

INTERVIEW WITH

Charles Thomas

by

Thomas Soapes

on

July 23, 1976

for

Dwight D. Eisenhower Library



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Charles S. Thomas
Donor

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This interview is being conducted with Mr. Charles Thomas at his home in Newport Beach, California on July 23, 1976. The interview is Dr. Thomas Soapes of the Eisenhower Library. Present for the interview, Mr. Thomas and Dr. Soapes.

DR. SOAPES: Over lunch you told me that you and I were born in the same town, a few years apart, Independence, Missouri, in 1896?

MR. THOMAS: Seven.

DR. SOAPES: 1897.

MR. THOMAS: Right.

DR. SOAPES: And your formal education was in the Kansas City public schools?

MR. THOMAS: I graduated from grammar school in Independence and then we moved to Los Angeles and I had graduated, but they only had seven grades in Missouri and I got out to Los Angeles expecting to go to high school. But they said no, you've only had seven grades and been through the seventh grade, we have eight grades so you'll have to take another year. And then within two weeks, I'd say, the principal called me in and said, "No, you've had all this, so you can go to high school." So I did go to high school and finished there in 1915. Then I went to the University of California at Berkeley in the fall of 1916 for a year. And then my family wanted me to go east to college. I wanted to go to Yale, but my brother had gone to Yale and came home with a fur coat and silk



shirts and my family had all they wanted of Yale. So I wanted to go to Harvard next or to Princeton, but I couldn't get in there because I didn't have Latin. In those days you had to have Latin, so I went to Cornell. And I had two years at Cornell and then the war came on and I went into naval aviation in World War I. So I did not finish Cornell.

SOAPES: And after the war?



THOMAS: After the war I came out and had no idea what I wanted to do. And this January, 1919. And my brother, who was some seven and a half years older than I am, he took me to lunch at the Alexandria Hotel in Los Angeles. And he had a captain, army captain, who was still in uniform from World War I, and he had a young chap that had been sent down to open a new office in Los Angeles, or to do part of a new office of an investment house, commercial paper house, which is investment banking. He asked me at lunch, said, "We're looking for a salesman here to start, the office is just starting, and how about coming over and applying for the job?" And so I went over and on the door it had in gold letters, "C.H. Merle", I think it was, "Real Estate." And I thought, well, I might just as well as go into the real estate business as anything else. So I went in, had a nice talk with the man, and he employed me for fifty bucks a

month and I went home and told my family that I was in the real estate business and actually I was in the commercial paper business and didn't know it. [Laughter]

So that was my start. That'd be 1919, I would be twenty-two, and about two and a half years later I became the head of the office. And I was in that business until 1932, and then I got out and took my family to Europe for six months, which I wanted to do. I sold out, sold my interest because I was then a vice-president of the company. We spent six month in Europe and then I came back and in 19-- , well we went to Europe in 1927--I had that wrong. We went to Europe in 1927, I took the family, and then I came back and in 1932 I sold out. There were five banks--- They were the bankers for Foreman and Clark which was the second largest chain clothing business in the country, retail chain. And with the investment house I had been with--I'm not sure I'm getting this in the right sequence. But in any event, the investment house, that's right, that I had been with and that I'd left had done chain store financing for J.C. Penney and S.S. Kresge in the early days when that was the first of all the chain store financing--the big chains were just starting then. And so I had a real interest in the chain store business. And Foreman and Clark, which was the second largest retail chain in the country, the head of it had died (and he'd been ill for quite a time) and there were five banks that had interest in it and it was right at the height of



the depression, and they were in real financial trouble because they had built two new factories; they'd built an office building in Los Angeles--a large office building; and they'd gone into very heavy debt at the wrong time. And I went in for these banks to reorganize it. At first it looked like it would be hopeless because their debt was such. And I finally went to the banks after probably six months and said, "Now, you can liquidate it and get--I'll guess twelve and a half cents on the dollar. But if you want to put up a substantial amount more money"--because their inventories had been shot and they had to have a great deal more inventory--"if you want to put up a substantial amount of money, the background of the company is such, the name is good, it's a basic industry, I think you can get your money out." And they did. They put up a large amount of money for those times, and in three years we had virtually all the debt paid and they were back in business in a big way.

SOAPES: Were you active in politics?



THOMAS: Yes. And I'll tell you in what way. I was in Washington in World War II with Jim Forrestal as his number one assistant and I was primarily in the procurement area and material area. And there I saw so many of our congressmen that really were more interested in getting business than they were in winning the war, and I became quite disgusted with a lot of the members of Congress.

Now that doesn't apply to all, but a lot of them. I'd never had any interest in politics, but I came home declaring that I was going to become involved in it. And I made an investigation to start with. The head of the Los Angeles County Central Committee-- Los Angeles county's always been a large county. They had one man, he was an insurance adjuster, not a very impressive fellow, and he ran the office with his secretary and he paid for half her salary for the political end, but that was all they had in the office. And I made a study at the time and the Communist party in Los Angeles--the Communists had not been outlawed then--had twenty-three in their organization. And so I got another chap and myself and we put up \$5,000 apiece--that was a lot of money in those days. And we brought a young chap out from Washington--he'd been in public relations in the Navy--I knew well, very outstanding, he's now senior vice-president of Metromedia, and another young Marine Corps captain who was in public relations, very outstanding. And we built a series of flip-charts that you could put on a desk and go in and turn them and flip them over and they would give it and they'd give the background of the Republican party and how many races we lost by half of one percent because we had no organization and the like. And I went to eighteen men and asked them for twenty-five hundred dollars apiece to build a finance organization for the party and everybody said that was crazy, that they wouldn't even give you a



hundred dollars much less twenty-five hundred dollars apiece. But I took these men in; they gave their story and the flip-charts. Of the eighteen, eighteen gave me twenty-five hundred dollars. And that was the start of the Republican National Finance Committee in California, because they had none really. And that would have been in '46.

And then coming up to the election in '52 I was then the chairman of the California State Finance Committee; also a vice-chairman of the national finance committee, because they put me on that in the meantime. And we set up, I would say, a very excellent organization. I had a vice-chairman in northern California, one in the Oakland-San Francisco district, one in the San Joaquin Valley, one in the Los Angeles area, and one in San Diego, and they were all wonderful men. They were not only names, but they were workers. And names to me are worth nothing unless you work. So we were the start, then, organizing for Eisenhower. Now the most that the California state committee had ever given to the national finance committee before was seventy-five thousand dollars. And we were given, for the Eisenhower budget, we were given four hundred and ninety-nine thousand, and everybody said that was ridiculous, but, as I say, we had a fine organization. I didn't raise any money myself; if so, very little. But I kept on their tails constantly, almost



every day or certainly telephone calls, wire, or a letter just constantly. But they were wonderful, dedicated men, and we raised for Eisenhower in that election, six hundred and forty thousand. So that was my involvement in politics.

SOAPES: This work of fund-raising for Eisenhower was after he had won the nomination; or is that before?

THOMAS: No, he'd won the nomination.



SOAPES: Were you at all involved in the California Republican politics before the convention with Earl Warren?

THOMAS: To this extent: I held a meeting once. I was called down to Santa Monica, I've forgotten who it was, but very prominent in the Republican party, very close to Earl Warren. And I came down; they had a meeting I'd say probably twenty men and Earl Warren was there, and this chap asked me to tell about our financial setup. And I told him about it with some pride, and I don't think I've ever been burned out as much as I was by Earl Warren. Oh, he just castigated me for getting into something I didn't know anything about, had no right to get into. And Earl and I--we didn't mix, that's for sure. Well then, came up to the delegation, and the chap who I knew well, Barry Brannan [?], was forming the California delegation. And he asked me to go, if I would go on it. And I said, "You must know I am not for Earl Warren."

And he said, "Well, that doesn't make any difference. The first ballot you'd have to vote for him, but from then on you'd be free. And what we're trying to do, we're trying to get everybody on it, like the head of the state finance and the like."

So I said, "Well, I don't think so, but--because I'm not for Earl Warren--but I'll talk to you later."

He called me later and he said, he'd checked and that was all right and on that basis I said I would go on the delegation.

So we had a meeting at the Biltmore Hotel the night, I think it was, before the delegation left from here and Warren was there and he told us, "Now, you're committed to vote for me until I release you."

And I said, "No, Governor, my agreement was I would vote for you the first ballot, and I was to be released after that." Oh he was mad, I never saw anybody madder than he was. I was on the delegation but I was for Eisenhower all the time.

SOAPES: Was there much Taft sentiment in the California delegation?

THOMAS: Yes, there was a lot of Taft. Taft was highly regarded and he was by me, too. This was a hard decision to make, I'll tell you that. But the reason that I was for Eisenhower primarily, well not primarily I guess, because I thought he was a great man, but I thought he was more electable too than Taft. And I think that was the sentiment of many of the people.



SOAPES: Is it possible to distinguish between Eisenhower and Taft people in California on the basis of age, economic level, history of participation in politics?

THOMAS: Well, I think definitely that Taft people were the more conservative types, older, more conservative, yes.

SOAPES: Were they the political pros as opposed to Eisenhower people as being novices?

THOMAS: I would think so, yes. The Republican party then in California was basically quite a conservative party and the leadership in it were older people. I guess that applies still. Lot of these younger people don't get out and vote now. They declare themselves Republicans or Democrats, but they don't actually get out and vote. But Taft was highly regarded.



SOAPES: One of the mysteries that historians still have to deal with in regard to the California delegation was the choice of Nixon, then the senator from California, as Vice-President. Were you in a position to see Nixon's own activities?

THOMAS: Clearly. On the train going to Chicago, Nixon got on, as I remember--I was going to say in Denver--and he got on the train. Now on the train I had told Warren again that I was not committed after the first ballot, and as I said he was really mad.

So when Nixon got on, I knew Nixon well because when he ran for the Congress in 1946 I met him first down in Santa Monica, and he was then still in his uniform as a lieutenant commander in the Navy. And we had at that time, we had a selection committee out in his district, the 12th congressional district. And they interviewed I think about, oh, seven or eight different ones, and, much to everybody's surprise, they selected Nixon. And so I was on his finance--well I was still then the chairman of the California State Finance Committee--so I had financed or supported Nixon in the financial end right from the very start. Now he was supposed to have no chance whatsoever. And coming back from the dinner I was telling you about in Santa Monica with Warren, I came back with the California national committeeman, who was supposed to be very smart--I guess he was. And he told me, he said, "Well, this idea of your supporting Nixon just doesn't make any sense because he's running against Voorhis, Jerry Voorhis, who's been in the Congress I think five terms, which is almost ten years--good family, well regarded." And he said, "To put up any money to support Nixon against Voorhis just doesn't make any sense because Voorhis will beat him by at least fifteen thousand votes." Well actually when it came out Nixon won by twenty thousand votes. And I don't know whether you know this or not, but Voorhis had challenged Nixon to a debate and they debated in a high school.



And the first night Nixon didn't debate but baited Voorhis into a couple of statements, and then he pulled out an envelope from his pocket. He said, "Well, you astound me. Here's what you said on such-and-such a dates, which contradicted what he said." And he got Voorhis so mad I don't think he was willing to debate the other two as I remember. So Nixon, oh, he was the hottest thing in town in those days. And he then ran for the Senate, you know, against Helen Gahagan Douglas, and she was supposed to win that one. He beat her by seven hundred and fifty thousand votes. So he was then a Senator. As I said, the hottest thing in town.

SOAPES: How important was the communist issue, the McCarthyism issue, in that 1950 race?

THOMAS: Not very important as I remember. As I remember most of the big furor was back in Washington and I don't really remember the McCarthy situation as anything of any importance out here.

SOAPES: What was the best thing Nixon had going for him in that election, for this upset win?

THOMAS: Well I think first of all he was a good campaigner, and I think his strong anti-communist stand was probably the most important thing. Now he was very popular at the time,



and, as I say, a good campaigner and very anti-communist which was very hot right at that time.

SOAPES: Now in 1952 the vice-presidential selection. One theme that some historians have tried to put forward is that Nixon was maneuvering in the California delegation to break loose some Eisenhower support early. Did you see any of that?

THOMAS: Say that again, now.

SOAPES: The story that some have put forward is that Nixon was working against Warren, against--

THOMAS: Against Warren?



SOAPES: --in the California delegation and trying to break loose some Eisenhower support and that that was then important in his selection as vice-president.

THOMAS: I don't remember that particularly. I don't remember--I'm sure that's right, though. I'm sure it was.

SOAPES: Nixon and Warren were not allies at all.

THOMAS: No, no, no. They didn't mix at all either. But I don't recall any particular show of that, but I'm sure it was

right. Because I was for Eisenhower and he knew that; so never any point for him to push it with me.

SOAPES: I'd like to turn now to your move to Washington. You went in first as under secretary, and you were telling me earlier that there's a story behind that.

THOMAS: Well I'd been active in the financial end. I'd never had any interest in running for public office, but I worked hard a good part of my business life and spent a lot of time trying to help elect good people. Because people are everything. And I was very active in the Eisenhower campaign as I have told you before, but I never made any move of any kind to get anything. And I got a call from Harold Talbott. Now Eisenhower had been nominated and he's gone out to Korea--you remember?

SOAPES: Yes.

THOMAS: He took Charlie Wilson and he took Roger Kyes and he took a group out there, General [Omar] Bradley, quite a group. And he was out there out at Seoul and I got a call from Washington--I'd come back from lunch--from Harold Talbott who had been selected and had been announced was going to be the Secretary of the Air Force. And Harold had been very active in the campaign, so I'd gotten to know him quite well. And he said, "Charlie, you're going to be the Secretary of the Navy."



And I said, "Well, Harold, I haven't heard anything about it."

"No," he said, "your jacket has gone out to Eisenhower, been sent out there, and you're going to be the next secretary."

And I said, "Well, I don't know any thing about that."

So that night the [Los Angeles] Herald came out and half of the page was a picture of me to be the new Secretary of the Navy. And I got all these calls from everybody--the news media, and television, oh, everything. And I said, "Well, I don't know anything about it. I have had no official contact of any kind."

The next day, now I'm at a directors' meeting in Los Angeles in the morning, and I get a call from Admiral [Arthur] Radford who is out there with Eisenhower. And Radford said, "Charlie Wilson is coming by," this was in Honolulu that the call come from "is coming in tomorrow at March Air Force Base up here (up in the Valley). He's going to come through there, land there at 6:30 in the morning, and they'll be refueling, and he'd like to talk to you."

And I've been told it's all in the bag. So I said okay. And I go up the night before and the General comes out and congratulates me on being the new Secretary of the Navy. And I said, "I don't know anything about this."

So the next morning they come in and all the brass got off of the plane and went in for coffee and the like and I went out and got on the plane with Wilson, sat in the lounge of it. We



talked for a very short time--and he said, "Mr. Thomas, are you in a position to take a position in the new administration if you're asked?"

And I said, "Yes, I am, Mr. Wilson."

And he said, "Well, we'd like you to be the Under Secretary."

And I said, "Mr. Wilson, I haven't got the slightest idea in the world, or interest, in being the Secretary. And only because I don't think I'd do a good job at it. My heart wouldn't be in it, Because" I said, "as you know with Forrestal, I was head of really all the procurement in the Navy. I've had a long background in the Navy, and I wouldn't do a good job and I have no interest in it whatsoever." So that was the end; the conversation didn't last very long.

They were then headed for Houston, Texas. Then I found out later that they were on their way to ask Bob Anderson to be the Secretary. Now Bob was a Democrat, but he'd been head of the Democrats for Eisenhower in Texas and been very politically oriented there and a fine man. They were on their way there. Well, I got a call from Wilson a couple of days later, would I reconsider? And I said, "No, because I really wouldn't. I'm not trying to be difficult, but just wouldn't do a good job because my heart wouldn't be in it."



So I get another call from him. And I said, "No, I don't feel any different than I did before."

I get the third call and he said, Wilson, "Bob Anderson would like to talk to you. Would you talk to him?"

And I said, "Well, of course I'll talk to him." Wouldn't say no I won't talk to him.

So he hangs up and in about two minutes I get a call from Bob Anderson. He would like to fly over and see me. And I said, "No, Mr. Anderson, I know what you're involved in now and you don't have to come over here. I'll come over there."

He said, "All right; I'll meet you half-way, some place because I want to talk to you."

And I said, "No, I'll come over to Houston and see," or Ft. Worth I guess it was.

So I went over to see Anderson. I met him in the apartment of one of the big oil men--a whole floor of one of the big hotels--I've forgotten the name of it--it was (H.L.) Hunt I think. And anyway what a magnificent place it was; one of the finest art galleries you ever saw. So Bob comes in, Anderson comes in, very nice man and he says, "I've never been in a rowboat as far as I remember, and I just have no background in the Navy, and I need somebody like you very badly, and I wish you'd do it because I really need you." And he really went to town on it.



Finally I said, "Well, I'll go back and talk to my wife about it."

So I came back to Los Angeles and I talked to Julia and she said, "Well, you've been complaining now that the right kind of people won't go to Washington, won't make the sacrifice to do it, and you've complained bitterly about it for years. I think you ought to do one of two things. Now either put up or shut up."
[Laughter]

So that's the way I went.

So I went over and Anderson was terrific. He had his office and then his room next is his mess and then next to that was my mess as the Under Secretary and next to that was my office. So we really adjoined and he said, "Now, you come in this office any time. Doesn't make any difference whether I've got people in here, whether I've got a meeting going on, you can come in this office when you want or need to any time." Well of course I never abused it, but I could have done it I'm sure. And he said, "Now, you form the secretariat." And I picked all the assistant secretaries. Well there were only three of them, but I picked them. He was very good. And that's how I happened to go in.

And then I'd been in there--I went in with Eisenhower in January of '53--and in August of '53 Wilson called me down to his office and Anderson was sitting there and he said, "Charlie, I'm going to ask you a favor."



And I said, "Well, what favor, Mr.--", no, I said "okay." I learned then, I always ask now, what favor. But I said, "Okay, what?"

And he said, "Well, we want you to be the new assistant secretary of defense for supply and logistics." Well of course my background all during World War II was a natural for that.

But I didn't want to do it. I said, "Mr. Wilson, I don't want to leave the Navy."

And he said, "No, we need you and this is something you can be very helpful," and he went to town on how badly he wanted me to do it.

So again I said, "Well, I'll talk to my wife." So she's at a meeting, some women's group down at the naval shipyard in Washington, and I go down there and they call her out and she and I sit in a little park there. And it seems that the admiral's wife went by and saw us and she said later she thought we were having a fight. And I told her the story and she said, "Well, I knew, Charlie, you came over here to be helpful, and if they want you to do it I think you have to do it." So I went in and organized because they had no--it was brand new setup under the Reorganization Plan Number Six that Rockefeller had set up for the Defense Department. Now I went in in August and organized it, got some excellent people down.

[Interruption]



THOMAS: I went in there in August of '53 and organized it, and we were able to get some very outstanding people to come down in the top jobs because Wilson was very good. He'd get on the phone and talk to somebody and just tell them that that was their duty and their responsibility and we got wonderful people. But I had that all set by March of '54, which would be eight months later, if I remember, something like that.

And who was Secretary of Defense then? No, Bob Anderson, no, the Deputy Secretary of Defense resigned; it was Robertson. And he resigned and they floated Bob Anderson up as the deputy secretary of defense. And that was announced, the resignation and the appointment of Bob as the Deputy Secretary. And my picture was in the papers in Washington and said, "Thomas is to be the new Secretary of the Navy." And nothing happened. A week goes by and then they're talking about other people going to be the Secretary of the Navy, and here we're going over the same thing all over again. And finally I guess it was maybe ten days and Wilson called me in and said, "Now, Charlie in your new job--"

And I said, "Well, Mr. Wilson, what new job are you talking about?"

"Oh," he said, "you knew you were going to be the Secretary of the Navy. If you didn't know that, you didn't know me very well."



So that's the way I became the Secretary of the Navy. And I had a wonderful affection and respect for Wilson.

SOAPES: What personal traits of his stand out in your memory?

THOMAS: Well first of all he thought more clearly between two points than any man I ever knew. I mean he could get to base of a problem quicker and think more intelligently on a direct line than anybody. He had a tremendous sense of humor. He would not be subservient to the press and they were, oh, they were tough on him. And that didn't bother him in the slightest. He had a big room off his main office, and every time they'd run a real dirty cartoon he'd ask for the original, and he had this room just lined with all these mean cartoons.

And then we went up to a hearing and I've forgotten, I think Irwin was the head of this committee we're before; it was something very important. Wilson sat in front and I sat behind Wilson with Bob Anderson, no Bob, Secretary of the Army--

SOAPES: Stevens?

THOMAS: Bob Stevens, and whoever was the Secretary of the Navy then. And then Radford was there and the chiefs of staff were there, because we were backing Wilson up. And I've forgotten how it came about, but Wilson interrupted and said, "Well, Senator, I'll tell you a funny story." And we all went, "No,



not now, not now." [Laughter] It was just absolutely spontaneous. "Oh, not now, no, no." Oh, but he had a great sense of humor, and very able, and I've never known a greater patriot than he was. Cost him about five million bucks to be the Secretary of Defense, and I never heard him say once anything that wouldn't indicate that it hadn't been a tremendous honor to be. Never once did he say, "well this is costing me anything," or, you know, "I made a sacrifice for it." Terribly able and everybody liked and respected him and worked awfully hard for him.

SOAPES: How about his style of administration? Would he look over your shoulder a lot, or, would he let you run your shop?

THOMAS: Oh, no. He delegated the responsibility to you. And if you didn't like it, he got somebody else. But I used to go down around six o'clock a lot of time. During the day his desk was absolutely clean, had nothing on his desk. And he had no file baskets, incoming, outgoing; it was just clean. But about six o'clock or around there he would do his mail, dictate, and all that, maybe later. But I would go down there once in a while and sit down and talk to him. He liked to do that, and I became very close to him really. Very close. He gave you the responsibility and when you had it, you had it now. For instance, I learned two tremendous things from him. When I first became the Secretary he said, "Now, Charlie, I just,"--because now I'm



working directly for him, before I'd worked directly for the either the Deputy Secretary of Defense or the Secretary of the Navy--and he said, "Now, don't you ever 'yes' me, because if you 'yes' me, I'll get on quicker than anybody you ever saw." And gee, I'd stand up and argue with him and, of course, never on a personal basis. And he would change his mind a lot of times. And if he didn't, then I knew it was the right thing to do. And then the other thing he said, "Now, if you want my advice any time, I'll give it to you. All you have to do is ask and I'll give it to you. But one proviso: and that is, you tell me all the facts." Now, see most people don't ask your advice and they tell you what they want to tell you so that you'll be for them and he didn't want that. He wanted all the facts. But in the office of Secretary of the Navy he never once directed me. Of course I had a good rapport with him because I would go to him on all these things. And I kept him well informed. But a wonderful administrator. He had good people and he delegated the responsibility to them and gave them the authority.

The remainder of this page and pages 23-25 have been closed in accordance with the wishes of the interviewee.

THOMAS: Well, I had made up my mind, the senior officers had been in command for a long time, that they ought to bring up some younger men, some outstanding younger men which we had. You know they have the zone, which is three years, serving three years after you're out of Annapolis, and that's where you pick out of the zone, select for your flag officers,



promotion from captain to flag officers. Now you don't have to, but that's been the custom or had been the custom. So I wanted them to go down and pick out, instead of having to wait until you're forty-nine or fifty to make your flag, go down and pick out some of these real tremendous ones, you know, younger than that. So the first selection board--I go in March, as I remember--and the first selection board is in June, and the head of it is a full admiral over in England. A very good friend of mine out of World War II; I knew him well; he was a good friend. So I got him before and I said, "Now," his name, I said, "I want you to go down now and pick up two, preferably three, younger men, very outstanding, and let's get in here a spirit of real competition now--you don't have to wait till you're damn near fifty to make it and go down and--we're not talking in the thirties or anything like that--although the Air Force was doing a lot of that. "But go down and pick up some that are so outstanding it'll just spark everything to, you know to be competitive." And he would nod. I told Wilson about this, Wilson was all for it. I don't know whether you know it or not, but General Motors people, they start their rise early if they're good, you know. They don't wait till they're forty or fifty, they take them when they're in their thirties and late thirties and start them up and if--so he was all for it. And I saw the admiral on couple of



occasions other than that and said, "Now don't forget, you're going to go down, I hope you pick up three," and he always seemed to agree.

So the day after the board--and the Secretary has to approve --because it goes to Congress, but the Secretary has to approve the list. And the tough thing about the Navy is, out of about two hundred and thirty-five captains, and they might all be qualified, you only pick about sixteen. And the rest of them, next June they're out. They go out. It's a tough thing but then it's certainly competitive because they've been screened out all the way along up to there. Well the next day after the board he comes into my office and puts down the list on my desk and I look it over and there's nobody out of the zone. And I said--I'd called him by his first name, John, when he came in because we were close friends--but I switched very quickly to admiral, I said, "Admiral, there's nobody on that list under the zone." And he didn't say it but he inferred they never had any intention of it. And I said, "Well, now if you had argued with me I would have respected that. Or if you had indicated that you didn't agree with it, I would have respected that. But you always seemed to agree and you seemed to nod your head." And I said, "I'll tell you what I'm going to do now. I'm going to dissolve that board and I'm going to appoint a new board, which I had the right to do as the Secretary. You never saw a fellow



change, get as red, in your life as he did. I thought he was going to have a stroke. And I said, "You're dismissed now." And he got up and he was really shaken.

So I beat it down to Wilson. I couldn't get down there fast enough. And I told Wilson. Wilson said, "Good for you, Charlie, stay with it. Good for you."

So in a very few minutes Admiral Robert B. Carney, who was then the CNO, comes in and he's white and he said, "Mr. Secretary,"--he always called me Charlie before, we had a good working relationship, outside of he wouldn't give me some of the communications I wanted. [Laughter] But we had good personal relations. He said, "I'm going to ask you not to do that." He said, "you'll just tear the Navy apart if you do it."

I said, "Well, I think they need it. I think it's going to be good for them, really," knowing I had the backing of Wilson, see.

And he said, "Well, I'm going to ask you not to do it. I'm going to ask you as a personal favor. I've never asked you one before. I'll never ask you again, but I'm going to ask you a personal favor not to do it because it will just tear the Navy apart." Now he said, "I'll tell you what I'll do if you won't do it. I will write a precept for two admirals, new precepts. And they'll be written such they'll have to go down and pick up some younger men. Now if you will withdraw that, I will do that."



So I said, "I don't think so, but I'll think about it over night."

So I beat it down to Wilson again. I tell Wilson and he says, "You won your point. Go ahead, do it. You won your point."

So I did it and now they go down all the time. Hell, they go down to any number of them. So that created a standard.

One other thing I'll tell you. (I'm sort of proud of these things, because they weren't easy, you know.) The wives are very important when you get up to your senior assignments. Unfortunately in the military, some of their wives when they get way up, their wives are alcoholics in some cases, are antisocial. When you're in a foreign base or you have a big command and all, the wife is very important. So I wanted to change that. I wanted to have, when you only have in your flags sixteen out of two hundred and thirty-five, you know, you don't have to pick--you pick a team--can be a team. But it hadn't been before. So the first one that came into my desk for promotion--now this is to your four stars, and I'm talking primarily about four-stars now, and there are only six in the Navy, four-star officers. So there's no reason in the world why they shouldn't be just outstanding. First one came in the wife was an alcoholic and we had been, my wife and I, at an occasion, very prominent occasion, where she'd gotten, unfortunately, intoxicated and really made a--was very unfortunate.



So the first one that came in I said, "Now, I want to see a dossier on the wife." And they told me that was none of my goddamned business. Virtually and almost in those words. And I said, "No, I want to see a dossier on the wife."

And they said, "No, no, that was not the custom." So I said, "Out." And I wouldn't approve them. And that went out. Now this was really, as my Marine Corps aide said, "That really shook the cage."

And so again Wilson--I mean I had a very close rapport with him, not that I had to so much but I wanted to and I thought it was a team and I thought he should be in. So I turned that one down cold. The next one came in and they had a dossier. It wasn't quite as full as I wanted, but no problem on that. Now the wife is about twenty percent, you know. Now this goes all the way not only to four-stars, all the way, you know. The wife is very important in the selection of flags, and of course they have to be reviewed every five years, and that's a very important part of it.

SOAPES: You mentioned the concept of teamwork. One of the things that Eisenhower frequently commented on--I've seen it in some of his letters and I think he made some public comments on it--was the service rivalries. I'm wondering about your reflections on that problem while you were Secretary of the Navy. Were the chiefs of staff, the civilian secretaries, did they work as a team or was this service rivalry a real obstacle.



THOMAS: Well now do you mean did the service secretary and the service chief of staff work together?

SOAPES: I'm talking about across service lines.

THOMAS: Oh, okay, across service--well I'll answer the other one first though. In alot of cases--not a lot of cases, some cases--the secretaries do not work very well with the CNOs or the chiefs of staff. But that's the fault, purely, of the secretary. I mean he has a right to have everything and if he doesn't have a close rapport with the CNO or chief of staff, then he ought to get a new one, and he could. And any secretary of defense would back him on that. Now one of the secretaries, I won't say who it is, asked me once, he said, "Did you have a rapport with a CNO?"

And I said, "I sure did." I said, "We couldn't have been closer."

And he said, "Well, I don't get to see the CNO very often."
[Laughter]

And of course that's ridiculous. And the CNO, he runs his own leader. Now one thing you got to be careful about in the military, the CNO, when the new secretaries go in--now don't forget that they change about every seventeen months and you get somebody that's been a political appointment, still may be



very good, you get a political appointment. Hell, it takes him that long to really get the background in military whatever it is. My big break was, see, I had been there with Forrestal and I knew all the senior people, and, as one of the admirals told me, he said, "Mr. Thomas," he said, "you know where all the bodies are buried." But he said, "One thing we all know about you is that you're for us." Which is right. But you had to have a real background in it to do it.

But as far as the crossing across the different services, I think that depends entirely on the secretary. Now I had a very close working relationship, of course I hadn't been in the Navy too long and then only as under secretary. I became the Assistant Secretary of Defense and that makes a lot of difference. But I would have, I worked the same way, would have. I had a very close working relationship with the Army and the Air Force both. Their secretaries, Bob Stevens and I couldn't have been closer friends. And the same with the Air Force. But that isn't always the case. And if you do that you keep you own people in line. Now the problem we had when I was there was the Air Force was new and they had all these young appointments, generals all over the place, and young, and they're eager beavers. And they were pushing. Now they were hard to control. But that could be controlled by the Secretary of Defense pretty well, and Wilson was good at that. Now when you came to budget time, the Air



Force would put in for a twenty-one or twenty-two billion dollar budget, and they knew they weren't going to get any part of it. Army, they got about nine billion; the Navy would get as I remember it was twelve to thirteen billion; and the Air Force would get maybe seventeen billion or something like that. But the Air Force had a lot of responsibility, they had the big atomic weapon. Wilson controlled that very well. The Air Force would a lot of times go up and when they didn't get it they would criticize the secretary. They'd be critical. I would tell my people, I'd tell them every budget period, I'd say, "Now you can have a reclama anytime you want, or you can have as many of them as you want, but once this budget is made, it's my budget and it's the Secretary of Defense's budget and don't go up, now, and try to undercut it because it won't do you any good if you do." I didn't tell them they'd find themselves way the hell and gone out in some place, but I wouldn't have hesitated to do that. Now Wilson was good. He didn't monkey with the Air Force budget. He'd take their twenty-one or twenty-two billion and he'd cut it down and he'd cut it down, based on advice of Radford--he was very close to Radford. And our budgets would come in; we'd have good sound budgets and he never tore them apart. He'd almost give it to us or--we'd make a good case with him--what it was. So that, again, gets back to people that primarily would be your secretaries and the secretary of defense.



SOAPES: I think the point that Eisenhower seemed to make several times was that sometimes either--your speaking of the civilian secretaries--that either their civilian subordinates or their uniformed subordinates would try to put them in the position where they would have to argue very provincially for their position as opposed to a total defense position.

THOMAS: That's where your Secretary of Defense comes in. Like Wilson says, if I'd been the Secretary of Defense, "don't 'yes' me. I get on to that quicker than anybody you ever know." And he'd get on to that very quick. But that gets back to the Secretary of Defense.

SOAPES: You said that you knew Bob Stevens very well. He, of course, bore the brunt of some of the problems that the Army had with Senator McCarthy. Can you recall how he responded to that, how that affected him?

THOMAS: Yes, Bob Stevens, a very nice man, very nice, very able, too. And you look at J.P. Stevens and Company--see he took it over I guess after his father and he built it into the tremendous organization it is now. Very able, but a kindly man. And it hurt him, the things McCarthy said. Those hurt him. And he took a beating at some of those hearings and meetings that--gee, I hated to see him do, because--. Now I would have been out long



before, because if McCarthy had said some of the things to me he said to Bob, I'd have gone across the table and I really don't--right across the table after him. Because he was insulting and it wasn't right to treat anybody in that position. But Bob was just an awful nice man, and those things hurt him; they hurt him real bad.

SOAPES: I've had his situation described to me as one where he was so nice that McCarthy took advantage of him and that--

THOMAS: Yes, I'm sure that's right, yes. He took terrible advantage of him because he said things that were just openly insulting and not true. And as I say, instead of climbing across the table--it hurt him.

[Interruption]

THOMAS: I might tell you one of the most interesting experiences I had with Eisenhower.

SOAPES: Okay.

THOMAS: Up in Seattle, we had a naval air base called Sand Point. Part of it was an over haul base for the PBY. You know what PBY stands for?

SOAPES: No, I don't.



THOMAS: Well the PBV is the old Catalina, that flying boat with the two engines and one of the workhorses of early aviation, that and the DC-3. But it was slow--it was a slow airplane--and when we got into real combat it wasn't very much value, but it was used in Alaska a great deal for going out and searching and the like. They had quite a base. But they had three buildings where they overhauled them, and they were old buildings, very old. To get one of them in they had to tilt it like that to get it into the thing and then they put it over in the corner, tilt the other end, put it over there. And the most antiquated work setup you ever saw in your life. And Arthur Langlie, who was then the governor of Washington, a fine man, dedicated Republican--so I closed the air base. I closed that facility down and shifted it down to Alameda. And Langlie came in and just raised hell with Eisenhower, and they were good friends. And a great supporter of Eisenhower, and he just raised hell. So I had on the back of a long table behind my desk and there was a white phone which was the White House, and a red phone which is the Army, and a blue phone which is the Air Force. And when that white phone rang, you answered it I'll tell you regardless of what you were doing. So this day it rang--it wasn't Eisenhower, I've forgotten who it was--and he said that Langlie'd been in raising hell and the President wanted to know what the facts were. So I'm a great believer in pictures, and I had some pictures of the thing tilting in and then when you got them in there how crowded it was, and



just a hand job, you know. And down in Alameda at the naval air station down there we'd set up a straight-line production on a track of these PBYS, these were PBYS--you put it on the track and worked it through, modern production line and overhaul them that way. I had a picture of that and then I had the cost. It would cost a hundred and ninety-five thousand to overhaul them up there, a hundred a ninety-five thousand; cost us ninety-five thousand overhaul them down here. So when I went in Eisenhower said the governor had been in just raising hell. So I showed him the pictures; I told him what it was, and he didn't ask any questions. He just looked up, says, "Charlie, tell him to go to hell." [Laughter]

I said, "Mr. President, I'll be delighted to do that."

[Laughter]

He would always say, oh, when you got into any political thing, you might say, "Oh, Mr. President, politically this is the best way to do it, but actually the best--," he'd always say, "Charlie, you do whatever's best for the country." And not had to work with somebody like that. Then I had one other very interesting experience. You want me to--

SOAPES: Yes, I do.



THOMAS: I had gotten out of the Navy--I'd been there for, gee, I guess five years, four or five years, and I hadn't had any vacation and I was tired. I might have stayed another year, but when I went up from the Under Secretary of the Navy up to Defense I asked them if they'd let me appoint the under secretary to fill my job. Which, of course, all I could do was ask them to do it and they said I could, sure, if they could, and I recommended Tom Gates. And Tom Gates, a very able administrator, very able chap. So Tom came in as the under secretary to fill my job on my recommendation. Well in any event, I go out now, one of the reasons I quit when I did, I might have stayed another year, was I told Tom when he came in that when I went out, if I had a chance, I would recommend him to fleet up as the secretary. And that's one of the reasons I went out. Because Tom had been there for I guess three and a half years and he ought to either move up--he'd done more than his share--and that was really the reason I got out.

So when I told Sherm Adams, Sherm said, "Okay, Charlie, what do you want?" And I think he'd give me almost anything I wanted, any, almost any ambassadorship or anything like that.

I said, "Well, I don't want anything. I've been at this for a long time now."

So I get back to Los Angeles and I've been here about a month and I get a call from Sherm Adams--the President wants to



talk to me. So I get on a plane, go back to Eisenhower. Oh, this is later.

I go in his office and he says, "Charlie," he said, "I'm going to ask you to do something for me." He said, "Now, I've asked practically everybody I know to take this job and none of them will take it and I'm going to ask you to." Now that's not bad, you know, when somebody's that desperate. [Laughter] And he said, "I want you to be the chairman of the National Finance Committee."

And I said, "Gee, Mr. President, I wouldn't do that for a million bucks."

"Oh," he said, "I want you to be it; I need it very badly."

So again I said, "Well, I'll talk to Julia about it." And I came back she said, "I think you have to if he wants you that bad."

So I called back and said I would do it. Now I wouldn't have done that I said for a million bucks. So I worked at this very hard and I go all over the country; I'm on the go and gee, I'm working my heart out. And it's very bad pretty near every place you go; they're really very nettled and very unhappy. Number one, the press is saying constantly he does nothing but play golf; he's more interested in playing golf than he is in running the country.



SOAPES: This is about 1957? '58?

THOMAS: This would be '57, yes. Be about March or April of '57. And then they would tell me, and this was true, they would say, well, gee, here the head of the party, Republican party in the area, here we have no leadership in our party. You get an appointment out here, we don't hear about it until it's broken in the newspapers back there. We don't get a chance to get local coverage of it. And then we get a big important, some sort of a corporation for some installation out here--and gee, the Democrats, they always give it to their people first and they can get the credit for it and we read it in the newspaper. They were very unhappy; they really were.

So I get this story, and it's bad. So I asked for an appointment with the President. And I'd been at this for probably six months or so, maybe six or seven months, and Sherm doesn't want me to see him. [Laughter] And I said, "Well listen now, I've been working for him for years; he asked me to take this job and I insist. I'm going to see him." Well Sherm wasn't very happy about it, but he set it up for me to see the President.

So I go in his office, he's behind his desk--he's got a lot of correspondence there and he's got his pen in his hand, and he's signing stuff. And he says, "Hi, Charlie." And he thinks this is going to be nothing but a personal call, you know, and he wants to get on with his writing.



And I said, "Well, Mr. President, you know I took this job because you asked me to and I didn't want to do it. I wouldn't have done it for anybody else." And I said, "Now, you're in real trouble on it in my opinion." With that he put his pen down. And I said, "The party's very unhappy," and I started to tell him why they were unhappy.

He said, "Well, goddamn the party." He said, "I was elected in this last election by eleven million votes," actually it was only nine million, but I didn't argue that with him. [Laughter] "I was elected by eleven million votes and goddamn the party."

And I said, "Well, now, Mr. President, you can't say that because you took the leadership of the party and you've got to give it leadership." Well now he's interested. And I went right down the line. I said, "They're saying you're playing golf too much." And I said, "You aren't but the news media's giving that impression and you could at least soften it a little bit. They claim that they get no advantage when these announcements are made as to appointments as to installations, or whatever it is they don't get--" and I had the whole list and I went right down the line on it.

And he said, again, "Well goddamn it I was elected by eleven million votes," but he listened. And this went on for damn near three-quarters of an hour. And he was mad; he wasn't mad at me, that he wasn't. But he was real mad, but I gave him the whole works.



And I said some of the things he could do that would be so very helpful. And again I said, "Well, you took the leadership of a great party and it's your obligation in my opinion to give it that leadership." This went on for a long time. But he listened and he never tried to stop me once.

When I got through I got a call from Sherm Adams almost immediately. He says, "Goddamn it, you tore this place apart yesterday."

And I said, "Yes, and it needed it." [Laughter]

Well you know, and I think the record will prove this, he changed almost completely on that. I mean he just reversed course on it. From then on he was the leader of the party and he helped them when he could and gave them all the information, gave them the advantages of it. For instance, the National Finance Committee, they couldn't get any advance notice of any kind on anything. And it didn't make any sense. There were so many things that could have fed into them that would have been helpful and been good news, but he virtually reversed his course completely on that, and the last part of his tour as President he was the leader of the party.

SOAPES: What kind of liaison did you have with the party chairman?
Meade Alcorn was--



THOMAS: Very good, very good.

SOAPES: He was helpful and--

THOMAS: Yes, he was helpful. There's not an awful lot he could do for the finance chairman. The finance chairman's got to carry the ball on raising the money. But Meade couldn't have been more helpful. Of course I went right back there and lived. You can't do that job, you know, I don't think from out--sure couldn't do it from out here. But the party was in pretty bad straits at that time and money was awful hard to raise. Because as, I say, Eisenhower they just said, well he doesn't do anything to help us.

SOAPES: You indicated in this story that you told Eisenhower what the criticism was and that he did respond to it. Was this a pattern with him that when, at least when you were around, that when he faced criticism he took it in a good way, in a positive way; was able to use criticism?

THOMAS: He didn't seek it, I'll tell you that. And he wasn't very happy about it. But, on the other hand, I never had any situation with him where he was--that was the only thing where I went in. Otherwise it was something that was like Arleigh Burke or the governor and the closed air base and things like that. But this one, I had nothing in world to lose, you see, because I was out. I'd done it as a favor to him and I pulled no punches on it.



I just told him just the facts of life the way it was. I said he was madder than hell, but he was mad at the party; he wasn't mad at me. And I can say I'm sure if you check it out that, when he gave some thought to it, he almost completely reversed the field.

SOAPES: I'd like to turn back to some Navy items now. I suppose the biggest development in the Navy in the '50s was of course the nuclear submarine. And the big personality there, of course, was [Hyman] Rickover.

THOMAS: Well, let's take one step before that. See I was there at probably the most exciting time in the history of, certainly, the Navy. Because we not only went from steam to nuclear power; we went from guns to missiles and we went from subsonic speeds to supersonic speeds. Now you can't hit anything more than that-- from guns to missiles; from subsonic to supersonic; and from gun-powder to missiles. So yes, well, I'm asked about Rickover all the time. Rickover, I'll take this out if I tell it to you now.

SOAPES: Okay. Go ahead and put it in and--

THOMAS: Well, Rickover is a great man. Nobody can gainsay that and I sure don't. But Rickover, see he was passed over for flag officer. He was passed over three times. And then the Congress moved in and made him a rear admiral. And I would guess probably one of the reasons he was passed over originally was because he was Semitic and the Navy at that time, you know, were not the



greatest advocates--. But then he took over and from then on--see he just retired here at seventy-four the other day and the retirement age is sixty-two. Now I have maintained, I guess jokingly, that Rickover could cry the biggest crocodile tears of anybody I ever knew. And, as far as I know his approach to the Congress was, well, gee I'm legislated against because I'm Jewish. And it's not right to keep anybody on that long in the service, and he would never have been kept on that long. And I will maintain that there are some very outstanding nuclear scientists in the Navy--and I don't mean to gainsay in any way that Rickover wasn't a great man. He was sure dedicated in that area and contributed a lot to it. But I still don't think it's right for the Congress--I wouldn't argue with the Congress with his background or starting background in the nuclear field. I wouldn't criticize them for having gone over and made him a rear admiral and I wouldn't criticize them I don't think for keeping him on maybe till he was sixty-six or something like that, but not till seventy-four. Because that does hurt your structure in the Navy.

SOAPES: Much of the criticism of him at the time, wasn't it that he was too narrow in his assignments, that he hadn't had the broad command experience?



THOMAS: Well he hadn't had any command experience. But I don't know how much command experience is required to develop a nuclear submarine because it's nuclear power you're really talking about and the adaptation to submarine warfare.

SOAPES: Was he the indispensable man in that--

THOMAS: Oh, I don't think so.

SOAPES: There were others who were equally knowledgeable with him.

THOMAS: Well, there are others awfully good. Awfully good. Some of them were terrific. Oh, I could name you a half a dozen people that were terrific in that field. See that was an exciting field then; that attracted a lot of very good people because it was so new and had such a potential. But I don't really gainsay-- I'd criticize the Congress more than I would Rickover. But I do think, we'll say after he'd been in--well he was sixty-six--there was an organization that could carry on just as well as he could.

SOAPES: What were the biggest problems of developing the nuclear submarine? What were the biggest obstacles that had to be overcome?

THOMAS: Well, I don't think of any particular obstacles in the nuclear submarine. I just think it was a matter of fitting it in with the proper safeguards and I don't think that was--I mean with our engineering know-how I think that was--. I think the big one, exciting one, was the Polaris missile, fitting that into



a submarine and firing it from two hundred feet below the surface of the water and firing it on target. To me that's one of the most exciting things.

SOAPES: When did the first idea for that start, for the Polaris?

THOMAS: I can't tell you exactly the first--I can't tell you exactly that. I can tell you when they started to build it, because I selected [William F.] Raborn to do it, Admiral Raborn. Well I had a sort of an interesting experience. I'm in my office now--I go down there at eight o'clock in the morning every morning and when I'd go in my aide gives me a signal, a wire, or a message that they've had a big explosion off the Bunker Hill outside of Newport, Rhode Island and that they're about seventy-five miles out at sea and that there were ten men killed, ten or twelve men killed. Well, when you get something like that in peacetime, you've got a flap on your hands. So I said, I wanted my plane and I wanted to go up there. And Admiral [Donald B.] Duncan, who was then the VCNO [Vice-CNO]--the CNO then for five years and he thought it was a lifetime job--he was the old school, which was all right, I don't criticize that.

But he comes in my office--and he and I are good friends--and he said, "Mr. Secretary, I strongly advise you not to do that."



I said, "Well, why, Admiral Duncan?" And I said, "After all we've had that loss and we don't know how bad it is--or we know that--and there might be some repercussions from it and why do you advise me not to?"

He said, "Well, they'll have to give you honors and that'll interfere with the operation."

I said, "Well, that's awful easy; I'll tell them not to give me honors." [Laughter] That's about the simplest thing you could have.

So, much against his advice, I get right up there. When I get there, there are seventy-four men dead, not ten or twelve, seventy-four. And I go through the hospital and gee, there are men there burned, they're black--they look like Negroes they're burned so bad. And that night more died and the next morning there were a hundred and twelve dead. So you've got a real, real big one on your hands now. And it was the most wonderfully organized thing I ever saw. They had flown in nurses from New York, from Boston; they'd flown in doctors from New York and Boston and other places; they'd flown in twelve chaplains. So these men, they were getting everything. It was the most wonderfully organized thing I ever saw. And I went out on board the Bunker Hill and she was just, you know what happened there...?

SOAPES: I don't remember the incident in detail.



THOMAS: Well their catapult fluid was explosive, and they've changed that where it's not explosive now. And it was right below the ward room, the officers' ward room, and it, well, a hundred and twelve men were killed in it, and that's a lot. So I went back to Washington that afternoon, late, and landed at Anacostia and met by a lot of press people. And I said, that I had already called a court of inquiry, I called that from there, that was in the process of being convened. And I said, "I will report every day to the majority and minority leader in both the House and the Senate and tell them exactly the status of it." And so I did that the next day to the offices of both the House and Senate, majority and minority leaders. I told them we didn't know yet; I would report to them every day, the Navy Department would report to them on the status of it. And you know we never got any flaps from that at all. None. None of the Congress came out and gave us hell because we kept them completely advised every day of the process that we--.

So well, that's getting back. Now Raborn then, I appointed him to head this Polaris missile program. Now to think that you're going to try to develop a missile, sixteen of them in the holds of an atomic submarine that have a range then of fifteen hundred miles-- it's now twenty-five hundred, three thousand miles--and where you can put one of them, you can take twenty of them really and put them a hundred, two hundred miles off the coast of the Eurasian



land mass and they can hit every target virtually in Russia. They can dive now, they're supposed to only dive to seven hundred feet, and the World War II submarines three hundred fifty, four hundred feet was your limit. These are seven hundred and fifty feet and I've been down to eleven hundred in one of them, which I shouldn't have done. But, in any event, when you get down to a depth of seven hundred feet you're below the thermal layers and almost impossible to be traced. And then you can emerge and surface and fire. This is really something to start talking about this. This is like going to the moon, you know. And Raborn had a room half again as wide as this room, and about as long as these all the way along. And those charts had flags on them. Now these were the different components of the development of it. And if you had a blue flag, you're on target. If you had a red flag, you're behind; and it told you how many hours or days you were behind. So you could look at that room and tell exactly where that program was, whether it was way behind or on schedule or ahead of schedule. And you know that program was never a day behind in the entire time we had it. It was the most marvelous production job. I couldn't conceive of a better production job.

SOAPES: Haven't heard about too many like that.

THOMAS: No, well, we've done awful good though, as a whole. But that was a marvelous job.



SOAPES: In view of the congressional relations, a subject that you raised earlier, the cooperation of both the Republican and Democratic leadership, was it good?

THOMAS: Well I think it's much worse now than it was when I was there. See you're going back now to, oh hell you're going back for twenty years. I had a very good rapport with the Congress. I don't think you could have it now. I think you've got a lot of members in this Congress, all these new young Turks and all, and they're more political than they are congressmen. Really, the whole thing I think it just reeks of politics. I think this is the weakest congress we've ever had, I don't think there's any question about that. But when I was there I had a very good rapport with them. First you had a lot of the southerners and they were good men and they were fine citizens. Now you had the chief of the armed services, chairman Vinson, Carl Vinson. Carl Vinson, hell, he was pro-military. He wasn't running that job as a political job; he was pro-military, no question about it. And I appeared before many, many congressional hearings, many of them. You took your staff with you, some of them, but I didn't believe in turning to your staff all the time and asking for the answers. Now I could be very sympathetic with a guy that had never been in the military or hadn't been in it long. But see my background in World War II, being there all during World War II,



was a wonderful background really. And I worked hard at it, and I went well prepared. And I didn't have to ask many questions of them. And the Congress like that. They don't like for you to turn around and ask an aide, you know, or somebody else. And I had a very good rapport with them. And when I went up before the budget I could explain the budgets and the why, and I never had a hassle with any of the--and now it would be awful. All they'd be is just trying to embarrass you and trying to make political hay.

I had an interesting one with Carl Vinson. Our JAG [Judge Advocate General] was coming up for retirement so we had to appoint a new JAG. And Vinson--for whom I have the highest respect, but he was an autocrat, don't ever think that, oh, boy he ran that committee--he had I think it was a distant relation of his, a fellow from the South, who he wanted to be made rear admiral and to be given the JAG. Well we had another chap named [Chester] Ward who had a fine--this, other fellow had no background per se on a national level. Ward had a fine background; he belonged to most of the top law societies and recognized throughout the country. Vinson wanted this other fellow appointed and wanted it very badly. And I knew that Vinson would resent it, but I went ahead and appointed Ward. And Vinson didn't like it, but never said anything to me, but he was very unhappy. Well when I retired and went out, I went around to see Vinson and called on him to tell him good-bye,



which you don't have to do, but I did it because I wanted to. And I started out by saying, "Now, Mr. Vinson, I know you were mad at me on one occasion, and I just want to tell you the background."

"Oh," he says, "you don't have to do that." he says, "Don't do that. You ran the Navy and that's good enough for me."

[Interruption]

SOAPES: I've got just a few other areas I want to delve in to. Wasn't there, during the time you were Secretary of the Navy, some discussion of a carrier reactor?

THOMAS: What do you mean a carrier reactor?

SOAPES: I mean a nuclear-powered carrier.

THOMAS: I don't recall it, but I'm sure there was because you're getting now into nuclear--well the first one was a cruiser, and you've got major ships now that are nuclear-powered, and I'm sure there was but I don't remember the particular details. But one of the things at that state no doubt would have been the terrific cost of it. See one of the things that people don't understand now, and I'm sure this is right, when I was there in World War II and I was virtually head of procurement--now maybe that is an exaggeration--but I met every day, about the last six or eight months of the war, in Forrestal's office with Forrestal,



Admiral [Ernest J.] King and Admiral [J.M.] Irish. Now I was the only one what you'd call in the materiel end like the department of supply and accounts. That meeting took place every day at twelve o'clock and I was really representing the materiel end of the war. So, what was your question? [Laughter]

SOAPES: A nuclear-powered carrier.

THOMAS: A nuclear-powered--all right. At that time in World War II now basic hull of a submarine cost you about five million bucks. The F6F, which was the navy's number one fighter aircraft developed by Grumman during the war was about a hundred and twenty-five thousand for the air frame, all the equipment about two hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars. Now those today, the navy's main fighters are fourteen to sixteen million dollars. A submarine now costs you fifty to a hundred million bucks instead of five million. Good equipment would be some more than that. Your major ships, when you get into a carrier, look at a carrier--a carrier now costs you a half billion dollars without its fighter equipment or its air equipment. Talking about that, you're talking about a billion dollars. Now your carriers prior to that were not that elaborate, of course, and they weren't that costly. Now when you talk about a modern navy, you're talking about billions, hundreds of billions of dollars compared to those costs in those days. So



the Russians are getting ahead of us. Okay, the Russian skilled labor now, is about a hundred and thirty bucks a month. They own all their raw materials. Now how in the hell do you compete with that, see? And if you talk about modernizing this Navy and new ships, modern ships, and all that goes with it, you're talking about more money than our whole federal appropriation, almost. So, this is a tough one. I don't know how you handle it.

SOAPES: At the time that you left the Navy Department, of course a couple of years later in the election campaign the issue was raised of American power versus Soviet military power. What was your feeling at the time you left? Was the American Navy superior to the Russian.

THOMAS: Oh, then it was, yes, but that's twenty years ago. Oh, all the navy, the Russian development has come in the last fifteen years really. Oh, we were far superior. Of course, what you have now, in my opinion, you talk about the Russians being ahead of us and all that is a great political ploy now. They have a what, four million man army, against our what, less than two million. They've got more tanks; they've got more of everything else. But we're not going to fight the Russians on the land. Forget that one. Your safeguard today is your nuclear capability. Now I think our Polaris, now you've got the Poseidon coming up, and with, as I told you before the depths that they can operate and all,



I'll say we're stronger than the Russians. But saying that isn't true, okay, we both knock each other off, which makes no sense. So we're strong enough, as far as I'm concerned, in the defense of this country if you get into a nuclear war. Now I can't conceive of us getting into a European war without it being a nuclear war. Now if you do that of course we don't have enough. We don't have enough manpower; we don't have enough tanks; we don't have enough artillery and all that. But I don't think at this stage that makes a--I'd say we were just as powerful as the Russians. I'd say from a nuclear standpoint more powerful would be my guess. Much more refined than theirs is.

SOAPES: Earlier you told me that you went to Moscow with Nixon in '59. How did it come about that you were on that trip?

THOMAS: Well I was then the President of TWA, and TWA was just bringing in the new jets. And we took the press over in one of our brand new jets that's never crossed the Atlantic before. And I met Nixon over there and then I came back with him. But the reason I really went was we took the press on a TWA jet.

SOAPES: You told me you weren't present at the kitchen debate.

THOMAS: No.

SOAPES: Were you present at any of the other--



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THOMAS: Well I was a lot of the time, but not all the time. I mean none of the civilians that were with him, I mean outside of staff and all, were with him all the time, but all the receptions and things like that, yes.

SOAPES: What was your impression of the reception that Nixon received?

THOMAS: Well, I would say generally very good. Now we went down to Poland, down to Warsaw. He asked if he could go to Warsaw. This was off--they hadn't planned this. And they gave him a permit to go down there. We went down and spent three days down there. I don't know if you remember or not.

SOAPES: Yes.

THOMAS: And now Khrushchev had been there twelve days before and we, their major airfield here, civilian airfield, was like here, about twelve miles outside of Warsaw, then and Warsaw here. This military field was about eighteen miles out the other way. The Poles, of course they weren't allowed to, there was nothing in the news media about it. Of course they didn't have television then; they had, I guess, radios. Nothing on the radio. Nothing on TV about Nixon's coming. When Khrushchev went in twelve days before they closed all the schools, all the stores, all the factories, and they were supposed to line the street, and they



gave him flowers, the state gave him flowers. And they said there were two hundred thousand people lined from Warsaw. So we come without any notice whatsoever and come from the other side and they said there were three hundred thousand that greeted--of course the Poles hate the Russians and love the Americans. And we were in cars, open cars, and gee they'd break the lines all the way through, and come and pat your arm, "Americans, Americans, Americans." We had the most tremendous reception in Warsaw you ever saw.

Now of course it was different in Moscow. They didn't have any crowds out per se because they didn't allow them. It was very, very, formal but not unfriendly. For instance, I had a suite at the hotel, I've forgotten the name of it, but there were three railroad stations down there, and I like to walk and I'd walk a lot. Now I was very careful I didn't go into any restricted areas, anything like that. And I never said anything in my apartment that they couldn't have broadcast to anybody. But, for instance at night, now, I went over--well I'll tell you about this dinner first.

I asked the State Department, I said, "I'd like to give a dinner for our crew." We had, gee, we had three hostesses, and we had eight in the crew of pilots, co-pilot, couple of mechanics we had with us; so including myself, there were twelve. Of course they queue up for everything there. State Department said no; they would make arrangements where we would go right in and gave me a choice of two or three restaurants, and I picked an



Armenian restaurant. It's one of their better ones. So our crew were all very hand-picked people, very attractive people, and of course they didn't wear the uniforms around Moscow; they wore civilian clothes--well dressed. Three good-looking girls, but they weren't the young type, they were supervisors, but I'd say in their early thirties, very attractive, and very conservative, and you'd been very proud of them. So we go into the lobby of this place and there are probably forty people or fifty people there. This is July. They're in short sport shirts, slacks, some of them had leather coats on, some of them had leather boots, but mostly in very informal attire. And we go in and up there is a small platform for an orchestra, small orchestra, and we go in and we go over there, a table against the wall for twelve. And as we go in, they give us about the dirtiest look you ever saw in your life because we're let in ahead of everybody, you know, and Americans--they knew who we are, we're with that party. We get some awful dirty looks and I figure, gee, maybe it wasn't right to bring these people here. So the waiters, the captain, gives us a dirty old menu and he doesn't speak any English. And they're not knocking themselves out for us, I'll say that. And not too long after that, two bottles of champagne are put on the table. Now we've had nothing to drink and we haven't ordered anything. And I said to the head waiter, I said, "Nyetm nyet." And he points over there and here four Russians, Armenians, sent us two bottles of champagne. So I motioned for them to come over



and they came over, we all stood up and we opened these bottles of champagne and we drank toasts. And standing up, and they didn't speak any English, and we sure couldn't speak any Russian. So they went back and not too long afterward that two bottles of vodka on the table. So another--we get them over and we stand up and we drink toasts to them, and we get the third one. So I was amazed that they'd have the nerve to do it, see, but they did. And then this orchestra starts to play. Now not many women go to those places. If there are women there, they're probably doctors or scientists because they're not the wives. And they started this music up there and three men came over and asked our hostesses to dance. I guess one came first. And I said, she was across the table, and I said, "Now Betty, you don't have to do this unless you want to." She said, "No, I'd like to." So she got up and two other men, well they came over and they danced with those girls a good part of the evening. And I asked them later, I said, "Well, how were they?" They said that they couldn't have been nicer. They were trying to find out, we couldn't speak either language, but they were trying to find out where we lived and if we had a family. And they said that they just couldn't have been nicer. So we leave there about twelve o'clock. And as we go out, they clap, everybody. Now this is exciting, you know. And, oh, they couldn't have been more friendly.



Well, what I started to say, I walked a lot and I got back to the hotel after midnight. So I want to go over and go through this station, and I go over and nobody--I was probably followed, maybe I wasn't but I assumed I was. But I wanted to see it; I hadn't been in one of their big railroad stations. The floor, marble floor was absolutely covered with families asleep. They have to wait for trains, and I guess they get one when they can. They may wait there quite a long while. But you'd have to walk around these kids. Be a father with one kid in his arms sound asleep and a mother with a family sound asleep and very, very interesting. But the point I'm trying to make--I was allowed to go anyplace I wanted to go, no restrictions of any kind.

The chamber maid, she didn't want any part of me at first. And I gave her a package of gum and oh, she was the most excited person. From then on we were devoted friends. [Laughter] Oh, that was really interesting. And we had a floor clerk. The floor clerk was colder than a--she was a girl I'd say thirty-five, six, or seven, in there--she was just colder than hell. But I kept trying to talk to her, of course I'm sure she could speak English but she wouldn't do it. And finally I saw her reading a book and I spoke to her in French, and that sort of warmed her up. Well then we started to talk in French and I don't know, my French isn't that good, but we ended up real good friends. You let them alone and they're prejudiced against you but they don't really mean it. I don't think they are at heart.



SOAPES: Need something to break the ice. Did you have much communication with Eisenhower in the 1960s after he was out of the presidency?

THOMAS: Not a great deal. No. I'm just trying to think. Oh, '60s? Well I say I didn't--I saw him down at Palm Springs quite often yes, but not really communications per se. Yes, I saw him down at Palm Springs quite often; I'd forgotten that. One of the most interesting experiences I ever had, was we went down, Doug (R. Douglas) Stuart was this ambassador from Canada, if you remember, and Amory Houghton was his ambassador to France and Ed Rierson was a very close friend of his, and they all had places down there at Palm Springs. And the Houghtons asked us down for a weekend. They were going to have the President and Mamie on Saturday and asked us down for a weekend to stay there for this dinner. And I saw the President down there quite a bit. At this dinner was Houghton, Stuart, Rierson and myself and the wives. And they were all very close friends of his, and I can't say I was a close friend, but I was reasonably so. So after dinner the women went out in the living room and we sat around the table and Eisenhower started to reminisce. And he started to look off, kind of, in the distance. And he'd say every once in a while. "I never told that to anybody before." Now we sat there for an hour and a half and I want to tell you it was the most fascinating thing I've ever--. And I think he probably didn't tell it, some of it.



He said, for instance, "Churchill and I were very close friends. I had a high regard for him and I'm sure he had a high regard for me, I think. But he didn't want to go into Normandy. He still wanted to go into the underbelly of Europe."

I said, "Well, Mr. President, I thought he got his belly full of that in Gallipoli." [Laughter]

"No," he said, "he was serious about it."

And he said, "He said, 'Now if you go into Normandy, you're going to lose a tremendous amount of American youths.'"

And the President said, "No, we will take normal losses, but they won't be more than normal."

He said, "Churchill said, 'If you land there and you go into Paris, you'll take fantastic losses there, and then if you go into Germany it'll take at least two years to get to Germany.'"

The President said, "No, we'll take normal losses in Normandy; we'll be in Paris by Christmas; and we'll be in Germany by spring," or whatever it was--it wasn't too long after that.

And he said, "Churchill said, 'Well, if you go in Normandy you'll take tremendous losses, you'll take tremendous losses in Paris, tremendous losses in going into Germany, and you won't do it for two years.' But he said, 'I'll say this: now if you do that and get into Normandy with normal losses, I will say it was a well-conceived campaign. If you get into Paris by Christmas I'll announce to the world it was one of the best conceived



military campaigns in history. And if you get into Germany in spring (or whatever it was), I'll take great pride in announcing to the world that it was the best conceived military campaign in history."

And then the President looked off, he said, "You know we beat every one of those schedules and he never said a goddamn word!" [Laughter] Oh, that was one of the most interesting times I ever spent.

He got onto DeGaulle. He said, "DeGaulle is a good friend of mine. I have a high regard for DeGaulle." But he said, "He's hard to deal with." He said, "Now, he was commander, he had two divisions and he was the commander of those two divisions, and he came to me and said he wanted to have their command autonomous, under his autonomous command." And he said, "Well I said to him, 'Mr. President,' (he was then the provisional President of France), I said 'we can't do that. we're headed for Germany now and we've got to have those divisions because they're a very important part of our campaign.'" Well he said DeGaulle was very obnoxious, really. He kept insisting that he have his two divisions under his command and he kept coming to him. And he said, "Finally I got fed up with him and I really got fed up with it and finally the last time I said, 'All right, Mr. President, you can have your two goddamned divisions. You can do with them whatever you want and I couldn't



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care less. But I think it's only fair to tell you they won't have any ammunition or any provisions.'" [Laughter] He said, "you know I never had any trouble getting along with DeGaulle." [Laughter]

I hope he gets his place in history, because he's really earned it.

