—of Soviet Premier Khrushchev to the United States. And he—he went to a farm in Iowa and made his speech, and he said—uh—"We—uh—Communists will bury you." And—and this made, you know, a lot of news. I remember sitting in the barber shop and reading in *U.S. News & World Report* these things, and thinking, "This—you know, the country's, you know, in danger." [00:01:49] And—uh—it was the combination of the—the nuclear, the missiles, the statements—uh—what Russia had done in Hungary. In 1961—uh—as I was applying to go to West Point, we were in the middle of the Berlin crisis. And I actually went to Little Rock University, as it was called at the time. It's UALR today. But I went there—uh—and the National Guard was mobilized in the gymnasium. And—uh—for months they—that was their place of assembly. I was interviewed by a colonel about my—uh—desire

to go to West Point. And—and so during all those formative years, the Soviet Union, Russia, Communism was a threat. So it was a combination of love of country and desire to protect it, really, that were—were present in my formative years. Probably not there today for young people, but it—it was really present in Arkansas in the 1950s and early [19]60s.

JD: And that—uh—that mission, that desire to serve carried you through your career in the military.

[00:02:53] WC: It absolutely did. And because—um—I knew why we were in Vietnam. I was the last Rhodes Scholar at Oxford who would defend US policy in Vietnam. We didn't do it right. And—um—and—and—and you know, many books have been written on it. I know how we could have done it better. I learned from the experience. I studied it. And it was the—that experience and learning from it that enabled me to be successful as a commander in NATO in 1999 bringing NATO cores of diplomacy against Slobodan Milosevic.

[00:03:27] JD: Very good. I'm glad that you—you included that in our conversation. Very much so. Uh—so we'll—we'll switch—uh—gears a bit. And so with—with Bill you—you've discussed your early—your early years—uh—in Arkansas and—and formative years—uh—both initially in Chicago and then in

Arkansas and your connections and—uh—to folks in Little Rock and Hot Springs and—uh—Stuttgart—uh—and other places in the state. And—and the people along the way that—that either—either in passing or in real close relationships with you had significant impacts. And I think that's—it's always important to consider is we all encounter these people in our lives, whether they know it or not, are really driving forces of inspiration to us. And so—uh—we've covered a lot of that—uh—with—with you and Bill earlier. [00:04:23] Now we're going to talk a little more primarily about your career—um—after retirement—uh—and your—your political—uh—involvement—uh—particularly after around 2000—uh—and your roots in Arkansas and how that interplay led to—uh—you being drafted and running for president—uh—and remaining incredibly active today in our public political discourse. And you touched on this just a moment ago, when you were talking about—uh—you know, what inspires, what drives somebody. And you talked about how the—the—the series of crises, really, in the [19]50s and [19]60s in particular, in the Cold War era helped shape—shape you and shape your drive and your mission. [00:05:05] Looking back at that, most of your focus in our discussion just—just now was focused on more international relations. Um—did you, at that

time, see the politics at play as well, the sort of—uh—the way that domestic politics wa—was going on at that time as a—as a teenager, as a young adult?

[00:05:26] WC: Never really understood it. Um—because—um—my father had been a Democratic—um—politician in Chicago. I remember in the 1952 election, my mother said, "We're supporting Adlai Stevenson," and everybody else had "I Like Ike" buttons on. I remember that—um—you know, at Pulaski Heights Elementary School. I was in the third grade. And—um—and it felt strange [*laughs*] because everybody liked Ike.

JD: Mm.

WC: But after that, no, domestic politics really wasn't much of a part of it. I would've been a Nixon supporter in 1960 could I have voted. I—there was something about—about Kennedy. I didn't—I didn't like the—the glamour, the glitz. It seemed insincere, but you know, what do you know when you're in the—in the, you know, eleventh grade? You don't really understand. I wasn't—didn't have any connection to politics.

JD: Mm-hmm.

WC: But—um—but I leaned toward Nixon because of—he was—um—strong—uh—anti-Communist, and—um—he seemed to speak with gravity.

[00:06:37] JD: Mm-hmm. And from that era, do you think your— your—the political stances, which we'll talk more about here in a little while, your—um—your very early and—and—and stalwart— um—criticism of our invading Iraq—um—and—and things of this nature that took some political courage—uh—really—uh— especially early on. Do you—do you see some connections there, some parallels to—uh—the turbulent [19]60s, [19]50s and [19]60s, to your positions today? Do you—do you think they evolved? What—do you think that same mission is driving you today?

[00:07:13] WC: The mission's driving me today. But you know, you're a professor of politics, and you know that American politics runs in forty-, fifty-year, sixty-year cycles. There was the—the—the Gilded Age after the Civil War. There was the era of the progressives. And that really wasn't capped off until FDR came in, and then—and then we coasted with it. And—uh—you know, at one point—um—Nixon said, or other—and other people said, "We're all Keynesians now," because they all believed in the macroeconomics of being able to steer government to better people's lives through—um—fiscal policy, taxes and spending and—and—um—and the whole Keynesian analysis. And—um—and that was shattered by Goldwater—uh—first. Um—he didn't

believe it. Um—guys like—um—Friedrich Hayek—uh—*The Road to Serfdom*, the emergence of the Austrian school of von Mises and Schumpeter. And—uh—and then—uh—Milton Friedman—uh—who captured the attention of the Republican party.

[00:08:22] You know, Roosevelt took a lot of money away from a lot of people. My stepfather was a banker, and—um—he always despised Roosevelt. Even though he—he was a commercial banker, it was like, "Roosevelt, oh!" I mean, and I never understood any of it. But of course, what Roosevelt did is he put in regulation. He created the Securities and Exchange Commission, he put in banking laws—um—and he did a lot of things to help people, like Social Security. He fixed people's mortgages. We didn't have long bankruptcy period after 1933. In six months Roosevelt had established an organization that basically stabilized people's homes so people didn't get thrown out because they'd lost their jobs and—and couldn't pay their mortgages. Obama couldn't do it, but Roosevelt did.

[00:09:06] And we coasted through that really until—um—until Ronald Reagan. Ronald Reagan was a genius in terms of his public appearance, his voice, the way he saw the issues. He was more than an actor. He'd been governor of California. And—um—and he picked up on the ideas that—that brought it for—

that helped him as governor. And so even in the early [19]70s, the Republican party—when I worked in Washington in the Ford administration as a White House Fellow in 1975, [19]76, you could look at these overlapping congressionally mandated programs like women and infant—uh—children's program for milk and other things, and say, "Well, this one's with this subcommittee, this one's—but they overlap with 'em. Why can't we straighten this out?" We—um—commissioned a whole bunch of what we called mess charts that show these overlapping lines of authority in an effort to serve the same population and differing standards and—and eligibility criteria. So it was kind of a mess. And—um—and so Reagan built on that and—and other factors. When you—um—government is [*laughs*] no more perfect than—than individual human beings. [00:10:17] And—and so everyone in Congress wanted to do more for their constituents, and that was the philosophy behind it, and it got out of hand. So Reagan—uh—started chopping at it. Kennedy became a big hero when he reduced the marginal tax rate from 91 percent to 70 percent. Reagan took it down to 28 percent—uh—and then he had to raise it because it was too low. But it—uh—that and the deregulation and breaking the power of the unions—um—progressively enabled a whole generation of wealth

to emerge in America. The idea was that if government can't do it better than the private sector, get government out of it. OMB Circular A-76 let—let businesses—um—compete with government. "So—uh—you're—you're doing tax collection. We can do it better. Here's our program. Uh—we have a right to challenge you." And—uh—and when the opportunity to do the public's good with private sector skills. Actually over the long term, most of that has proved elusory because by the time you pay the retirement costs and the totally loaded compensation and figure in wage increases and other expenses, you realize it was low bid [*laughs*], and—and you got suckered into it. But that was the thinking in the time. [00:11:40] So we've been through forty years of the Reagan revolution. Bill Clinton in Arkansas couldn't stand against it. He had to triangulate. He had to move to the center. He had to—we—we couldn't finish Roosevelt's vision of—of—of healthcare for everybody. We got it, you know, in Medicare for old people. We got it—the Children's Health Insurance Program under Clinton. But when I was running for office, I found Democrats didn't even understand the notion of progressive taxation. [00:12:07] Um—there's a guy named Frank Luntz who coined the word "death tax" for the estate tax. And it—um—basically undercut

one of the principle elements of progressive philosophy, which is we don't want a moneyed class in America. We believe in equal opportunity, a meritocracy, but you don't get to pass it all on. The eta—estate tax used to be 55 percent. It became—uh—the money. It became the death tax, and it was progressively whacked and whacked and whacked. Some economists used to say, "The easiest way to take money is to take it from dead people", but you're not. You're actually taking it from their estates, which go to their children. And—uh—so they don't like it. And when you even talk today to Democrats, they don't want the government to take their money. They say, "If they've already paid taxes on it, it's ours. It belongs to our family". Um—but—um—and—and it's wrapped up in the family-farm issue and—um—and whether, you know, people have to sell their property in order to pay the estate taxes when Mom and Dad die. Excuse me just a second.

[Recording stopped]

[00:13:12] WC: Oh—um—so anyway, this is—um—these are forty-year cycles. And—um—the question is whether we're coming out of that cycle now or not. Arkansas tends to be the caboose on the train. It was the last state in the—in America—uh—in the South to go from Democratic to Republican. Others had done it

before. There was a methodology to it. And—um—the methodology was essentially—uh—you—um—put money into the legislative races. You put money into the judicial races. It doesn't take much money. People don't know much about it. People don't pay much attention to it, and you can capture it. It wasn't an accident. It was a programmed effort. [00:13:55] Um—there are two different parties in America today. There's the Democratic party. The party of Will Rogers. I'm a Democrat. I belong to no organized party. And—um—it's never really been different. It's always been a party of ideals and idealists. It's been a party dreaming about the future with a thousand different plans. It's a party that's been diverse. It used to have Southern conservatives who, in Arkansas, rode—um—the tails of Jim Crow and—um—and—and racism to maintain their position in the electorate. And when I ran, there were people who came up to me said, "I'm a yellow dog Democrat." I said, "I just came out of the Army. What's a yellow dog Democrat?" Said, "My granddaddy was a Democrat, and my mama was a Democrat. And I'll always be a Democrat". You know, well, that—that's good, but I'd rather, you know, you tell me you're a Democrat by profession of belief and what your convictions are and your values rather than telling me you've

inherited it. [00:15:00] So but—but that's the way politics is in America. It's families, it's groups, it's associations. And—um—and so the question is now, we're the last state—uh—we'll be probably the last state to see it differently as well. But we are nearing the end of an era. We're nearing the end of the era where people could say, "Let the private sector do it. They're better." No, you can't. Private sector doesn't build bridges, despite all the money in infrastructure funds. And I'm an investment banker. It's really hard to make a profit on building bridges unless it's a toll bridge. And—um—I'm—I'm sort of against toll bridges. I watched this whole tolling business start in Oxford when I was a student there studying economics. And people said, "Well, if you wanna drive on a motorway, you should pay. Otherwise you can take, you know, a cart path. And—uh—you know, let the people who use it pay for it." But unfortunately, that's a very narrow utilitarian approach that doesn't really advance the public interest. Because what you're looking for is the creation of wealth. The wealth creation is spontaneous, but it needs nurturing by education and infrastructure. So you gotta have water and electricity and roads. [00:16:17] And—um—there has been a fight over this from the beginning of the Republic. It was Alexander Hamilton

versus Thomas Jefferson. It was the Bank of the United States versus Andrew Jackson. It was who was going to—it was Abraham Lincoln who, using the Civil War, got the Transcontinental Railroad started. But it's always been a struggle between the center and the states, the federal structure. And—um—we're sort of nearing the end of that right now. And with it Americans are coming back to reexamine the proper role of government in their lives. You can't compete with China today if you don't have a strong central government to—uh—put funding into research and development. Business does not do basic research. It's about the bottom line. Wall Street hates a science project. They just won't vote for it. So—um—if you're going to have cutting-edge science, it's going to be paid for by the government, often driven by national security but now increasingly driven by concerns about climate change. And of course, you have the medical community with the National Institutes of Health, who's done a remarkable job of pushing—um—American creativity. So we may be nearing the end of forty years of—of Reagan. [00:17:36] Um—and—um—I hear the dissatisfaction in the Democratic party on the left wing. I see bold expressions of ideas from people like Bernie Sanders. We talk about guaranteed minimum income and things like this. But

we're essentially a conservative country. John Smith said, "If you wanna eat, you gotta work," or something like that at—in—in—in Roanoke or in one of the—in Jamestown. And if—um—that—that sort of Puritan work ethic is deeply ingrained in America. We don't like handouts. And—um—you know, even during the Depression when there was 25 percent in unemployment, public opinion surveys showed that if you talked to Americans who had their jobs, they said, "That fellow down the street, he lost his job. He must have done something wrong." So there's always the tendency in this society to blame the victim. It's not a class-based society. There are people who drive trucks and work—um—as plumbers and work in the trades who want their children to go on to become multi-millionaires. And that's the American dream. And it can be done. Um—you see it every day, especially with immigrants. And—um—and as they push forward, they don't want a class-based society. They don't consider themselves—um—you know, underprivileged people who are downtrodden. In a way that in Europe there are—there's class warfare.

JD: Mh-hmm.

WC: So that's not a winning argument in American politics. But somehow you have to have government do more to enable it

to—people to have the opportunities they need—um—to release their creativity and their energies. [00:19:25] And as we move into the twenty-first century, we have to find a new ethic in human civilization. It's always been a struggle for survival from clans, to agriculture, to warring states, to the American frontier. It's been about survival. And there were people in this country who starved. There were people who went to debtor's prisons in the nineteenth century. Um—we're a little better, but we still got homeless people today. And—um—when you go out into the business environment, you realize unless you come from an extremely wealthy family, buddy, you're on your own. You gotta make it. And—uh—your family depends on it. And—and—um—but you know, the truth is in the world there's sufficient wealth today that we could educate, clothe, feed, house every human being. Um—we just don't know what the right ethic is. If that were the case, if you knew from being a young person that every want, every need was taken care of, what would we do? Hunger games? Professional football? Pay nine-year-olds that seem to have the best athletic potential to entertain us? Watch chess matches? What would we do? What's the point of human civilization? And—um—so this is what we're reaching for in the twenty-first century. It's coming slowly. It may come through

conflict. We may not be there yet. It may take another 100, 200 years if we're lucky, but is there a path forward for humanity that lives in the communitarian spirit of, let's say—let's put it in religious terms of Jesus Christ, of breaking bread and sharing it in a community, of the loaves and the fishes. Can we live that way? And what—if we did, what will we do with our lives? How would we serve the community and our creator? So these are elemental questions that mankind will slowly come to address in the years ahead, I believe.

[End of verbatim transcription]

[00:21:50] JD: You touched on that—on the sort of the business work ethic. You transitioned from [*WC laughs*] an Army career.

WC: I'm sorry to wander on like that.

JD: Oh, no, this is great. It really is.

WC: If you keep nodding—the problem is if you keep nodding, I keep talking. [*Laughs*]

JD: I'm fine with it. I'm fine with it. You won't get a stop watch with me. So you retire from your distinguished career in the Army and pretty quickly go into an Arkansas institution with Stephens and investment banking. And you, of course, were a Rhodes Scholar. You had studied economics and finance and banking.

[00:22:28] But what was it that really pushed you into a pretty

different career path or career field there after your retirement in the Army?

[00:22:38] WC: Well, I didn't know what I was gonna do. And it's a—it was a sudden shock. I never had any real interest in it. I'd turned down a couple of opportunities that had been offered when I was in uniform because I was thrilled to look at the Army. It was my community. It was my family, and it was something I deeply believed in. And the other thing is that I think when you're wounded and you've shed blood for your country, I think it's a special bond that's really hard to give up. You've donated for your country and risked your life for it in a very special way. So it's hard to turn your back on it.

[00:23:18] But I knew I was fifty-five years old. I knew I had to do something. So I interviewed with various groups, and it looked like the best opportunity I had was investment banking. So I interviewed with Goldman Sachs and Merrill Lynch and Stephens. And it seemed like the best fit for me was actually Stephens. Goldman Sachs wanted me to live in Europe, and I didn't wanna stay abroad. I wanted to come back home. I didn't have any particular idea of what was gonna happen in investment banking. I had been in Congr—in the Office of Management and Budget, and I'd taught economics. I didn't

know business. To do business you have to know accounting. You have to know about money. [00:23:59] I remember I went to see one of my old bosses, General Alexander Haig, when I was in the process of retiring. He said, "What are you gonna do?" And I said, "Well, I think I wanna become an investment banker." He said, "Ooh, investment banking. That's about money. And there are people who know it, and I don't." He said, "But I got my house in Palm Beach." General Haig had made \$150 million or so off AOL stock when it went public back in the mid-nineteen—late 1990s. And so he was riding high then and happy. But he said to me, after I'd said that, he said, "Well, I'm glad you're gonna do something." He said, "So many of these people," and he mentioned a couple of names, "they don't do anything but sit on boards." He said, "You need to do more than that". He had become Secretary of State, of course, after he retired. And then he began to digress and tell me what had happened when he was Secretary of State and so forth and how he didn't like the Reagan administration, how they were a bunch of closed-minded Californians protecting a president who didn't really know that much. So he got on the inside of politics in the wrong way. And even though he'd been a White House chief of staff and worked around the Nixon White House, it turned out

that there's some—*[laughs]* different groups have different proclivities. And he sort of overstepped his bounds and got stepped on and pushed out. [00:25:26] But when I looked at it and thought about it, yeah, investment banking made sense. And so Stephens offered me a chance to come in and learn it. But it was a tough transition because investment banking's about relationships. You build those relationships over a career. You go to Harvard Business School, or Walton's School of Business or school over in North Carolina, depending on where you wanna live and kind of what relationships you want. And those people carry you through, and you call them, and you say, "What's it going?" Say, "Oh, I got this business. I'm doing this." And you get these ideas. I didn't have any of those relationships. So that made it hard. And then it also was difficult because you didn't really understand the business side of the economy. You understood the macroeconomic side, but you didn't understand the business side. So when the folks at Stephens said, "Well, we're—you know, you brought us this great technology firm, and they develop parallel processing computers." Said, "How we gonna make money out of that?" Said, "We're interested in how much revenue per square foot of floor space you can get?" I'm like, "Ah, okay, we're trying to

make money. I got it. I got it." It was hard to transition from thinking about the country. "Well, this is a great technology. Think what we could do," to thinking about, "Put, you know, so many million into this. Here's how much you're gonna make next year and the year after that and the year after that." So I had to sort of learn a new way of thinking. It took a while.

[00:26:54] JD: In your book, *A Time to Lead*, you mention the name Roland Remmel.

WC: Rollie Remmel.

JD: Rollie.

WC: Yeah.

JD: So Rollie played a role in your post-military career . . .

WC: Huge role.

JD: . . . your post-military years, and I was wondering if you just wanted to touch on that, on the role that Rollie played.

[00:27:10] WC: I always look—I was always lucky. I always had mentors, someone who helped me. And Rollie came as part of the Sister Cities group to Belgium. And he met me there. And Rollie was in his early eighties, and he was very civic minded. His wife's family was at one point the wealthiest family in the state. His brother had been mayor of Little Rock. He was a lifelong Republican. He'd served in the Air Force during World

War II. He was a golfer on the golf team at the University of Arkansas before he went in the Air Force. He was a really smart, experienced guy, and he had a big heart. And so he welcomed my family, Gert and me, back into Little Rock in so many ways. They sort of adopted us. We went to their family gatherings at Christmas, at Easter. He came to the house. He brought donut holes to the house. He brought me cotton plants to [laughs] plant in the yard. Said, "You got to know about cotton. Cotton's big in this state." [JD laughs] He drove me through the state, said, "You gotta read this book on the Great 1927 Flood." And he would drive me to the airport in the morning and say, "This is my family's corner." I said, "Your family's corner?" Said, "We bought this land." He said, "I'll tell you how we got this road." He'd tell me these stories about these things. And he'd tell me the personalities and what the state was like, what the history was. And it was an incredible opportunity to be introduced back into Arkansas. In a way—and then he introduced me to people. We went up to Walmart, met people at Walmart. [Laughs] CEO of Walmart said—told him—he said after—he said, "He's too controversial for us." So yeah, I was a, you know—I speak my mind, and business has some problems with that. You know, they're about making a profit. They're about gettin' along with

everybody, not about, you know, speaking your mind. So I learned that you gotta be who you are. I grew up with a certain set of values. I believe in this country. I speak my mind, and you know, it's made the transition to business sometimes challenging.

[00:29:17] JD: So you—and that's, I think really interesting too.

You get into investment banking. In relatively short order, you begin talking on these myriad of topics, especially after 9/11. So you're becoming a very prominent person, a analyst in your civilian role, but also with your enormous experience in international affairs and military affairs. How does that translate into business? Were you—how—in other words, how do you keep those tracks sort of separate, especially in the years leading up prior to your presidential run?

[00:29:54] WC: Well, it was tough, and it was a tough thing personally, because the thing is, I had, in my command in Europe, I had run the operation to suppress Saddam Hussein in Northern Iraq. That was a US-European command operation. I went to Turkey, went to Incirlik Airbase, looked at the targets, was on the phone with the chairman of the Joint Chiefs often about target selection, saw all the intelligence, knew what had happened with Saddam Hussein. [00:30:25] And before that,

when I was in the Joint Staff in the mid-1990s, [19]94, [19]95, [19]96, I met with the UN Special Commission on Iraq. Hans Blix, who was the coordinator, came to my office. We talked about it. We knew that Saddam Hussein in the 1990s had tried to hang onto his bioweapons program. His two son-in-laws had defected to Jordan. They spilled the beans. The inspectors went in and ripped it all out. He brought the son-in-laws back. Shot 'em. I knew all the, you know, intel on the inside. [00:30:56] And so after 9/11, I had a—I was the first military analyst. I was hired—Richard Holbrooke gave me his speaking agent. Speaking agent said, "Well, you know—and this is—these speeches"—you don't know what you don't know. So you say, "Well, I mean, how many speeches will I get? Can I count on it?" He said, "Well, it depends." I mean, what's it depend on? You don't know. So how much will you make? "Well, we're gonna start by"—you know, so, hmm. So if I made like \$25,000 a speech, if I did one speech a month, that's twice as much as I made as a NATO commander. "Will I get one speech a month?" "Well, we don't know." You know. And so there's just this—it's like a fog out there. [00:31:40] So I signed on to be a military analyst with NBC. After a year they never used me. I think I was on one time. It's like, "Oh, they don't need you." He said,

"Let's go to CNN." And so I got this CNN to—six weeks in CNN, nobody used me. I was going to work on the eleventh of September. And I got into the office at Stephens and somebody said, "You gotta look at this, Wes." And there was a picture of New York City and the World Trade Center and a lot of smoke and everything. And then CNN called and said, "Come on right away. There's been"—you know, I was on CNN virtually every day. [00:32:19] And when we invaded Iraq, I was on four hours a night with Aaron Brown. And I became a trusted voice. And I had spoken against the Bush policies. See what happened to me was first, before I got out, I was in Washington, and I was asked, "Hey, you're gonna go back to Arkansas. You gonna run for office?" Tim Hutchinson asked me, "You gonna run against me?" Steve Friedman and—asked me, "Would you run against Hillary in New York as a Republican?" Like, what the hell is this? Crazy stuff. Bill Clinton said, "Well, you know, you're young. You could do that." Like, "Oh, wow, okay." I never thought about it, really. I never ran for student council. I didn't do anything at Arkansas Boys State. There was no politics in my family. My stepfather was, "Oh, we're not givin' a dime to politicians. They're all corrupt." And there, you know, there's a deep strain of that thought in America to this very day. Rollie

Rommel said, "Politics is the way the country's governed. You may not like it, but that's the way it works. And so if you care about the direction of the country, you gotta care about politics." So he's the one who kind of steered me into this direction. And then as I continue to speak out and give my opinions, then people begin to say, "We should listen to him." [00:33:42] I think the turning point was September of 2002. I was asked by the *Times* of London about the invasion of Iraq. It was clear to me that we were going to invade Iraq because a week and a half after 9/11, I was in Washington. I went by the Pentagon to see Secretary Rumsfeld, whom I'd known during the Ford administration and Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz. It was hard for me to be on television after 9/11 and not have a public affairs spokesman or an intel briefing that I could sort of crib from. You know, I had to go on, basically, what I knew and what I saw. I went by to check signals with the Pentagon. And as I was leaving, a three-star general called me into his office and said, "You gotta understand, we're gonna invade Iraq." I said, "Why? Did we find out there's a connection?" Said, "No. No, no connection that we know of. But I don't know, sir." He said, "I guess we're not very good at dealing with terrorists, but we think we're pretty good at taking down governments." Well,

that's what he told me. [00:34:45] But you know, as the months went on, it was clear. People would tell me who had worked with me in Europe, British officers and others say, "Huh, we're going to Tampa. Guess why we're going to Central Command? [Winks] Chk-chk. We're planning, you know, the next stage." And so there was constant talk of this. And the question is why. Why do we do this? I went to the Senate Intelligence Committee chairman, Congressman Graham or Senator Graham from Florida, and I said, "You know, I don't have any, you know, direct need to know. I'm not on the inside of this, but Senator, I just wanna ask you, has there been new intelligence? Condoleezza Rice says we have to worry about a mushroom cloud. Is there something new?" He said, "There's nothing new." I'm like, "Why are we doing this? The North Koreans are building nuclear weapons, and we're invading Iran—Iraq. The Iranians are a threat to us, and we're going after Iraq. Why? Either of those two countries should be prioritized over Iraq." So I began to ask these questions. I testified in front of Congress. I was still on CNN. White House called CNN and said, "You gotta stop puttin' Clark on television. He's a potential presidential candidate." I met with Rumsfeld one time with the other generals on television, and Rumsfeld said, "You gonna

run?" I said, "I'm [*laughs*] not even a member of a party. I don't think I'm gonna run." And this was like January of 2003. And I was concerned about the direction of the country. And I was concerned about us stepping into war. But on the other hand, I'm a military guy. These were the people that worked for me who were leading these units. How could I speak against the policy but be in—promilitary. It was a really tough challenge.

[00:36:43] JD: Well, as you mentioned, you considered the military family, that you had . . .

WC: Yeah.

JD: . . . that lifelong connection.

WC: Yeah. I mean, of course . . .

JD: Did you . . .

WC: Most of the officers that were . . .

JD: Did you lose relationships over that?

WC: . . . planning the operation, the ones who were leading, they all were friends of mine and they—I worked with them, and here I am saying, "Don't do it." And they're on the inside. Of course, they don't have any choice. And so we're on the outside saying, "You're not putting enough troops in," but then it made it seem like I wanted the invasion. No, I didn't want the invasion, but if you're [*laughs*] gonna do it, do it right. Instead, you know, we

did the wrong thing, and then we did the wrong thing the wrong way. And we ended up with a failure, a catastrophe.

[00:37:23] And so anyway, I became outspoken. And then over the summer of 2003—what had happened was I became outspoken, and I think it made the people at Stephens a little uncomfortable because it was a conflict. You can't really talk about—unless you're in a very special [*laughs*] firm. One time I was asked by one of the top people in the firm, says, "What gives you the right to—you're at Stephens. What gives you the right to talk about the country?" Said, "I don't know. I'm just a retired general." Said "Well, you're also an employee of Stephens." So you know, that's when I saw the conflict, and eventually we parted ways, and I formed my own company. And that was in the spring of 2003 just before the invasion. And then I was on TV on the invasion. Then I was on my own.

[00:38:19] I remember getting my first business card. My wife gave it to me. Said Wesley K. Clark and Associates. Jiminy, was that scary. I was fifty-seven years old. I'd always worked for somebody else. I never cared about money. And suddenly I realized that there's no safety net out there. Oh, I got my retired pay, but you can't live on the retired pay. And I had people that were—I had to hire a secretary, and she depended

on me to pay her. If I didn't make money, what was I gonna do? I didn't have any big savings. Didn't have any big property. You know, it was a come-to-Jesus moment, as they say. You gotta really think about it. So we did that. And then over the summer of 2003, people became increasingly concerned.

[*Phone rings*] Just a second.

[Recording stopped]

[00:39:20] WC: So over the summer of 2003, we had—I gave a few speeches. I was really—I was in hot, hot demand. It was like three speeches a week with really great groups. And they wanted me to write another book. And so they were putting the pressure on me to write a book about what to do about terrorism. This is my publishers. And I was trying to do consulting as well to keep my office afloat. And the Democratic Party was in agony over Howard Dean. And so Bill Clinton told me—he said, "Well, the only two people in the party that have national stature are you and Hilary." He was sort of encouraging me to run. And so after a lot of soul-searching consideration, I ran. I didn't realize when I ran [*laughs*] that—as soon as I ran, they said, "Oh, you got to give up all the speeches, give up all your business. You can't have any income." Said, "What? I can't"—I mean, these were multimillionaires telling me that I

don't have any income. "Oh, you can live off your savings. You know, don't worry about it." Well, I did worry about it. So there was always a conflict. It was what Mark Warner had told me. Said, "Sometimes you can't run for office. You're not—you don't have the financial means, or family situation's not right, et cetera."

[00:40:50] JD: So you talk about—and we'll get into our—into your [20]03–[20]04 campaign for the presidential nomination in a minute. You arrive a couple years before that in Arkansas. And in many ways—you mentioned President Eisenhower earlier—you had—there were some parallels. There were people who didn't know which party you affiliated with, but they felt you had the history, the—you met the criteria for public office. And you were in a time where you were going against the grain in terms of our involvement in Iraq, certainly. Were you courted by both parties? I mean, were there individuals in Arkansas and even nationally that were trying to get you to run for an office? And if so, how did those conversations go?

WC: Well, there was no . . .

JD: You know, prior to that [20]03–[20]04 era.

[00:41:41] WC: . . . there was no courtship on the Republican side after I did my fundraiser. Instead there was concern. I mean,

Mike Huckabee didn't—was governor. He didn't want any competition. And so I gave a speech at the country club a few days after 9/11 in Little Rock. There were 800 people that came. They filled up the whole club, overflow rooms, and everything. Afterwards, a guy who was in the Democratic establishment said, "You know," he said, "I used to work for Bill Fulbright, and you should be a senator. You speak as well as Bill Fulbright did." He said, "Now I can't say you're better than Bill Clinton, but you speak better than—you speak as well—you should be a senator." I said, "Well, you want me to run for senator? Would you support me?" He said, "You should come over to my house and talk about it." So I went over to his house. I said, "So you want me to run for the Senate?" This is the fall of 2001. He said—I said, "Would you support me?" He said, "Yeah." He said, "I'll certainly support you if you win the primary." I said, "But—you would support—you said for me to come over." He said, "Well, you know, I told David Pryor I'd support Mark for the primary." He said, "I can't change that." [Laughs] That's politics.

[00:42:57] JD: Were you encouraged to run for governor in [20]02 against Huckabee?

WC: I was offered the chance, and my wife said, "Really? Governor?"

Come on. I mean, you don't get paid anything. Who's gonna pay for the house?" No, it was one of these ego things that—it was a—it's an ego trap. And one of the things I learned in life is you can't fall into ego traps. You gotta do what's right, what makes sense for you for your situation. It's not about just getting pats on the back. Politics is a binary effort. You either win or lose. And when we came out of that presidential campaign, everybody cried. It was pretty painful. A lot of people gave me a lot of money. We raised \$23 million in that campaign. And most of it from ordinary people who gave \$100, \$500, \$2,000. Some people sold property to donate to my campaign. They knew the United States was in terrible mistaken territory with George W. Bush. That's what they believed.

[00:44:00] JD: Tell me about that race. Your race for the nomination leading up to [20]04. So how did that start?

WC: Well, there was a Draft Clark movement that emerged in New Hampshire, and it was interesting. My wife told me, "Stop thinking about it. You're not gonna do it." And but then I felt like I had to do it because I could see the failure in Iraq. I could see it slipping into civil war. I could see the dishonesty on the part of the administration of not admitting it. I was appalled by the Supreme Court blocking the recount of the Florida election,

Florida presidential election in 2000. That was the first time I really understood partisan politics. When they blocked, I thought, "But what's the matter with counting the votes? Why wouldn't you count the votes?" And there was this what they called, I don't know, bow-tie riot or something where these Republican staffers ran down the hall and pounded on the window. I'm like, "Hey, in Europe we ran elections. I ran elections in Bosnia. I was responsible for it to support those elections. We would've thrown those people out, and we would've, if necessary, redone the election. What is it about America?" That's the first time I saw the partisanship. So when I saw—why are we going into Iraq? Went in without enough troops. Went in under false pretenses. Wouldn't admit it was becoming a guerilla war. Bush is trying to give tax cuts in the middle of fighting a war. It was crazy talk. And you knew it wasn't gonna end well, because I know the American military. We're not an occupying force. Put us in a nice country, let our soldiers go over there, meet the families, you know, we're pretty charming people. Put us in an Islamic country where the soldiers are confined to barracks, where the women wear veils, where every man looks at every soldier as an enemy, we look like a bunch of aliens over there. [00:46:14] And I always told

people, I said, "Look, if these people from Mars had come in and come down to Arkansas and wearin' weird goggles and carrying weapons and pointing at everybody, looking at our beautiful women in Arkansas, [*laughs*] we'd shoot 'em. We wouldn't have 'em here in our state either." And we did such a terrible job. We sent units into Iraq with no interpreters. They couldn't even talk to the people that they ran across in the streets. They had no idea what they were really doing. There was no plan for what happened other than "let's race to Baghdad." It was so poorly done. And I had done the contingency planning for Haiti in 1994, did it for Bosnia, did it for Kosovo. I knew what had to be done. But under Don Rumsfeld, who was the sort of czar of this, and Cheney pushing it and George Bush, who was presiding over it and didn't get into the details, we had a terrible—we did a terrible job. And all I could think about was those lives that were gonna be lost. Our soldiers, their families, and the Iraqi lives. That's why I ran.

[00:47:30] JD: So you're one of the, to my knowledge, one of the few in the twentieth century, let alone the twenty-first century, which it's just unheard of anymore, to really be drafted as a political figure, right, as someone who—this—we talk about grassroots, but you were truly being recruited by people who

you had no contact with prior to that who were wanting you to run for this position. And the campaign gets going late. You've mentioned that in your books as well.

WC: More I couldn't make up my mind what to do. The draft didn't start, and I really—you know, people plan for years to run for the presidency. They go out there—look how many trips Biden made or Dick Gephardt made to Iowa. There's ninety-nine counties in Iowa. Every one of them considers themselves a sovereign decider for who will be the next—you got to go to ninety-nine counties. I didn't even know the difference between a primary and a caucus when I started it. I didn't understand the sensitivities in New Hampshire versus Iowa. And so I always—I called it the Campaign of the Four Nos. There was—*[laughs]* back in the 1970s, there were slogans about Communist China and the four nos, and so, well, they said, "Well, this is the campaign of no strategy, no money, no experience." And so—and basically we—it was like tryin' to cross the Atlantic by putting a couple of two by fours under your arm and saying you're gonna build a raft as you jump into the Hudson River and float out to sea. It was an amazing effort. The day I announced *[laughs]* there were 300 people that flew into Little Rock, and I had a little office there that Rollie Rimmel

had invited me to use. And [*laughs*] they couldn't even get in the office. It was—they were literally standing like this [*indicates shoulder to shoulder*] in the office. There were no—nobody had any room to work. It was total confusion. It doesn't work like that. I mean that's not the way you can succeed. It was a miracle we got as far as we did and did as much as we did. [00:49:43] And then the other thing that happened is a lot of the Clinton people came in—their professionals. I think some of them thought that maybe I was a stand-in for Hillary. That maybe, you know, the Clintons had released their funders, and maybe Hillary's gonna jump in in November 'cause she was already in the Senate. And there was a little bit of, you know, undercurrent, "Let's get Clark in there as a placeholder against Howard Dean." And so some of the Clinton people got involved, and then they'd pull back. They'd come in and say, "Well, you can't say that. Oh, no, I'm sorry. I've gotta go do my business." So they were full time for Bill when he was running, Bill Clinton, but they weren't fully committed to me. They came in just enough to discourage people. I remember sitting at a restaurant with a guy saying, "You know, you don't tell us whether you should be in Iowa or not. That's not your job. Our job is the strategy. Your job is to be the best candidate." I said,

"Well, have you heard me on the campaign trail? I had huge turnout from people who love my town hall sessions." And he said, "Well, no I haven't. But you know, right now you don't have the right campaign speech. You're not—you got—you're not even B-plus yet as a candidate. You let us worry about the strategy." Then he went off to business and disappeared on me. I mean, it wasn't like what you could assemble if you were, let's say, a senator or a governor and could really, you know, work this thing and it was in your blood and worked it. So you know, I was grateful for the opportunity. I met wonderful people. I learned America.

[00:51:18] JD: Tell me about that. You know, there's the campaign, the machinery of the campaign, the business end of it. But you were able to come in contact with thousands of people in relatively short order.

WC: We made it to thirty different states. We met leaders and ordinary people in thirty different states. And they're so different. New Mexico is so different from, let's say, Arkansas. New Hampshire different from Iowa. And the people, what their interests are. And then people would tell you their problems. And it's like you're—when you're a politician, people share confidences with you that you wouldn't expect. When you walk

down the street and you look at people, they look, you know, normal, dressed, everything. They're telling you, "My husband lost his job. I have a job. We can't afford to leave Massachusetts because our daughter's in state school, and she's got two more years." I said, "What's your husband do?" He says, "Well, he's just waiting, you know. Hopefully, you know, he'll be okay till we can get Medicare and he gets Social Security, but right now he doesn't have anything. And he needs—you know, his business went out," and blah, blah, blah. And you get all these personal stories from people. And that's the way you learn America. You listen to people. It was an incredible education. And it hit me in my weak spot.

[00:52:49] I grew up as a camp counselor at the Kiwanis Boys Camp. I went to West Point. I had soldiers in the Army in my first command who didn't wanna be there. We had people who went AWOL. We had crazy stuff happen with these kids, many of them with no—so I was a counselor, not an authoritarian disciplinarian. It wasn't about giving orders. It was about teaching, about leading, about coaching, the things I learned from Jimmy Miller at the Boys Club. And here there are—here's the American people telling me, "We don't have insurance. We don't have a minimum wage. We can't afford to live. The jobs—

they're being taken away overseas. Our kids aren't getting the education they need. They're totally in debt on college loans." One thing after another. And you realize these things. You think, "I wanna help. I wanna see what can be done to help people." I don't wanna leave it to the marketplace, you know, where it's like, "Oh, there's still people working at \$7 an hour. Okay, fine. Let's cut the wage to \$5 an hour and see who'll take it. Cut it down to the minimum and see"—I mean, that's supply and demand. That's not right. We know that's not right in this country. That's the reason we're raising the minimum wage. [00:54:08] But I had people who would tell me, you know, one accident, no insurance, they're bankrupt. Breaks your heart. People who can't get a lawyer. I realized that I'd grown up in a socialist [*laughs*] environment in the Army. Lived in a government house, took government pay, kid went to a government school, got government medical help. I mean, it was like socialism. I didn't understand what America was like, how hard it can be on people. So that's one of my great learning experiences from the campaign. It's one of the reasons I believe that we've got to move forward. We got what we could out of the age of Reagan. We turned business loose. We improved efficiency and productivity. Good. Now let's turn that wealth

that we've created—some of it back to help people to get the next wave moving in this country. So I still believe in this.

[00:55:04] JD: Well, and you—we started our conversation about your purpose and how important purpose and mission is.

WC: Yeah.

JD: And it sounds like during that presidential race, you found sort of a different angle on your purpose and mission. And it was, you know, these individuals who you were meeting for the first time with these very real, troubling experiences and difficulties.

WC: Yep.

[00:55:28] JD: So despite success in that campaign, the race falls short. And . . .

WC: Well, we won Oklahoma. [*Laughs*] I was really proud of that.

JD: And Senator Kerry, of course, becomes the nominee. And on paper, you know, someone who is just sort of glossing over—and we remember the narrative of that campaign cycle in [20]04 in the general election where Senator Kerry was being criticizing critically of the war in Iraq as well. Was trying to use, I think, some of his military experience as sort of a way, as you sort of touched on, to say, "You know, I'm a credible voice in this, and I'm not anti-military, but I'm just anti-war in Iraq."

[00:56:16] Just cut to the chase. Would you have been a

better candidate in 2004? You had the military credentials. You had been an outspoken critic of the war in Iraq. You did not have the legislative baggage that Senator Kerry had. 'Cause that's a problem, right?

[00:56:29] WC: You know, you just never know on these things. For the Democratic Party, I was a mystery candidate. And *[laughs]* you know, it looked good from the outside, but without the legislative baggage, you also didn't have the legislative experience, and you didn't have the relationships that are necessary. And so there's a lot to be said in politics for experience and—just like there is in the military or in business. And so you know, it was a shot in the dark for me to run. It was a chance to make a statement. If I could have been elected, I would've loved it, but would I have been a better president or a better candidate than John Kerry? Maybe a better candidate, but maybe not. And probably not a better president because I didn't know enough then. I just—I didn't know enough people. I didn't know enough about the country then. I know so much more now. It's—and I see it much more clearly now than I did then. So no, I respected John Kerry. That's why I endorsed him. He's a very smart guy and a very thoughtful, compassionate guy. But what I realized is—when I considered

running again in 2007, I woke up one morning, I said, "Would you say anything necessary to get elected?" And I said to myself, "No, I don't say—I'm a hip shooter. I say what I believe." And if you're not willing to say whatever it takes to get elected, you're not likely to get elected. And this is not necessarily wrong, but it's the ambivalence of politics.

[00:58:14] Politics is—in democracies is representational. That is to say, it's not direct. Therefore, the people that are representing you, they have personal views and they have your views. And they want you to think that they have your views. But in fact, their mission is to represent your views. Sometimes they don't do that very well. But you know, a guy like John McCain and the Straight Talk Express that he put together—people said like, "Oh, you know, you may not agree with me. This is my views. Vote for me because I strongly hold those views." But usually in politics that doesn't work. Usually you want the voter to identify with you. And so you realize that there's a skill in how this is done. And you have to do it, if you can, without dishonesty. And yet when Eisenhower ran for president in 1952 and George Marshall, his mentor, was accused of being soft on Communism by Joe McCarthy, and they told Ike, "You have to have McCarthy support and Wisconsin support," he

gave a speech, and he condemned Marshall. He did what he had to do to be elected. Of course, we all like Ike. But Ike was a smooth character. And he knew what to do. I don't know if I was that capable. I will tell you this, that Joe Biden told me before I made the decision to run—he said, "You got a one in three chance of winning the nomination." He said, "If you win it, you'll beat George Bush." The Republicans like Karl Rove always knew that I was the real threat because I could pull from the middle, because I'm not, you know, a moder—I'm a moderate. I've been, you know, in a Republican administration. I see both sides of the issues. And so they were always worried about me.

[01:00:20] JD: Well, that's in hindsight, looking back, knowing how that race in 2004 happened and knowing that every candidate has vulnerabilities. But Karl Rove and others were able to really exploit Senator Kerry's vulnerabilities. Senator Kerry, you know, at the time's vulnerabilities. And so things that could have been strengths for a John Kerry candidacy were used against him in many ways.

WC: Yeah.

JD: And it just seems like that would've been much harder . . .

WC: No, no.

JD: . . . for someone like you.

[01:00:48] WC: Everybody—look, the basic thing in politics is you gotta use people's strengths against them. And so you know, I came up through the military, and as I mentioned earlier, there was a *Washington Post* Sunday magazine story on me in 1981. And it generated continuous jealousy through my military career. And even when I was running, generals would come out and speak out against me. Tom Johnson, the former editor of CNN, former chief executive at CNN, said—he said, "If you're thinking about running, you need to go see these generals." Well, I wasn't thinking about running, and I was trying to make a living. It's not like I could take three months off in the summer of 2003. I was trying to finish a book, trying to make a living. And then people kept after me to run. And so I didn't go see the generals. So you know, I had generals that said all kinds of things. Al Gore told me when I talked to him, he says, "I'm worried that they're going to use your military career against you." Because he understood politics. You take someone's strength and use it against them. You don't go after someone's weaknesses. You go after their strength. "He says he's a military leader. Well, look what these generals have said. You know, he says he's a great businessman. Well, look, he's had these bankruptcies. He said he's a great teacher. Well, look,

here's this"—I mean, it's the way you do it in politics.

JD: Sure.

[01:02:06] WC: You know, it's what John Edwards taught me after the campaign. He was a congressman, Democratic congressman from Texas. He said, "Oh, the way politics works," he says, "you define yourself, you define your opponent, and you respond quickly to attacks. Those three rules." He said, "Here's the way I did it." He said, "My opponent was a Texas state senator. And she had passed and was claiming great credit for having passed a law that's produced savings in the Texas expenditures for Medicaid. And she was able to, you know, call whole classes of disease no longer fundable by Texas Medicaid standards." So he said, "I found a woman whose life was destroyed because her daughter was infected and had special eating requirements and disabilities. And when this law was changed by this Texas senator, it bankrupted their family. I put her on television. Said, 'Senator So-and-so destroyed my family with her false frugality. She's living well. My daughter can't afford to eat.'" Said [*laughs*], "It destroyed her candidacy." And so that's politics. You find the opponent's strength and take it down. They tried to do that to Donald Trump. But you know, despite his bankruptcies and so forth, he had so much culture behind

him, and so much of this—of *The Apprentice* show of saying, "You're fired," that people thought he would be a great executive. And so they got what they voted for. But usually you go after someone's strength. [01:03:51] So Kerry's strength was the Democrats wanted a veteran in 2003 to run against George Bush because there was a war. Kerry was a veteran. And let me tell you something, he was on a PT boat, and he did go into Cambodia, and he was nicked and hurt. Now if you get nicked, that's a Purple Heart. If it's an enemy contact—nicked. Okay, that's what the rules say. Someone put him in for it. He got it. I took four rounds. I had a Purple Heart. Bob Dole asked me after the Iowa primary when Kerry won it and I wasn't in it—he asked me on television. He says, "Well, General, how does—you know, he's a lieutenant, and you were a general." And it was some kind of a snarky question that I didn't do very well answering. And the next week I was in New Hampshire on the campaign and said—and I was asked by a Boston NPR radio station, "So how does your military experience compare to John Kerry's?" Well, what I wanted to say was *[laughs]*, "He was a lieutenant with five guys on a boat. I was the Supreme Allied Commander of NATO, whe—running an alliance, stopping ethnic cleansing, and saving a million and a half Albanians. He stopped

the boat and pulled a guy in who'd fallen overboard." Why had the guy fallen overboard in the first place? We never got an answer on that. But you can't go into all that stuff. You know, it's just about define yourself, define your opponent, and then respond quickly to attacks. [01:05:30] So you were asking me hypothetical questions that they're impossible to answer. John Kerry waffled on his—on criticizing the war in Iraq because he'd voted for it. Why did he vote for it? Well, because the Democrats who voted against the Gulf War were all forced out of office. You know, that was a close vote. Great senators like Sam Nunn were run out of office afterwards. He couldn't go for reelection. So he was out. And he'd expressed reservations. He'd expressed fear. He didn't wanna get us involved and bogged down. Well, he was wrong on the Gulf War because we didn't, but [*laughs*] he would've been right on the invasion of Iraq. But it's just the perils of politics. So you know, John did well. [01:06:16] I'll tell you something else, John would've been president and should have been president, and he'd have been a great president, but here's the thing. It rained in Ohio on the day of the election. And the Ohio secretary of state was a Republican. And there was some goofing around with the election and polling places and election hours. And afterwards

John Kerry told me privately that if he'd carried Ohio, he'd have been president. If the voting had been fair and open in Columbus, he'd have carried Ohio. I said, "Well, can't you protest it?" He said, nah, he can't do anything. It just—it is what it is. It's the same thing that happened to Al Gore. He knew that if you'd done the recount in Florida, he probably would've been president. That's why the Supreme Court stopped it. They knew it. [01:07:18] So you realize politics is an imperfect business. There's no perfection here. It's a contest of ideas and people and personalities. Jim Baker put that effort together to seize the control of the election in 2000. He's a tough infighter. We didn't have anybody that tough on the Democratic side. Democrats play by the rules; Republicans play to win. That's what's emerged over the last forty years in the American political system. Maybe it'll change, or maybe we'll become a one-party state. Don't know.

[01:08:01] JD: So you decide against, you consider, decide against running in [20]08. You support Hillary Clinton's campaign. Whence—once her nomination fails, you support then Senator Obama's campaign.

WC: Yeah.

JD: And so I'm curious though. Hillary Clinton, of course, an

Arkansan, has Arkansas ties in many ways and Illinois ties. Now that I think about it, there's another parallel between . . .

WC: Yeah.

JD: . . . the two of you. Hillary runs again—you know, in [20]08 and then again in [20]16 and loses both. You know her well, you supported her, you campaigned for her. And this is a hypothetical again. I apologize. What did we miss out on? What do you think we miss out on by not having a President Hillary Clinton?

[01:09:00] WC: Well, on the positive side you missed out on an incredibly intelligent, honest, ethical, dedicated public servant. A woman who—the same way I feel about national security. She grew up in the same era and feels the same way about good government and human rights and the rights of women and, you know, having an open and fair playing field for everybody. She's a wonderful person. And she would've been a fantastic president. What we got was a very inspirational leader who lacked the experience to know when to hold 'em and when to fold 'em. And so you had no-drama Obama and don't do stupid stuff Obama. And you had a cautious recovery that never reached into flyover country, that didn't deal fully with providing a public option for healthcare. So it was a moment that was sort

of half lost. No big mistakes, but his election opened the way to racism and Trump. Immediately after he was elected, I saw signs, reported and people told me, throughout the South that were racist signs. When he was running and I was campaigning for him, there wasn't an Obama sign west of Joe T. Robinson High School in Little Rock area. And it was what a man in the business community told me when I came back to Arkansas in 2001 and talked about people I knew in business and talked about African Americans and so forth. And he said, "Well, I'm glad some of 'em have some ambition." I was shocked. I was in an army that bent over backwards to make sure that everybody was treated fairly and with respect. And I came into American society and realized the old racism was still here. [01:11:28]

So I think if Hillary had been elected, we would've partially dodged the racist bullet that's bedeviling American society today. We would've had accusations of a dynasty. [*Laughs*] It would've paralleled the Bush dynasty. But Hillary would've been a great president, and we'd have lived through that. And I think we'd have been—we'd have avoided the crisis we're in right now with Ukraine because Hillary understood Europe. She understood NATO. She understood national security. She understood strategy. And she would've been a great president

for us. We're in trouble. Had she been elected in 2016 we'd've been a lot better off. But by that time, she had played her cards in the Obama administration. And she had powerful enemies in the Middle East because she tried to do the opening to Iran. She had powerful enemies in Israel because she tried to do the opening with Iran. She tried to do a reset with Putin. Everybody wants to do a reset with Russia. And this administration even sorta tried to do a reset. They denied it. But you can't. Russia wants what it wants. And but—and so Putin became a real enemy. She saw through Putin, he became an enemy. And so she had powerful forces working against her in 2016 that—more powerful than in 2007, 2008. [01:12:59]

The other thing is the media. We haven't talked about the media. You know, I'm on CNN, I'm a media person. And I know the press in a way that of course I didn't get to know them in the military. Look, these journalists are so conscientious. They try so hard. They believe they have to present both sides. They believe in evidence-based reporting. They don't like to do anonymous sources. That's the mainstream media. And then there's another side of the media that's partisan and that is competing. It's competing driven by money. It's Rupert Murdoch. It's the—you could call it the democratization of the

press in the sense that it appeals—like the yellow journalists of a hundred years ago, they appeal to ignite the passions and bring support, not just to sell newspapers now but to sell advertising time. Fox News has been an incredibly profitable organization. They cater a certain—and they've been a powerful force in American politics. So all of this, of course, flowed from the Reagan era. Got rid of the fairness in media, got rid of the limitations on ownership of stations in media markets. In Little Rock, Arkansas—I came back. I was asked to do a public service announcement in 2002, 2003. And they said, "Well, come out here and"—to the radio city or wherever it was. And I went out and they said, "Now, you know, here's all the radio stations." Eight radio stations all lined up in one building. Said [*laughs*], "They're all here?" "Oh yeah, yeah. They're all owned by the same people." Really? I mean, so except for NPR, you get a certain slant. It's commercial. It's not public service.

[01:14:55] In the progressive era, we believed that the airways had to be used for public service. We believed that aeronautics had to serve the public. We consolidated our airlines to serve profit. So we've driven huge conglomerations of business and transportation in Atlanta and Dallas. We starved Memphis, Columbus, and other countries. It's all about the hub because it

made business sense. Because government said [indicates wiping his hands clean], "It's a business. It's too complicated." Same thing happened with the media. Can't tell what fairness is in media. Who knows what repub—oh [indicates wiping his hands clean], let the public decide. And so it's changed the character of America. We haven't talked about this, but this is another powerful force in politics.

JD: We'll be actually getting to that to the next segment. Would you like to take a break for a moment?

WC: I've got about another thirty minutes . . .

JD: Okay.

WC: . . . and then I have to run.

[Recording stopped]

[01:15:53] JD: Okay. So switching gears a bit and looking more at Arkansas. And you've touched on this earlier, this historic shift in partisanship in the state from a one-party-dominated Democratic state until very recently. And then almost just [*snaps*] almost with a flick of a switch, we went from one-party domination Democratic politics to dominated Republican politics and very little window there of a two-party system, really, with competitive two-party statewide races. As someone who's seen it, and you've had your own national campaign, but you've also

seen up close and personal Arkansas politics as an Arkansan, what have been the consequences of this shift in the last five to ten years?

[01:16:44] WC: Well, I think it makes it harder for government to do things that advance the public interest. It's—there's a different philosophy about what government's about. And I think that's the hard part. The Republicans built their renaissance on culture wars and on the fear of ordinary people that they're gonna lose their family, what they stand for, or what the country stands for, et cetera. I remember campaigning in 2003 with a congressman from East Tennessee and got in his pickup truck to go to the rally. And I noticed a shotgun rack in the back. And he said, "Yeah." He said, "I'm not gonna be out-Godded, outgayed or outgunned in this race." Well, he finally was driven out of office in 2010 by the Tea Party. But it's about culture. And so you find a lot of stunting in the state legislature today about abortion and things like this. And look, maybe not in Arkansas, but across the country majority of Americans support in some form or another a woman's right to choose. [01:17:51] And so Republicans have managed to offset the declining but still potent labor backing of Democrats by appealing to the church as their source of support. So in a religious state like Arkansas, where,

when I first came back here, people said, "Well, have you got your church home yet?" My wife said, "What's a church home?" But people take their churches very seriously. They give 'em a lot of money. They believe in God and country and living the right life. They want their kids educated that way. And those are all wonderful attributes of our state. But when religion gets caught up in politics, it's a problem both for politics and religion. And that's what's happened in America. I can't say it's the first time it's happened. This goes in cycles in this democracy, but right now it's reaching a fever pitch. I hope after the Supreme Court throws out *Roe v. Wade* that the movement will dissipate.

[01:19:06] After I ran for office, the Bishop of Arkansas came to see me. And he said, "You know, the Church wanted to support you in your presidential campaign. But"—because my wife and I are Catholics. We go to the Presbyterian church, but we're Catholics. And he said, "But you have to understand that the pope wants to protect the lives of the unborn." And I said, "Well, what about the lives of all those people dying in Iraq? Isn't he against the war in Iraq? So those people are born, and their lives are in jeopardy. Why doesn't he speak out about that?" He said, "Well"—you know, I mean, you can't talk to a bishop about what the pope said. [*Laughs*] And you—he can't

do anything about it. It was just rhetoric. But basically, you know, the Catholic Church has been enlisted in this. We saw it in a peak where there were a group of bishops who wanted to deny Joe Biden the right to take communion. For goodness sake. One of the things I admire about the Presbyterian Church is we have open communion. If you believe in Jesus Christ, you take communion in our church. You're welcome. We want you to have that bond with Jesus and the good Lord. And so—it's just what's happened is politics and religion have become too closely intertwined. Maybe, you know, as I say, maybe when *Roe v. Wade's* dispensed with, maybe it'll go away. But these are cycles in American society. We gotta survive through that cycle. [01:20:53] In Arkansas—it's one of our strengths is we're a state that has strong beliefs in home and family and in our religious faith. We gotta be careful we don't carry it too far because there are other people who have religious faiths not the same as ours. And you know, this country was founded on the basis of religious freedom. It was not founded as a Christian state. It was founded as a state for people of all religious faiths, and we're against any established religion, unlike, let's say, Saudi Arabia which has an established religion, or England which has an established religion in the Church of England. So when

you start talking about, you know, how America's a Christian country, be careful. Be careful. Because it can take you into some waters that will come back twenty or thirty years from now, and we'll resent it.

[01:21:54] JD: Tell me a little bit about Arkansas Values. I know you're involved in that organization. There's another one that you founded that I wanna get to here in a moment. But given the changes we've seen in the politics in Arkansas, what is your driving force for being involved in groups like Arkansas Values and then, of course, Renew America Together?

[01:22:17] WC: Well, I think America needs a two-party system. And so my wife really is the one who's driving Arkansas Values. But I mean, it was an effort to try to reestablish a Democratic foundation in the state. What happened was this state was long-term Democratic, and so office holders at every level affiliated with the Democratic Party. That was their social club. That was who they felt comfortable with. These were the after-business-hours developments that people had and in-business developments. And so it was everything from, you know, could you call the local sheriff or the mayor, and would he support you or not? And politics is intensely local, and there's a greater discretion at the local level than there is at the national level. So

these friendships and associations are more important. And what's happened in Arkansas is Democrats aged out. So the churches were more vigorous. Older people weren't as zealous on things like abortion. And they sort of got squeezed out of their positions. And younger people came in with passion and with the support of the church. Question is, you know, is there another side to Arkansas? And so Democratic Values was trying to establish people who might have an interest in politics but weren't affiliated with the Republican Party, people who believed in church and family but didn't believe that you had to vote for Donald Trump because your preacher told you to do that. And so that's the effort. It's a demographic effort first. I don't know if it's gonna make it. They say they just need—it's all a matter of money. I'm not sure. I think if you were gonna rebuild a Democratic Party in Arkansas, you got to rebuild it around issues. And there's a conspicuous lack of courage on—in going out and working these issues. We saw it in the right to open carry and some other things in this state. [01:24:41] You know, when your party is made up and your money principally comes from lawyers, those lawyers work for businesses. So they don't like to get—they don't mind funding behind the scenes, but they don't necessarily like to come out and take a stand because

it hurts them in business. And everybody understands that the Republican Party stands for low taxes and less regulation. Business naturally likes that. Why would you want, if you were a businessman, to wanna pay higher taxes and do more regulation? Because businesses, they don't think for the country, they think for themselves. Now they're patriotic. They support the men and women in uniform, but they gotta worry about their investors, the bottom line, keeping people employed. So they have a different set of interests. So they naturally incline toward the party that is most favorable to business. That's the Republican Party. And so between the business interests that incline that way and the influence of the church on the cultural issues, you have a very powerful set of actors that are inhibiting the possible development of the Democratic Party in Arkansas.

[01:25:56] JD: Looking more nationally, you founded Renew America together. And the board, the leadership team, that you've created around that nonprofit is bipartisan. What are the goals there?

WC: Well, you know, it's—I was talking to the governor the other day, and he said—we—talking about politics. He says, "Well, you know in politics you gotta define yourself." Well, that's why

American politics is divisive. You know, if you say, "It's red," I'm gonna say, "It's blue." If you say, "It's up," I have to say, "It's down." If you say, "It's wet," and I say, "Yeah, I agree with you, it's wet." And say, "It's also blue." Say, "I agree with that." So what's the difference between these two people? And so the thing about politics is you do have a tendency to accentuate the issues that you think will appeal to the public that will separate you from your opponent. But the truth is that that's a tiny froth on the top of the fundamental agreement in Americans, between 80, 90 percent of Americans, on what the country's about. And you know, the networks have accentuated these differences. There's MSNBC who will drive it—"We hate Trump. We hate Trump. We hate Trump." And they're gonna tell you everything about what's wrong with Trump and the Republicans. And very literate, very careful, very—you know, appeal to a certain demographic. It's all done by statistical analysis. It is not accidental. It is not intuitive. Every single program on network news is evaluated statistically. So on the other side, there's Fox News. [01:27:33] And then there's CNN which likes to think it's in the middle, but mostly it isn't quite in the middle. It's more to the left, according to most people. And then there's Fox, which isn't news very much. The primary contributors to Fox are not

newsmen. They are just—they give you their opinion, and they advise the White House privately as we saw with Sean Hannity. And so when you look at this, you realize that you've got to somehow get beyond this divisiveness of people wanting to shout. [01:28:07] When I was doing my book tours, a guy told me—he said, "Look." He said, "You know, you're on Book TV." He said, "Well, C-SPAN 3 and stuff—people don't watch that unless there's controversy." Said, "They're flipping through the channels. If they see someone droning on s—they don't watch that. What they wanna see is they wanna see an argument. Then they say, 'Well, what's—why are they arguing?' And they may pause on it for two minutes, five minutes. And if it's really a good, juicy argument, they might really be entertained and stay on it." And so when you realize that it's this passion, this argument, this so—that attracts the reader or the listener or the viewer, then you are understanding why we have to have Renew America Together. Because underneath that is when you stop and you say, "Okay, you're watching this argument, but you know, you really understand, we really do have to vote in this country. I mean, we really don't want a dictatorship. Right?" So when people say, "Throw him out. Put him in jail. Lock her up." They don't really mean that, do they? I mean, most of

them don't. Most of them would say, "You're going to lock her up without a trial? Without ever—I mean, what's the accusation of crime?" You know, you're not really supporting that, are you? Said, "No, I just got carried away." [01:29:25] It's like some of those January 6 rioters. Yeah, there were some hardcore troublemakers in there, but some of 'em told the judge—said, "Well, I just—I didn't—I just—I didn't know what was happening." People are like that. What you have to do is strengthen the fundamental agreement and convergence on values and interests in this country to hold this democracy together. A united America, a renewed America pulling together—it's worth ten aircraft battle groups for national security purposes. Putin sees weakness. Xi Jinping sees weakness. He sees division. They think—they misunderstand American democracy. They don't understand we air our problems in public, and we try to keep everything, you know, together. But with the advent of the Tea Party, and Donald Trump, Mitch McConnell, some people believe party's more important than country. They think only their party can save America. They think they're the only ones that have good ideas. [01:30:29] So one of the things we're trying to do with Renew America is show everybody's got some good ideas. Most people

have [*laughs*] some ideas that aren't so good. So that's why we tried to bring postpartisan Republicans and Democrats together. What I found is that's a very hard task because when people have grown up in politics, that's their life. That's what they live, eat, and breathe. It's a—politics is a all-consuming, weekend-eating profession. I mean, you give up your family, you're taking those phone calls, you're going to those potluck dinners on Saturday night, you're doing your fundraising. So it's really hard to ever be postpartisan. And so you still have trouble. In the military, you know, we can be—you know, retirement—generals can talk to you about the Army and tell you what it's like. So can sergeants. And I was looking for that in Renew America Together. It's hard to find, but some people can do it. They can be honest and laugh at themselves and say, "Yeah, we got kind of got carried away on that issue." Some can't. And I was hoping and I'm still seeking the ability to bring Americans together from different political perspectives and have them understand each other as individuals and be able to see what they have in common and be able to find common goals to work for. Now that's antipolitical. It's not nonpartisan, because in politics you have to define yourself as different. But I think you have to have the balance in American society. And we sort of

went too far in sort of defining our differences and not enough in strengthening what we have in common.

[01:32:09] JD: I only have two more questions for you. One you've touched on a little bit with Bill, and just a moment—you said it again or touched on it. What were your immediate feelings about January 6, 2021?

WC: Outrageous. Insurrection. Awful. Effort to take over the country. And as the evidence is unreeled—unveil—look, I was the first president that Donald—first—sorry, we're talking about presidents. I was the first general that Donald Trump came to, said "Come and meet me." I said, *[laughs]* "No, I'm not. I'm supporting Hillary." I knew Donald Trump from the time I taught economics at West Point in the early [19]70s. He was runnin' around in limousines in New York City getting on the society pages with, you know, Miss Americas, and so forth. I was trying to teach cadets and recover and set the path, you know, forward after Vietnam. No, he was always about himself. And he was a shrewd dealer. He was a guy who skirted the law. He was a guy who used mafiosi tactics, blackmail, and other things.

[01:33:23] We knew all about Donald Trump. And so I wouldn't support him. And I knew that he was also backed by Putin and—whether or not he was a Russian agent. I mean, you know,

there are different qualities of agents. I don't think Putin ever paid Trump a dime. But I think Putin [*laughs*] really used him. I think they manipulated him from an early age because they saw he was a supreme egotist who had the right physical characteristics. You know, look, it helps in politics if you're six foot three, blonde haired, blue eyed, strong jaw, good grip, not worried about the size of his hands. You know, I think, you know, when people meet Trump, they're impressed. That was one of the keys to his success. He was—he's an impressive physical presence. And so Putin saw that. Putin understood the weaknesses of American society. A lot of people forget Donald Trump was the most popular Republican in 2011. And he couldn't run in 2012 because of Ivanka's legal problems, they said. So he didn't run in—but the Russians knew what he was about. So I knew all that. And I knew what Trump was saying. Look, he's the guy who deliberately went down in that Republican Convention and took out the clause that said we were gonna do something on Ukraine. Trump himself did that. Who told Trump to do that? Why would he do that? We knew what that was. [01:34:46] I campaigned the last day of that 2016 election on behalf of Hillary Clinton with Adam Schiff, and we were in Salt Lake City. And I said, "There's two things

America can't afford. You can't afford to educate Donald Trump 'cause he doesn't know anything. And you can't afford to have a guy who listens to Putin and who's interested in his business interests more than he is in the interest of the country." And that's exactly what happened.

[01:35:17] JD: And January 6, you see that as sort of the . . .

WC: Absolutely.

JD: . . . the symbol of that?

WC: Could have foretold it. Trump was—before the 2016 election, he was preparing to say he was being cheated. That was the way he was gonna go out gracefully is to say, "Oh, they—I was the winner, but they cheated me." And he was gonna set up a media conglomerate and make a lot of money off of it and then, you know, consider whether to run again or not. [01:35:41] But he was surprised that he won the election. He won the election because basically Rudy Giuliani tricked Comey in the FBI into restarting the investigation into Hillary Clinton's emails. And there was nothing there. I was in China. I came back, I landed on a Friday afternoon, and I saw the announcement that that had been restarted. I knew there was nothing there. There was nothing there. And you know, and it was all fed—generals were telling me, "She's gonna go to jail. She's leaked. She's—there's

confidential information in there." Well, there wasn't any confidential information except some stuff that had been post email, retroactively considered classified. That's all. So it was just one of those things where you could never get the press to see past the latest headline. And so anyway, Trump was surprised to win. Look, he started a year ago saying the election was gonna be stolen. Before the election, saying they were gonna steal it from him. He's always been a great guy for lies and alibis. And so I have been surprised as the evidence came out how deeply ingrained, how deep into the administration this effort to take over the country and disrupt the election results was. It was deep. But even on January 6, we saw it. I saw it in the summer in June of 2020 in the demonstrations in Lafayette Square, when they were callously crushed by the security forces outside the White House with tear gas and other things against a bunch of young people who—[laughs] they weren't doing anything but exercising their right to demonstrate and—so Donald Trump could walk and stand in front of a church and make a pronouncement with a Bible. Couldn't figure out which way was up. And this guy doesn't read the Bible. He doesn't know Second Corinthians from two Corinthians in a bar, as the old joke went in 2016. He's not—but he is a genius at

manipulation, alibis, lies, manip—using the law in his favor. And he's a strong enough personal presence. He has enormous charisma, enormous personal power. When he loses his temper, people jump and run. And he did that in the White House. He's still doing it. And he's got a huge backing in this country, and he may well be president again.

JD: So sort of winding down this discussion . . .

WC: I guess I answered you on my reaction to January 6.

[01:38:34] JD: You did, you did. So we started the conversation, you and Bill, talking about your early years in Arkansas, and we've covered decades of different experiences, mainly hearkening back to family, to growing up, to childhood, to Arkansas, to modern day politics. We've covered a lot of ground. And as you know, the Pryor Center will keep and store our conversations for generations to come. If there's one thing you would want to impart, one thing you would want to share with those who are going to see this years, decades from now, what would it be? What about you would you want to have shared?

[01:39:25] WC: I think it's love of country and respect for humanity and a belief that we can actually make the world a better place, a safer place. That what brings humanity together is much

greater than what divides us. That essentially, we're all the same and all interconnected underneath. And the challenge is to help, in each person's small way, to make the world a better place for each other. I think that's the ultimate lesson I've taken from my life and the meaning I'd like to live with in my life.

JD: General, on behalf of the Pryor Center, thank you so much for sharing your experiences and perspectives on a extraordinary life, a life of duty and honor and mission that is an inspiration to a lot of people, particularly Arkansans, who see connections with you in a way that may be unique to others. Thank you so much for sitting down with us and sharing us . . .

WC: Yeah.

JD: . . . sharing with you—with us your story.

[End of interview 01:40:43]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]