

Edwin Meese III: A Legacy of Commitment and Service to America and the Law

Edwin Meese III

KEY TAKEAWAYS

For over 50 years, Edwin Meese III has served his country and the conservative movement with dignity and distinction.

Mr. Meese's time as America's 75th Attorney General was marked by remarkable efforts to combat counterterrorism, the traffic in illegal drugs, and organized crime.

For a quarter-century, Mr. Meese has worked at Heritage, where he has kept Ronald Reagan's legacy of conservative principles alive in public debate and discourse.

John G. Malcolm: Welcome, everybody, to our virtual Joseph Story Lecture. My name is John Malcolm. I'm the Vice President of the Institute for Constitutional Government, but more germane for this event is that I'm also the Director of the Edwin Meese III Center for Legal and Judicial Studies. Because we are in the midst of a pandemic and these are unusual times, I am interviewing General Meese here in his home.

Ed, I have to tell you, this is a particular pleasure for me. I remember when we first met. It was either 1990 or 1991, and I was a baby Assistant U.S. Attorney in Atlanta and was in charge of inviting speakers to come to the national convention for the Federalist Society. I decided to take a flyer and invite you to come speak at a program on the overfederalization of crime, and to my amazement, not only did you

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accept, but from the first time I met you, you insisted that I call you Ed. I never dreamed that at some point in my career, I would have the privilege of directing the center that bears your name, so I'm just delighted to be spending this time with you.

Edwin Meese III: Thank you, John. It's good to be with you.

John G. Malcolm: I thought we would spend some time talking about your career and a little bit about the rise of the conservative legal movement. Let's start at the beginning: Where did you grow up, and what did your parents do?

Edwin Meese III: I was born and raised in Oakland, California. My mother was a homemaker, and my dad was a public servant of various sorts. When he graduated from law school, he didn't go into law practice right away. He was asked to become an assistant to a state senator in the state legislature, which he did. Then, from there, he had a succession of jobs. I don't think he ever looked for work. Somebody came along with a job offer, and he accepted it or didn't accept it as the case may be.

He then was a clerk of what was known in those days as the police court. It would be like a municipal court today. And then he became the chief deputy and ultimately the treasurer and tax collector of Alameda County, which is where Oakland is located.

John G. Malcolm: It seems like you almost had a genetic predisposition both to public service and also to law enforcement.

Edwin Meese III: It turned out that way. Yes.

John G. Malcolm: So you met your wife Ursula at Oakland High School, isn't that right?

Edwin Meese III: That's right.

John G. Malcolm: Was it love at first sight?

Edwin Meese III: Well, we certainly enjoyed being with each other. It was probably not as deep as love right at that time, because it took us a while before we finally got married.

John G. Malcolm: I was going to ask you: You didn't get married until after law school. In fact, Ursula referred to this as—and I love this quote—“a whirlwind courtship of 11 years.” What took so long?

Edwin Meese III: She was a year behind me in school, so when she was finishing high school, I was already 3,000 miles away at Yale. Then I came back and went in the Army after she had graduated from college. Again, we were in different parts of the country. I was in Oklahoma. She was in California for a while and then was back at Harvard in the East Coast. We finally got together around 1956 and then dated quite a bit and ultimately got married just a couple of years later.

John G. Malcolm: You mentioned before that Ursula went to Harvard. She's told me that she was one of the first women admitted to what is now Harvard Business School, and it was only a one-year program. I guess they weren't sure whether women would be able to hack it at that time.

Edwin Meese III: Right. A woman had not been in the Harvard Business School, so they set up the Harvard–Radcliffe Program in Business Administration. They could go for one year. I guess they figured if they had two years of business training, they'd be too dangerous. So she got a certificate in business administration after one year, and both of us then wound up in California.

Early Years: Yale, Berkeley, and Military Service

John G. Malcolm: You attended two institutions, Yale College and then Boalt Hall, which is now Berkeley Law School. Both are very different institutions today from the time you went to them. What was it like attending those two schools?

Edwin Meese III: You're right; they were very different in many ways. Yale, for example, was pretty well-balanced between conservatives and liberals. As a matter of fact, the Conservative Party became the largest party in the Political Union, which is how I happened to become president of the union. I had been chairman of the Conservative Party, and we had more votes than anybody else.

And then, at Boalt Hall, at the law school, even back in 1956, '58, at the time I was going there, it was still pretty nonpolitical in many ways. Most of us in my class were veterans. We'd been in the service, Army or Navy or Marine Corps or Air Force. It really didn't have the politicization that has taken place since that time.

John G. Malcolm: You mentioned that you were president of the Political Union. You were also involved in a lot of other activities, isn't that right?

Edwin Meese III: Yes. As my father-in-law once said, apparently I didn't allow my classes to interfere with my education. In addition to being the president of the Political Union, I was president of the Yale Debating Association where I followed by a couple of years Bill Buckley, who had previously been the president. Then I was the manager of the track team and also was the cadet commander of the ROTC battalion there.

John G. Malcolm: So you joined the ROTC at Yale and enlisted. Then you were commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Army after graduating. Your family has a very, very rich military history. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Edwin Meese III: We've had a number of people that have been in the Army. My dad was a private in the Army, for a short time at least, in World War I. Later, he went to the Coast Guard Reserve during World War II. I was a field artilleryman in the artillery beginning on active duty in approximately 1954.

We have a lot of West Pointers in our family. My father-in-law, Ursula's father, was a West Point graduate in 1915. My son was a West Point graduate in 1981. My grandson was a West Point graduate in 2012. My granddaughter married a West Point graduate. And I have another grandson who just started in West Point this year. So we have a lot of West Point people in the family. I was the black sheep. I got my commission through ROTC.

John G. Malcolm: You stayed in the military for quite some time, didn't you?

Edwin Meese III: Yes. I spent about 30 years in the Army Reserve after active duty, retiring ultimately in 1984 as a colonel.

John G. Malcolm: You mentioned that you were involved in debate. I know that you were a champion debater in high school, college, and law school, and I believe that, as part of the moot court program when you were at Boalt hall, you ended up debating now Ninth Circuit Judge Carlos Bea. Tell me a little bit about that debate experience.

Edwin Meese III: In my senior year of law school, we had a moot court team and ultimately an inter-schools competition. So the Boalt Hall team of which I was a member, a three-man team, was debating against a similar team from Stanford University Law School for the state moot court championship. Fortunately we won, but it actually started a long-time friendship between Carlos Bea and myself.

The Making of a Prosecutor

John G. Malcolm: He's a wonderful guy and also a former Joseph Story lecturer. Then he was appointed by George H. W. Bush to the Ninth Circuit.

So after you graduated from law school in 1959, you went to work at the district attorney's office in Alameda County. What made you decide to become a prosecutor, and what was it like working in that office?

Edwin Meese III: The reason I became a prosecutor was because of a peculiar start to my legal career. I went into the Army between my first and second years of law school. In the Army in those days, special courts-martial was the intermediate court between the summary court-martial and the general court-martial, kind of like a municipal court.

In those days, they didn't have lawyers in those courts, so one officer would be picked out to be the trial counsel or prosecutor. Then another

one would be assigned as the defense counsel, or the defendants could have their own private lawyers if they wished. I happened to be assigned as the trial counsel, so I actually tried a lot of cases as a non-lawyer during my Army career. That was an additional duty added to the other things I did as a field artillery officer.

So when I went back to law school, I was very much interested in trial work, and when I graduated, I wanted to try cases. The district attorney's office, which was a very excellent office in Alameda County, had vacancies. I applied and was fortunately accepted.

John G. Malcolm: It's rather remarkable to think of courts-martial being conducted by non-lawyers. That's sort of a moot court with real consequences.

Edwin Meese III: That's right, absolutely.

John G. Malcolm: Did you prosecute and defend?

Edwin Meese III: No. You were either a trial counsel or a defense counsel, and I was trial counsel.

John G. Malcolm: Because now I gather they rotate. You can be a prosecutor for a period of time and then a defense attorney for a period of time.

Edwin Meese III: I think today it's entirely different. They have a different corps of prosecutors and defense attorneys, and you can go into the Judge Advocate General Corps as a lawyer and could conceivably go to either prosecution or defense.

John G. Malcolm: I gather that when you were in the Alameda District Attorney's office, there were riots at your alma mater, and the governor at the time, Pat Brown, Jerry Brown's father, called you for advice. What happened?

Edwin Meese III: This was in the 1960s when the disorders on campuses were just beginning. They began roughly in the 1960–61 period. This was 1964, and a group of students called themselves the Free Speech Movement, although free speech was having it their way or else.

John G. Malcolm: Free for them, very costly for everybody else.

Edwin Meese III: Right. Over 700 of them had invaded Sproul Hall, which was the administration building of the Berkeley campus of the University of California. By the time it came to be the end of the day when they were there, the question was what to do at this point, and the officials at the university and the local police felt it was necessary to take back the administration building, to arrest those who wouldn't leave voluntarily.

But in order to keep this from becoming a whole mob scene with the rest of the campus, they had to have a perimeter that would keep everybody away and keep crowds back so they could proceed with the arrests.

The Berkeley police, the Oakland police, and the sheriff's department were all engaged in that operation, but they needed some force to provide a perimeter to keep others away, and the only logical one was the California Highway Patrol.

It was necessary to get the governor's permission. So the governor was on the phone with the officials there, the sheriff and others, and he said, "Is there anyone there from the district attorney's office?" They pointed out that I was there, among others, and he asked to talk to me. He asked whether we thought it was necessary to go ahead with this and whether we needed the Highway Patrol. I said, "Yes," that was the consensus of all the police executives there, and on that basis, he said, "Well, okay, go ahead."

John G. Malcolm: I take it that was your first contact with the governor of California.

Edwin Meese III: No, I had actually met him before, and that's why he had asked for me when he heard that I was there, because I had done the legislative work on behalf of all of the district attorneys, chiefs of police, and sheriffs of California in 1961. My boss, the district attorney, was the chairman of the legislative committee of that group, so it was traditional for one of his deputies to go up to the state capital and represent him and, inferentially, the entire law enforcement community before the state legislature.

John G. Malcolm: Only two years out of law school you got to go up to Sacramento and do that?

Edwin Meese III: I had that experience.

John G. Malcolm: Were there prosecutions after these riots? Were you involved in that at all?

Edwin Meese III: Yes. We had a massive set of prosecutions. We started off with 150 cases. We had developed a system so that the individuals could be identified: when they were arrested, to have the police officers standing next to them and then having a Polaroid shot taken so that later on they were not anonymous. They could be identified as the specific people who were arrested by specific officers. That was very effective. It enabled us to identify and then convict. We convicted about 771 out of the 773 who had been arrested.

John G. Malcolm: So two people got off?

Edwin Meese III: Unfortunately, they died in accidents during the pendency of the trial.

John G. Malcolm:

They went to a higher tribunal.

Edwin Meese III:

Right.

John G. Malcolm: You talked about your relationship with the police. I gather you spent a lot of time riding around in patrol cars with the police. Why did you do that, and what did that experience teach you?

Edwin Meese III: There were a couple of reasons. One, I did a lot of training of police, training in laws of arrests, training in police operations, investigation of crimes with the prosecution in mind, investigation of traffic accidents, that sort of thing. One of the ways I needed to learn about these things was to actually be out there with the police, observing what they were doing, observing the conditions under which they operated so I could ask intelligent questions during the trials that followed.

Also, on particular cases where I had a police officer as a witness, rather than take them off their beat or bring them in on their own time, I would visit them on their beat where they were actually patrolling the streets and have a chance to talk with them and learn what information they had, but also to go to the scene of the crime and actually understand the physical circumstances in which a crime was committed. All of this was helpful in the ultimate prosecution.

John G. Malcolm: So you have a special connection with the police that continues to this day. I've been in meetings with you with police officers, and they hold you—appropriately so—with a degree of reverence. Did that special connection begin around this time?

Edwin Meese III: Yes, in a way. But in some ways it actually began when I was much younger, because with my dad being the clerk of the police court, he knew almost all the police officers. He would bring home stories about things that he had learned from them, stories about individuals. So I was somewhat familiar with policing as a kid. Then, of course, my experience later on in the district attorney's office really cemented that relationship.

John G. Malcolm: Is it true that on your honeymoon you took time out to go visit police headquarters?

Edwin Meese III: My wife and I were in California. We actually had gone to Disneyland on our honeymoon. It just happened that the Los Angeles Police Department had opened up one of the most modern police headquarters in the country, so while we were there, I decided it might be a good time just to have the tour that they were offering at the time, and that turned out to be very good.

Meeting Governor-Elect Reagan

John G. Malcolm: You have a more forgiving wife than I do.

Let's talk a little bit about Ronald Reagan. You first met Governor-elect Reagan in 1966. How did that meeting come about, and what were your impressions of him?

Edwin Meese III: As I mentioned earlier, I had done legislative work in 1961, so I was known to a few people in Sacramento in the state capital. In 1966, when Ronald Reagan had been elected governor, he was looking around to form a cabinet and to find heads of the various departments. He essentially had a group of people on a talent hunt, and a senator that I had worked with some five years before remembered me and recommended me to Ronald Reagan for the position of legal affairs secretary.

I was invited to come up and meet the new governor-elect. I had not met him before or been involved in his campaign. I'd heard a lot about him. So I came up and met him. He brought me in, had a private interview, just the two of us for about a half hour.

I was tremendously impressed with two things. Number one, his friendliness and good nature. Secondly, he knew a lot about subjects that I was very familiar with in criminal justice and had a lot of good ideas. We were very much in agreement on most of the things we talked about in the criminal justice arena, different things like the death penalty, clemency, pardons for certain people who had completed their penalty, and so on. As a result, at the end of the half hour, he surprised me by offering me the job, and I surprised myself by accepting on the spot. The toughest part was, driving home 75 miles to Oakland, to figure out how to explain to my wife that we would be moving.

John G. Malcolm: I bet that was quite a conversation. So you didn't know at the time that you were engaging in a job interview. You thought you were just there to sort of inform the governor-elect about things that you knew about?

Edwin Meese III: It had to do with the possibility of a job, but certainly, I did not realize that it would happen the day that I went up there.

John G. Malcolm: Do you know how he got his background knowledge about some of the issues that you two talked about?

Edwin Meese III: Yes. Actually, part of it was that he played a law enforcement officer, either a marshal or secret service agent, in a lot of movies, so I guess he had some background there. But also, he had a curiosity about law enforcement. It was always a matter of interest to him. He knew a number of people in the law enforcement community in Los Angeles.

He also thought a lot about these issues. These were issues that came up during the campaign, particularly the disorder among some of the student bodies and things like that. So it was not a matter that was new to him. He had read up on it and was very knowledgeable.

John G. Malcolm: You said that when you were hired, your title was legal affairs secretary, but the press shortly after that began referring to you, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, as assistant governor. That was before you officially became his chief of staff in 1969. So I thought we'd spend a little bit of time talking about some of the things that you did when Ronald Reagan was governor.

One of the major issues that I gather you worked on was welfare reform. How did that come about, and how did that influence his later thinking when he was President about welfare reform?

Reforming Welfare and Cutting Taxes

Edwin Meese III: One of the major fiscal problems for California in 1968–69 was the burgeoning welfare rolls and the fact that, as it turned out in 1970, we would have to have a tax increase in California unless something was done about welfare.

At the governor's direction, we set up a task force, and we had people who had never had any experience in welfare but who had a good deal of experience in public policy and management generally. The mission that they were given was to sit down with clean tablets, so to speak, and if you're going to start a welfare program, how would you do it? They came up with a way, and ultimately the idea was to remove from the rolls people who really did not deserve or need welfare and at the same time to increase the grants of the people who were on welfare who are truly deserving.

This program was then developed and presented to the legislature of California in 1970. As a result of it ultimately passing—not without a great deal of hindrance from the opposing party, but nevertheless it ultimately passed—the welfare rolls were reduced. At the same time, deserving people got higher grants that were more livable, and the state budget actually was then brought into balance without raising taxes.

John G. Malcolm: You mentioned taxes. Governor Reagan actually cut taxes in California quite a bit, and he vetoed 994 spending bills, with only one of those vetoes overridden.

Edwin Meese III: Right.

John G. Malcolm: Can you talk a little bit about that and your involvement?

Edwin Meese III: We had a cabinet of about six people plus the governor, the heads of major agencies, and the director of finance and myself as chief of staff, and we would go over these bills one by one with the governor and provide the advice from the various facets of state government. Then he would make his decision ultimately whether to sign or to veto the bills. That was a major part of looking at almost every aspect of California government.

John G. Malcolm: The thought in California of taxes being cut these days seems like Fantasyland. What was that experience like in terms of cutting taxes? Was it particularly controversial at the time? Was it well received?

Edwin Meese III: When the governor took office, he had to raise taxes in the first year because the previous governor, through an accounting gimmick, had managed to spend 15 months of income in 12 months. It left the government with a deficit that had to be repaired in time for the next budget year, which started in July of 1967, so the governor actually had to raise taxes against his will but necessarily because of the constitution.

He vowed that if we could, as he called it, “cut, squeeze, and trim” the state budget over the next several years, then he would return any savings to the people. That was the basis for his tax reductions. It was not easy to persuade the legislature because some of them felt that they should be able to spend whatever we saved in expenditures. The governor decided that it was much better to reward the taxpayers rather than the spenders.

John G. Malcolm: The times change, but the debate remains the same.

Edwin Meese III: Right.

Riots at Berkeley

John G. Malcolm: When you were working for Governor Reagan, I gather there was a problem up at Berkeley and that there were more riots in which a building, I believe, was firebombed. Can you talk a little bit about that and how the governor reacted to that?

Edwin Meese III: Yes. This was in 1969, and they had an event called the People’s Park episode. There was rioting, and there was a certain amount of burning of buildings and throwing of bricks and rocks and sharpened steel spikes at police officers. It was a major uprising. So the governor, at the request of the local police, brought in the National Guard, and within days, the uprising was ended and peace was restored.

John G. Malcolm: Were you involved in any decision-making on that?

Edwin Meese III: Yes. I actually went to the scene at the request of the governor to provide a liaison between him and the police and sheriff’s deputies, the National Guard—one of my responsibilities as a

member of the cabinet was the National Guard of California—and the state Office of Emergency Services, which was the body that arranged the mutual aid between police departments and sheriff's departments. So it was natural for me then to be, more or less, as his representative on the scene.

John G. Malcolm: And you got it done. You handled it pretty quickly.

Edwin Meese III: It was indeed. Yes.

John G. Malcolm: I think there are some governors today who could probably take a page from Ronald Reagan's playbook.

Edwin Meese III: I think that's right. What he did was promote the unity between the various levels of government, and the fact that everybody was playing from the same plan meant that there was no chance that the opposite groups could ultimately prevail.

Beginnings of the Conservative Public Interest Law Movement

John G. Malcolm: While you were working for Governor Reagan, I gather you were instrumental in founding what was one of the first conservative public interest legal groups, the Pacific Legal Foundation. How did that all come about?

Edwin Meese III: Ronald Reagan became tired of having the welfare reform program constantly attacked, sometimes in the news media, other times in litigation. These lawsuits, brought by so-called public interest lawyers, were actually paid for by federal funds. He was tired of the taxpayers having to fund lawyers who were essentially working against the best interest not only of the taxpayers, but also of the people who were on welfare. As a result, it was felt that we needed organizations who, on the side of the taxpayers and the law-abiding citizens, would provide the same kind of resources that the spenders and the opposing party, the so-called welfare rights organization groups, had.

That was the origin of two organizations. One was a think tank or public policy research organization known as the Institute for Contemporary Studies. The other was the Pacific Legal Foundation, which was publicly funded through voluntary contributions, an organization that would provide representation for the ordinary citizens who were being sued or governmental entities that were being sued such as the welfare program in California.

John G. Malcolm: Were you involved in coming up with the plans for those organizations and recruiting the leadership?

Edwin Meese III: There were a couple of people choosing the leadership for these organizations. The California Chamber of Commerce was very much involved and actually provided a president for the Pacific Legal Foundation. Then we came up with some top-notch lawyers, including Ron Zumbrun, who was the initial chief counsel and later president of the Pacific Legal Foundation, which was really the first general-purpose public interest law firm that was funded by private enterprise in the country. From it proceeded then what is known today as the conservative legal movement.

Teaching and Practicing the Law

John G. Malcolm: After Ronald Reagan left the governor's mansion, between 1974 and 1980 you worked for years as vice president at an aerospace company; you worked briefly at a law firm; you taught at a law school; you served as the vice-chairman of the California Organized Crime Control Commission. Those are a lot of experiences. Can you talk a little bit about some of them?

Edwin Meese III: I enjoyed the private practice I was in, of counsel with a very good group of lawyers in a very small firm. I think we had six lawyers, which today is minuscule compared to most of the large law firms. But it was a very good group, and we covered all kinds of law, everything from criminal law, estate planning, the whole works.

I did mostly corporate law, general law practice, and family law to some extent. It was a real variety, and I had a chance to look at different aspects of the law during this time. I worked on a number of political issues, such as state initiatives. I had clients who were planning and promulgating state initiatives in California. So it was really a great variety of things that I was able to look at during that time.

It is while I was in private practice that I was invited to become a member of the state organized crime commission, which was convened by Attorney General Evelle Younger, and ultimately became vice-chairman of that commission. We worked with the state Department of Justice and with various sheriff's departments and police departments on potential and actual organized criminal organizations and activities within California.¹

1. See Organized Crime Control Commission, *First Report*, May 1978, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/Digitization/79411NCJRS.pdf> (accessed January 12, 2021).

John G. Malcolm: Did you have field hearings and hear from witnesses?

Edwin Meese III: We did. We had hearings in various parts of the state and also had regular briefings by the Division of Law Enforcement of the state Department of Justice.

John G. Malcolm: Was organized crime a major problem in California at the time?

Edwin Meese III: It was a growing problem. I would not say a major problem in the sense of a large amount of it, but there was a sufficient amount, and it appeared to be on the rise. That was the purpose of this commission, to nip it in the bud, so to speak, so that it did not become a major problem for California.

John G. Malcolm: What sorts of actions did you end up taking?

Edwin Meese III: First of all, the exposure of these criminal syndicates and then public exposure of what law enforcement was doing to combat it and also to warn business organizations so they would not be infiltrated by organized crime.

John G. Malcolm: You also taught law school then, didn't you?

Edwin Meese III: I did. I became a professor at the University of San Diego School of Law and was able to continue a small part of my law practice while I was doing that. I enjoyed it very much. I founded an institute for criminal law research there, the Center for Criminal Justice Policy and Management, which not only taught law students and particularly graduate students, but also taught various public officials like investigators and lawyers in district attorneys' offices on special programs.

John G. Malcolm: What did you teach in law school? What subjects?

Edwin Meese III: I taught primarily criminal justice. I had a criminal justice seminar, and I also taught basic criminal law for law students.

John G. Malcolm: Were you thinking about possibly going into academia permanently, or was that not an interest?

Edwin Meese III: I was teaching full-time and also running this criminal justice institute, so I probably would've been in there full-time if Ronald Reagan hadn't run for office—for President—again.

John G. Malcolm: What did Governor Reagan do when he left the governor's mansion? I gather he did not go back into the movies.

Edwin Meese III: No. Ronald Reagan said the reason he couldn't go back into the movies was they had changed quite a bit from his heyday, and he didn't feel comfortable taking his clothes off in public.

So he did a number of things. He did a good deal of public speaking, which he had started really even while he was in Hollywood.

John G. Malcolm: His General Electric days.

Edwin Meese III: Yes, the *General Electric Theater* and *Death Valley Days*, things like that. But he also then did a good deal of writing on topics related to public policy, and then he had a series of five-minute radio spots each day, Monday through Friday. As a result of this, he was able to keep up with current events and give commentaries on major issues that were facing the public.

Reagan Challenges Gerald Ford

John G. Malcolm: It certainly kept his profile up. And then I gather he was involved in an insurgent campaign challenging President Gerald Ford in 1976. Were you involved in that? Can you talk a bit about that?

Edwin Meese III: Yes. When that started, I was in the aerospace business, and we were a federal contractor with some of our work. As a result, I couldn't join the campaign right away, but I still kept in touch with the governor and was part of a small advisory committee that he had put together when he left the governorship on a part-time basis.

John G. Malcolm: Who were some of the people involved?

Edwin Meese III: There were a number of people. There were people like Holmes Tuttle and Henry Salvatori and others who were a part of it. Then there were other people who had been in the government with him: myself, Pete Hannaford and Mike Deaver, Lyn Nofziger, folks like that.

In 1976, he really was reluctant to run against an incumbent Republican President, but he felt that the policies that were being engaged in at that time in Washington were the wrong policies in two areas. Number one, he felt that the growth of federal spending and the expansion of federal power, which had started with Lyndon Johnson and to some extent was not stopped but continued under Nixon and Ford, was heading in the wrong direction. Secondly, he was very worried that the federal government was not doing an adequate job of contending against the Soviet Union and that there was too much acceptance of what then was really Soviet aggression around the world.

John G. Malcolm: So Ronald Reagan came very close to defeating Gerald Ford and capturing the nomination. He had, of course, given a very memorable speech in October of 1964 for Barry Goldwater, "A Time for Choosing." But at the '76 convention, he gave a very memorable endorsement speech in which he talked about whether future generations would live in freedom and whether they had met the challenges of their time at this particular moment. How did that speech come about? Was it a planned speech?

Edwin Meese III: No, it was not planned at all. At the convention, Gerry Ford had the delegates: no question about that. As we went in, there was an attempt by some rule changes to see if perhaps, at the last minute, the large group of people supporting President Reagan might be able to pull a surprise. Since the incumbent had the necessary delegates, it was pretty much decided almost from the start that it was an uphill fight.

But at the same time that Gerald Ford got the nomination, there's no question that the popular person at the convention was Ronald Reagan. There were large groups of people there supporting him and who appreciated his program, what he was talking about, and also his personality. Gerry Ford knew it would be helpful to have his endorsement for the upcoming general election, so out of the blue, after President Ford had been there on the final night of the convention and given his talk, he said, "I think it would be good for Ronald Reagan to come down and give us a few words."

Initially, Reagan demurred, and Ford just kept waving him down from the place halfway up in the stands where the governor was sitting with Nancy. So they came down, and Ronald Reagan spontaneously gave an outstanding talk.

Earlier that week, he had been at a high school graduation where he had talked about the future to these young people. They were burying a time capsule that would be opened up 100 hundred years from then. So he incorporated some of the things that he said there and some of those themes into this spontaneous speech and gave what some would call a stem-winder of a speech for President Ford, which was very helpful, to kick off his campaign in the general election.

Laying the Groundwork for 1980

John G. Malcolm: After the '76 convention, Gerald Ford lost his reelection effort to Jimmy Carter. What did Ronald Reagan do to lay the groundwork for his presidential run in 1980, and how were you involved in that effort?

Edwin Meese III: Ronald Reagan was not at all sure he wanted to run again or whether he should run again. He was, by that time, in his mid-60s, which in those days was quite old for a presidential candidate.

But he wanted to support the Republican party, so he took the leftover funds from his primary campaign and formed a public political action committee called Citizens for the Republic and also a companion organization so that he was able to utilize that as the basis for giving talks for other candidates around the country and for mobilizing people in support of conservative ideas. And he continued with his speeches, and he continued with his radio program.

As a result, when he did decide in 1978 or 1979 to run for the presidency again, he had a start then organizationally in the Citizens for the Republic and was able to formulate a very successful campaign. Again, he was going against another incumbent President, this time a Democrat.

John G. Malcolm: I gather you were one of the people involved in all of this, encouraging him to run.

Edwin Meese III: I was. I was more involved really in helping him after he decided to run since I had always felt he had to make that decision. I would give him my advice, but I wasn't necessarily one of those who was most ardently pushing him to run. By that time, he deserved a well-earned retirement after having been a major leader in politics, as well as in other aspects of his career. But he decided he was physically able to, mentally able to, and emotionally ready to run again, and he did an outstanding job in the campaign.

John G. Malcolm: What role did you have in the campaign?

Edwin Meese III: Initially, I was in charge of the policy issues. Then, when he had a reorganization of his campaign in February of 1980, I was one of the two people, with Bill Casey, to be put at the head of the campaign. Bill was the chairman, and I was the chief of staff to the campaign.

John G. Malcolm: At the convention in 1980, there was a lot of talk about Gerald Ford joining the so-called dream ticket and essentially serving as co-President. How did that all come about, and how were you involved with that?

Edwin Meese III: Reminiscent in some ways of politics today, Ronald Reagan when he ran in 1980 was not the favorite of the Republican establishment. They had their own people, some of them in the Senate, others from other walks of political life.

In the primaries, it was really a very hard-hitting and very elaborate campaign of top-level political figures. You had people like Bob Dole in the Senate. You had people like John Connally who had been governor of Texas. And you had several others like that: Howard Baker, who had been a leader of the Republicans in the United States Senate, and Phil Crane, who had been a leader in the House. It was really a very interesting and very powerful field that Ronald Reagan had to overcome in the primaries initially.

When we got to the convention city of Detroit, the Republican establishment was not sure that Ronald Reagan could win because President Carter was very well-established by that time, and Ronald Reagan was not really part of the Republican establishment team. They had a number of other candidates, as was indicated in the primary.

So the idea was thought up by someone there—I can't remember who, but it was among the financial backers of the Republican Party—that maybe what they should do is ask Gerry Ford to run again as Vice President with Ronald Reagan as President, and they denominated that the so-called dream team. It was a real question whether that was a good idea, but there were enough people in the Republican hierarchy that were in favor of it that the governor felt we ought to at least give a look at it to see whether it might work.

There were two teams that were established: the Ford team of people like Alan Greenspan and people like that, Henry Kissinger and someone else I can't remember, and then Bill Casey, Dick Wirthlin, and myself in the Reagan camp. We sat down to see whether we could work out how that would really go into a practice of having a Vice President and a President who would more or less be co-equals and how you would divide up the different responsibilities. After two or three days of pretty intense negotiation, we came to the conclusion that it probably wouldn't work and that it would not be a good idea anyway, because then you really were minimizing the role of the President himself, which really would not work out in practice.

John G. Malcolm: Diffusing accountability too.

Edwin Meese III: It would diffuse accountability, and also, it would be a very confusing thing for the people of the United States to have two people as co-chief executives. It would be hard even for the government itself to function, to know who was really in charge.

John G. Malcolm: Right.

Reagan Chooses a Vice President

Edwin Meese III: On the next to last day of the convention, we had to decide whether we would go forward with this idea. Also, Walter Cronkite, in his television program that evening, had interviewed Gerry Ford, and somehow it had left the impression that this so-called dream ticket was actually going to materialize at the convention.

On the afternoon when that decision had to be made, I was talking with the governor, just the two of us, and I said, "Governor, I don't think this is going to work out, this idea of a co-presidency. And if it doesn't, I would suggest that George H. W. Bush, who had been one of your opponents in the primaries, might be a good candidate for you to consider for Vice President." To which he replied, "You know, Ed, I've been thinking of the same thing myself," and we kind of left it at that until that night.

By nine o'clock, we determined that this road wasn't going to work. Gerry Ford in the meantime had come down and said he didn't think it would work either. So the decision was really made that we would go forward in the normal fashion, and Ronald Reagan decided that he would talk to George Bush. He got him on the phone and said, "George, I'm thinking about perhaps asking the convention to nominate you as Vice President, but I need to know, do you agree and will you be enthusiastically supportive of my policies and my programs?" George Bush after a minute of thought said, "Yes, governor I can. I can do that."

The problem was the convention. The buzz had gone through the convention that the dream team was going to happen. The governor rightly figured that if people were going home that night thinking that this would be the answer and then the next day would find out that that was not going to be the case, even if they might not have been in favor of the idea initially, they would feel there was some sort of skulduggery at work and there had been some political machinations overnight.

That's why he felt he had to go to the convention itself in defiance, really, of tradition and talk to the people there and announce what he would like them to do for Vice President. So we hopped in the cars and went to the convention where he asked the chairman for a time to talk briefly to the assembled delegates. That's when he said that he would like to have them nominate George Bush as his Vice President, and that's how that team came about.

John G. Malcolm: How did you settle on George Bush? During the campaign, he had referred to Ronald Reagan's supply-side economics as voodoo economics. Was that an issue that came up during this decision?

Edwin Meese III: Obviously, it was, and that was why the President was very clear about asking George if he could support all of his programs and policies. But one of the things that a small group of us knew was that a poll we had commissioned back in June among about 12 people, each of whom was conceivably a potential Vice Presidential candidate, showed that the two people who brought the most to the ticket would be Gerry Ford and George Bush.

That was one reason. The other was—and I mentioned this when I was talking with the governor—that George really for the most part had conducted himself very honorably during the primary campaign. As to the voodoo economics, as I said to the press when they asked me about it then, I said that George had an exorcism while he was in Detroit.

John G. Malcolm: An effective one too.

Edwin Meese III: As it turned out, George Bush definitely was one of the best Vice Presidents that any President has ever had. He was totally loyal, very helpful, and he brought to the ticket the one thing the President

didn't have, which was Washington experience. George had been director of the CIA. He'd been ambassador to China. He'd been a Congressman. So he knew the Washington scene, and, combined with the policy views that Ronald Reagan brought from California, it was a great match.

John G. Malcolm: And a decorated fighter pilot, as I recall, as well.

Edwin Meese III: He had been a fighter pilot in the Navy, right.

The Troika: Meese, Baker, and Deaver

John G. Malcolm: When you were in the White House after President Reagan won, you became a member of what was called at the time "the troika," which was you, James Baker, who was the President's chief of staff, and Mike Deaver, who had been your deputy in Sacramento. How did that all come into being, and how did that work out?

Edwin Meese III: The President felt, again rightly, that he needed to have a combination of people: the people who knew him from California and worked with him and also people who knew Washington. So he asked me to be the counselor to the President, which was the senior position on the White House staff, and a member of the Cabinet. Jim would be the chief of staff to the President, and Mike would be the deputy chief of staff.

Basically, the way we divided it up, I had the responsibility for policy and the running of the executive branch. Jim had the responsibility for things having to do with the White House including the press and also the relationship with the Congress. And Mike had the things to do with the President, things such as the operation of the White House facility, the scheduling, the travel, and those things that had to do with the President and his personal activities.

John G. Malcolm: Did the President have a relationship with Jim Baker before, and did you have a relationship with Jim Baker before?

Edwin Meese III: No. When Ronald Reagan selected George Bush as his Vice Presidential candidate, that's when we got acquainted.

John G. Malcolm: Jim had been running George Bush's campaign.

Edwin Meese III: He had been running George Bush's campaign. Then he moved to our side, and we worked very closely together during the general election campaign.

John G. Malcolm: How did the troika work? Did it work well?

Edwin Meese III: I think it worked very well. There was plenty of work for everybody to do, and with this delineation of responsibility, it worked out very well.

Responding to the Attempted Assassination of President Reagan

John G. Malcolm: Let's talk about a number of things that happened during the Reagan years, and I suppose pretty early on was the assassination attempt by John Hinckley, who shot the President. The Washington Hilton is near my house. I think about it every time I go by there. So talk about that.

Edwin Meese III: Just weeks after the inauguration, Hinckley shot the President through a delusional feeling that somehow this would help him win the affections of a movie star.

John G. Malcolm: Jodie Foster.

Edwin Meese III: Jodie Foster. This was a real test at a time when we were very new to all of this, having the President in the hospital literally fighting for his life and having been seriously wounded.

John G. Malcolm: That was downplayed at the time.

Edwin Meese III: It was downplayed at the time, the seriousness of the wound. Actually, it was not initially discovered just how serious it was. But the main thing was to assure the public that this new team that was less than two months old was able to carry on and do what was necessary to carry on the business of government, and we worked very hard at that.

The Vice President stepped in, but he was very careful not to usurp any of the powers that belonged only to the President. For example, when the Vice President was coming back from Texas where he had given a speech, I believe, there was some thought that after landing at Andrews Air Force base, he should helicopter to the White House like the President would. He said, "No." Instead, he went by helicopter to his own residence up at the Naval Observatory. This way it did not look like he was trying to step into the place of the President.

Then he carried out the convening of the Cabinet and the other things necessary to make sure that the business of government continued. Ronald Reagan, of course, during his recuperation took care of signing bills or making decisions that had to be done. It really worked very smoothly and was very reassuring to the public, particularly the graceful way in which the President himself reacted, cracking jokes while he was awaiting surgery to remove the bullet, things like that.

John G. Malcolm: I remember he told the surgeon that he hoped he was a Republican.

Edwin Meese III: It was interesting. Just before he went under the anesthetic, the President told the doctors, "I hope you're all Republicans," and one of the doctors said, "Mr. President, we're all Republicans today."

When I got to the hospital with Jim Baker and a couple of others, Mike Deaver, who had been with the President, was there and met us as we went to the door of the hospital. The three of us were there together, and the President was wheeled by us going from the emergency room up to the operating room. He looked at us, and he said, “Who’s minding the store?” He was kind of wise-cracking like that, and that grace under fire, so to speak, reassured the public not only that he was in good shape, but the government was in good shape.

John G. Malcolm: You pointed out that George Bush assumed control in a modest way. I remember when Al Haig came out and said that he was in charge. Did George Bush have to wrestle that away from Al Haig?

Edwin Meese III: No. Actually, I think Al Haig got a raw deal on that. Al had been down in the situation room and was watching on television, and the news media were playing this up. The question was asked of Larry Speakes, who was the assistant press secretary, “Larry, who’s actually in charge?” One of the reporters said, “The Vice President is on a plane en route from Texas. The President is in the hospital. Who’s really in charge?”

Al saw this and realized that our opponents—the Soviets, for example, or some other foreign power—might think that there was a gap in the government and would try to take advantage of this. That was when he went running upstairs to the press room and where he said, not necessarily accurate in terms of the Constitution, but nevertheless said, “As of now, I’m in control.” That then was played up, and he was given a bad time.

John G. Malcolm: So he wasn’t thinking about presidential succession?

Edwin Meese III: He was not thinking about taking over the presidency.

John G. Malcolm: And of course we all learned about Ronald Reagan’s predilection for jelly beans. He must have been inundated with them after that.

Edwin Meese III: That’s right. Actually, the President had a jar of jelly beans on the Cabinet table, and when the arguments or the discussions got hot and heavy, he went off and grabbed the jar, would take a jelly bean, and would pass it around the table, and that cooled off the ardor of some of the debaters.

John G. Malcolm: That’s great.

Edwin Meese III: People wondered, why jelly beans? What happened was, in the 1950s, I guess, the President gave up smoking. He had been a smoker through his movie career. He gave it up in the ’50s. And I guess to satisfy the need to do something with your hands, he would start eating jelly beans instead of smoking. So jelly beans became a part of the persona, and the maker of Jelly Belly jelly beans saw a great opportunity there and kept sending jelly beans of different flavors to the White House for the President and for the Cabinet.

Cutting Taxes

John G. Malcolm: I may keep a jar around for staff meetings from now on.

Let's talk about a few of the things that got accomplished during those years. Just as the President had done when he was governor, there were the Reagan tax cuts. Let's talk about that.

Edwin Meese III: When the President took office, the country economically was in very deep trouble. We had high inflation, a stagnant economy, high unemployment, and so on, and he felt that to stimulate the economy, it was necessary to do four things. One was to cut taxes across the board. Secondly, to reduce the number of unnecessary regulations and rules that were hampering business and industry. Thirdly, to have stable monetary policies, working with the Federal Reserve. And fourth, to slow the growth of federal spending.

But the top of these was to provide a tax cut because people were in very deep personal financial trouble because prices were so high. The tax cuts were one of the ways to stem the economic problems, to give people more money so that they could afford the higher prices, as prices ultimately came down as inflation was curbed.

John G. Malcolm: Obviously a very difficult thing to get through.

Edwin Meese III: It was difficult to get through, but fortunately it was in fact voted, I guess in the summer of 1981.

John G. Malcolm: There was a huge economic boom. And then, of course, the curtailing of spending became a little bit of a difficult thing.

Edwin Meese III: That was extremely difficult. And while the growth of federal spending was curtailed for the most part, the one area where it was not curtailed but was actually expanded was the military, because our military capability was at a low ebb in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. It was necessary to spend considerable amounts of money to improve the conditions of the military, manpower, to improve the equipment that had been downgraded, and also to improve weapons systems to match the Soviet Union's capabilities.

The Air Traffic Controllers Strike

John G. Malcolm: I want to get to that in just a moment, but I want to touch on another episode early in the Administration that tested the President's mettle, and that was when the air traffic controllers, the union PATCO, went on strike. That was a big moment. What happened?

Edwin Meese III: The Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization, the union of the controllers, went on strike for a contract. Although the contract offered by the Federal Aviation Administration had been fairly generous, they would not accept it, and they determined they wanted to go on strike.

It was illegal for them to go on strike and also a violation of the oath of office that they had taken when they were hired. Ronald Reagan, even though some Presidents before him, when they had strikes of government employees, more or less overlooked it and in some cases actually capitulated, felt that it was wrong to give in to them while they were illegally striking. So he said that while we wanted to be fair to them and we would continue negotiations, they had to stop the strike and return to work.

He gave them 24 hours, or maybe 48 hours, to return to work by a certain deadline and said that anyone who had not had forfeited their job and would be terminated, which was the penalty for violating the law. Many of them did return, maybe a quarter or so, but most of them stayed off, and as a result, they were in fact terminated. This was the end of the strike.

The press was very much opposed to this. They said planes would fall out of the sky, air travel would be hampered for years, and talked about the dire results that would be the result of what the President had done. But he said he really had no choice, his oath was to be sure that the laws are followed, and that it was necessary to take the actions in order to do that.

He and Drew Lewis, who was the Secretary of Transportation, and others cobbled together the people, the supervisors of the air traffic controllers, those that came back to work, the traffic controllers from the military services, and put together a substitute group of traffic controllers very quickly. Within a short time, the planes were flying again, and air traffic was brought back to normal. But the main thing was, it demonstrated that every government employee, no matter who they are, or no matter what their job was, had to follow the law and could not strike illegally.

Dealing with the Soviet Threat

John G. Malcolm: Another thing that it demonstrated is, this was a President who, when he drew a line in the sand, was going to keep his word. I'm sure that not only were there unions in the country watching, but overseas people were watching.

You made reference a moment ago to the Russians, who I'm sure were watching, and the military buildup. There were several significant events that occurred during the Reagan presidency in terms of his dealings with the Russians. Can you talk about some of that?

Edwin Meese III: There were several things, as you point out. By the way, we found after the end of the Soviet Union, in looking at the records that were there in Moscow, that it was the action in curbing the illegal activities of the traffic controllers that convinced many of the Soviet leaders that they had a new kind of President, a President who would be very tough and was, I think, instrumental in creating a climate in which the ultimate end of the Soviet Union was possible.

There were several things that occurred. One of the ideas that the President had was to engage the Soviet Union on a moral plane. He gave a speech in 1982 in Westminster before the British Parliament in which he talked about consigning Marxism-Leninism, as he called it, to the ash heap of history and rallied the Western forces of freedom to fight against the Soviet Union and to stop their aggression. He also supported freedom fighters around the world, whether in Angola or Poland or Nicaragua, wherever it happened to be. All of these things were very important.

He did it on a moral basis because of what he called the Soviet Union. In a speech for the National Evangelicals Association, he talked about them being an evil empire and essentially identified them for what they were and how they were oppressing the captive nations that they had conquered. Then he gave a speech in Moscow to the University of Moscow, to the students there. He gave the speech at the Brandenburg Gate in which he called on, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall.” And the support of freedom fighters, as I mentioned.

All of this showed that he was definitely in a position to contend against what had been happening with the Soviet Union exerting their Communist philosophy throughout the world.

John G. Malcolm: Some of these speeches that you talked about, speaking to the Parliament and talking about consigning the Soviet Union to the ash heap of history, and certainly to the National Association of Evangelicals referring to the Soviet Union as an evil empire—were there people within the White House who were saying, “Oh, don’t do that.” Was this a matter of controversy?

Edwin Meese III: There were some that felt that way. Most of the opposition came from the State Department, the striped pants group as the President called them. A lot of them said, “No, you shouldn’t do that. That’s not being diplomatic.”

The President felt that the aggression by the Soviet Union was not diplomatic either and, therefore, that the only way you could really contend against the Soviet Union, what they were doing, was to take firm stands and accurately identify them for what they were doing. It was this that really

brought out the appreciation of the people in the captive nations. The fact that somebody was now standing up and telling the truth about the USSR was, to them, tremendously helpful, particularly for those people who were involved in the freedom movements in these various countries.

John G. Malcolm: We'll get back to that in just a moment. You referred to the military buildup that was going on and the Reagan Doctrine. How critical was that?

Edwin Meese III: Building up our military capability was absolutely critical, and it wasn't just the resources, the equipment, and even the pay and living conditions. It was the fact that Ronald Reagan reinstilled pride in the military. By visiting Army posts and Air Force and Navy bases, actually flying out to ships at sea and watching Navy maneuvers, things like that, he indicated his appreciation and his reverence for the military, and that inspired a lot of people in the country also to have the same appreciation for what the military was there for and what they were doing.

It certainly also brought to the attention of the Soviet Union the fact that we not only were building up the military, but that they had the full support of the federal government behind them. All of these things had to do with creating the climate which ultimately, later on, would lead to the end of the Cold War. The President would also build up our intelligence capabilities, having Bill Casey as the Director of Central Intelligence. He also then launched something which was particularly significant, and that was the Strategic Defense Initiative.

The Strategic Defense Initiative

John G. Malcolm: Let's talk about the Strategic Defense Initiative. At the time when President Reagan came into office, the policy for dealing with the Soviet Union was based on MAD, Mutually Assured Destruction: No one would fight because there would be an immediate counterattack. The President pivoted in a completely different direction and came up with the Strategic Defense Initiative that was mockingly referred to as "Star Wars" at the time. I actually thought it was pretty good in terms of capturing the public imagination. Tell me about the SDI.

Edwin Meese III: Ronald Reagan had been opposed to nuclear war all the way back to the time he was governor. He said that nuclear war could never be won and should never be fought. So he was looking for some way to counter that threat of a nuclear missile attack. As a matter of fact, he thought this Mutually Assured Destruction idea was kind of like two

Western cowboys with six-guns pointed at each other's head standing in front of a bar. He thought that that was not a very stable way to look at the future of the world.

So he initiated, with the support and help of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, a program to come up with a counterforce to nuclear war, which would be a defense against ballistic missiles. This was what he denominated the Strategic Defense Initiative. He announced it to the public in 1983 in a White House announcement with the Joint Chiefs, and it began development.

Today, if we'd continued at the same tempo as the development was going when he was President, we probably would have a complete system in effect, but we have had partial programs. One of the aspects of the Strategic Defense Initiative was adopted by the Israelis, and it's provided them a weapon against the missile attacks from their opponents in that region.

John G. Malcolm: Yes, the Iron Dome.

Edwin Meese III: The Iron Dome and other things. We have, again, aspects of it in being today, but it was certainly a major change.

It was a major change not only in terms of the state of combat capabilities of the two sides, but also it showed the Soviet Union that we had the technology to do it, and they knew that this was something where we would eclipse what they had done. Illegally and in violation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, they had been trying to develop such a ballistic missile defense, and they found that with our technology, we were already going to surpass them. That was another reason why the Soviet Union was going to lose in the long run.

John G. Malcolm: I know that there were a series of summits, including one in Reykjavik, Iceland, in which Mikhail Gorbachev basically made an offer to the United States that he thought that Reagan couldn't refuse to trade away Star Wars. Talk about that.

Edwin Meese III: In the second summit meeting in Reykjavik in 1986, they had gone for two or three days. In many ways surprising the assembled people from the United States, Gorbachev was willing to give up about half of their nuclear weapons and an amazing array of concessions. Ronald Reagan was very impressed and was very much in agreement and realizing that this could be a major move toward relieving of tensions and toward peace in the world.

It looked like things were going very well until the last morning when Gorbachev played what he thought was his ace in the hole by saying, "Of course, in order to get this, you would have to give up your research and development of the Strategic Defense Initiative." With that, Ronald Reagan realized what the game was from the Soviet side, and he said no and ended the discussions at that point and came home.

The press and everybody said that that was really a great defeat for the President when actually it turned out later that that was one of the key milestones that let the Soviet Union know that they would never be able to win and showed the mettle of the President and his willingness and steadfastness to do the right thing despite what the ramifications publicity-wise might be.

Margaret Thatcher, Pope John Paul II, and Lech Walesa

John G. Malcolm: You talked before about the President's relationship with freedom fighters. I want to talk about his relationship with three people in particular, one of whom was certainly a freedom fighter: Lady Margaret Thatcher, Pope John Paul II, and later President of Poland but at the time the head of Solidarity, Lech Walesa. Can you talk a little bit about those relationships?

Edwin Meese III: Part of President Reagan's approach to the Soviet Union was to support freedom fighters such as Lech Walesa, but the whole idea of giving this support was something that he shared with Margaret Thatcher and the Pope. He felt that it was very important to provide hope for people who were at that time being oppressed, particularly throughout Eastern and Central Europe. It was a key part of building morale, you might say, among those who were still yearning for freedom and willing to take steps to move in that direction. It was a key point in the overall combination of things with improving military capability, in dealing with the Soviets on a moral basis, and then allowing and encouraging other people to join the fight against Soviet imperialism.

John G. Malcolm: Talk a little bit about his relationship with Margaret Thatcher and the Pope.

Edwin Meese III: When Reagan and Thatcher went to their first industrial summit together in the summer of 1981, they were the only two right-of-center leaders there, the only two conservatives. Everybody else was a socialist, whether it was Germany or France, whatever it happened to be. So it was kind of the two of them against the world. They got along very well. Ronald Reagan had met Mrs. Thatcher in London when he had been there during the 1970s and thought highly of her then and thought even more highly of her as he saw her doing the same thing in Britain as he was doing in the United States, which was reviving the economy and rebuilding the spirit of the people.

The Pope had his own reasons, both as a Pole himself and based upon the oppression of religion in the Soviet-dominated countries. So it was a natural opportunity for people who had mutual objectives and mutual basic philosophies of freedom to be able to work together informally and, to a certain extent, coordinate their efforts and bring their efforts together in furtherance of expanding freedom in the world.

America's 75th Attorney General

John G. Malcolm: Special relationships at a remarkable time.

Let's get back a little bit to your career. You transitioned from being White House counselor to the Department of Justice in February of 1985 to become the 75th Attorney General, but it took 13 months for you to get confirmed. I think at one point you might've said a joke like, "Well, I was nominated in February and confirmed in March. That's not so bad." But there was a year gap there. What was that all about?

Edwin Meese III: That was a lot of political machinations at the time, just as we're having today. The opposition party in the Senate was difficult, and there were some false accusations and so on about federal forms being filled out, so it took a while to get this done. There was an independent counsel investigation which exonerated me. Ultimately, I was able to take the oath of office in February of 1985.

John G. Malcolm: Let's talk about some of the things that you did as Attorney General. One of the more controversial things was, you established a commission on pornography. How did that come about?

Edwin Meese III: Actually, I didn't establish it. That began while I was still in the White House.

John G. Malcolm: So William French Smith began that?

Edwin Meese III: Yes, William French Smith, my predecessor as Attorney General. What happened was, a group asked for a meeting with the President. It involved a clergyman, a psychiatrist, teachers, a child specialist, and physicians. They talked to the President about the extensive amount of obscenity and pornography which they felt were having a deleterious effect on the children of the United States and many adults as well.

They asked for a commission on pornography to be launched to find out what the situation was and what the harm was. There had been such a commission launched by President Nixon in the 1970s, and they came up with a conclusion that pornography was not really much of a problem. But by the 1980s, it was far different.

This commission, which was begun in 1985 before I became Attorney General, under my predecessor, brought out their report in 1986 when I was Attorney General.² As a result, the media denominated it as the report of the Meese Commission, so that I got more credit than I deserved.

2. Attorney General's Commission on Pornography, Final Report, U.S. Department of Justice, July 1986, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015058809065&view=lup&seq=1> (accessed January 15, 2021).

They had three very important findings. Number one was the ubiquitousness, the extent to which pornography was available at that time. Number two, the harm that it was actually doing. The psychiatrists, for example, were very definite about the harm that was being done. And thirdly, the fact that organized crime was a principal factor in the manufacturing and distribution of this type of material. All of these things then led to a considerable amount of legislation and then the implementation of that legislation in the Department of Justice by the creation of a National Obscenity Enforcement Unit within the Criminal Division.

John G. Malcolm: I actually oversaw that unit when I was a Deputy Assistant Attorney General.

Another thing that you did was, you placed a real emphasis on victims' rights, and there was a task force on victims of crime. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Edwin Meese III: Yes. One of the things that really began even before I went to work for Ronald Reagan as President was a movement that was largely in California but also other places to support the victims of criminal activity. In 1982, it was still a problem.

We created a Task Force on Victims of Crime to see what could be done to be helpful to those people who were the unfortunate victims of criminal activity. They came in with a lot of recommendations.³ As a result of that, we were able to create the position of Victim/Witness Coordinator in every U.S. attorney's office throughout the country⁴ and also to take other steps to enable victims to have a mitigation of the harm that had been done to them by crime in the country.

John G. Malcolm: Yes, long overdue.

I'd like to talk a little bit about the anti-drug campaign under the Reagan Administration, with Nancy Reagan and her "Just Say No" campaign. At the time, it was quite successful because drug use dropped among high school students. I have it here that among high school seniors, 54 percent had reported taking drugs in 1979. It was down to 29 percent by 1991. Talk a little bit about the anti-drug campaign.

Edwin Meese III: As you point out, the use of illegal drugs was pretty rampant in the 1960s and 1970s, to reach a peak in 1980. When President Reagan took over, that was one of the major problems that he had to deal with.

In 1982, he brought a coordinator into the White House who worked directly with me to develop a strategy to deal with the problem of drugs

3. President's Task Force on Victims of Crime, Final Report, December 1982, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ovc/87299.pdf> (accessed January 15, 2021).

4. See, for example, U.S. Department of Justice, United States Attorney's Office, Eastern District of Pennsylvania, "Victim/Witness Services," updated December 30, 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-edpa/victim-witness-resources> (accessed January 15, 2021).

on a national and international basis. It had five aspects: number one, international cooperation against drugs; number two, strengthened law enforcement activity; number three, improved rehabilitation and treatment programs for those people who got involved with drugs; number four, education and prevention activities to keep people from getting involved with drugs; and fifth, expanded research to deal with the harm of drug abuse.

As a result of this, for example, when I was Attorney General, at the President's direction, we formed the National Drug Policy Board where virtually all members of the Cabinet were a part of the effort to deal with drugs in one of these five areas and where the board itself met on a monthly basis at the policy level, and then their subordinates, head of the Drug Enforcement Administration, the FBI, people in the Health and Human Services area, and so on, worked on a day-to-day basis on you might call the street level, the public level.⁵

The board itself set the policies, which were then implemented by people in the other levels of government. The President himself was very much interested, met with the board on a regular basis to learn the progress and make sure that the effort was expanding and had cooperation throughout the government. As a result of all of this, in that 10-year period from 1982 to 1992, drug abuse, as you point out, was reduced significantly: overall, probably about 50 percent among adults and students or student-age kids throughout the country.

It was probably one of the major accomplishments of the Reagan Administration besides what happened to the Soviet Union. Because of this, crime materially decreased as well. There were other factors too in regard to crime, including increased imprisonment of serious habitual criminals for a longer period of time and so on. But the overall effect of reducing drug abuse was a material matter in terms of reducing crime in the United States.

The Jurisprudence of Original Intent and the U.S. Supreme Court

John G. Malcolm: Let's talk about one of the things that happened for which you're best known within the conservative legal community, and rightfully so, which is the debate about originalism that was kicked off in July of 1985 with a speech you gave at the American Bar Association on the jurisprudence of original intent.⁶ Talk a little bit about that.

5. See Executive Order 12590, "National Drug Policy Board," March 26, 1987, in Federal Register, Vol. 52, No. 60 (March 30, 1987), pp. 10021-10022, <https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/ll/fedreg/fr052/fr052060/fr052060.pdf> (accessed January 15, 2021).

6. See Edwin Meese III, speech to American Bar Association, July 9, 1985, in U.S. Department of Justice, "Speeches of Attorney General Edwin Meese, III," 1985, <https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/ag/legacy/2011/08/23/07-09-1985.pdf> (accessed January 15, 2021).

Edwin Meese III: In 1985, I was asked to speak to the ABA, the American Bar Association. About every 10 years or so, they had a very large meeting, and half of the meeting was in Washington. The other half of the meeting was in London. As I gathered with the staff, as I usually did when I was going to make a speech to discuss what we had to talk about, the sentiment of all of us was, we shouldn't make this just an ordinary "Welcome to Washington" speech, but should talk about something substantive.

One of the problems that Ronald Reagan had been very much concerned about was judges who would obey the law as it was actually written and would follow the Constitution as the words really were written and what they meant rather than substituting their own personal biases or policy preferences for what the law said. So we decided to talk about the idea of something that Bob Bork had started back in 1971 with an article in the *Indiana Law Journal* about originalism—in other words, getting back to the original meaning of the Constitution, the original meaning and understanding of the laws.⁷ And that's what I talked about.

I talked about how the Supreme Court in several ways had departed from what the Constitution really said in areas such as religious liberty and crime, the relationship between the states and the federal government, and so on. This in itself was something new. The press played it up that we were all wrong, that we were trying to disrupt the orderly following of jurisprudence and so on, and it probably would have just ended at that point, except a few months later at Georgetown Law School, Justice William Brennan decided to provide a speech trying to refute what I had said in July.⁸ The fact that he was taking an opposing view then made a debate out of it. One of the other justices joined in later on, and it became a major aspect of legal attention by the legal profession and judges, but also by the media and the academic community as well.

As I say, if it hadn't been for the fact that a debate ensued, my speech would have laid on the shelves in people's library never to be read again. But this now was a whole new idea, a new controversy, and from that has come the whole idea of originalism or textualism or what I call fidelity to the Constitution and the laws as they're actually written.

John G. Malcolm: Obviously, those of us involved in the conservative legal movement are grateful to you and to Justice Antonin Scalia for picking

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7. See Robert H. Bork, "Neutral Principles and Some First Amendment Problems," *Indiana Law Journal*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (Fall 1971), pp. 1-35, <https://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2720&context=ilj> (accessed January 15, 2021).
 8. See William J. Brennan, "The Constitution of the United States: Contemporary Ratification," speech at Text and Teaching Symposium, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, October 12, 1985, <https://fedsoc.org/commentary/publications/the-great-debate-justice-william-j-brennan-jr-october-12-1985> (accessed January 15, 2021).

up that debate. We're also grateful to Justice Brennan for deciding to take you on in that Georgetown speech.

Judges and the Supreme Court: Obviously, the Reagan Administration paid a lot of attention to that. I know that your predecessor, William French Smith, had set up a committee on federal judicial selection during the Reagan presidency. You had the opportunity to fill 368 out of the 761 federal judgeships, which was the highest percentage since the Administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

I want to talk to you about how you were involved in selecting judges, and then we'll talk specifically about the Supreme Court appointments that were made. What was the philosophy in terms of picking judges?

Edwin Meese III: The philosophy, again, was to find judges who would follow the concept of originalism or fidelity to the Constitution and who not only would do that, but who had proved it by their record: what speeches they had given on the subject, if they were judges or members of appellate courts, what they had done with their decisions, as well as looking at their overall career and interviews of prospective judges by Assistant Attorneys General. There was a very careful vetting of the legal philosophy of potential candidates for the judiciary.

John G. Malcolm: And that was new, I gather. That vetting process had not fully existed.

Edwin Meese III: That was accentuated at least by Bill Smith in the first four years and by me in the second four years. I brought in people to work on this as their sole job, people like Steve Markman, Grover Rees, and others, so that they would really emphasize the role of the Department of Justice in providing candidates for the President to select the people who then would actually go out and be these kinds of constitutional judges.

John G. Malcolm: So very early in the Reagan Administration, in 1981, there was a vacancy with the retirement of Potter Stewart, and the President appointed the first woman justice, Sandra Day O'Connor. Tell me about how that all came into being and what your involvement was in that.

Edwin Meese III: During the campaign, this matter had come up, and the President said that if he was able to find qualified candidates, he wanted to see if he could appoint a justice to the Supreme Court from among women lawyers and women judges. My predecessor, Bill Smith, headed that, as you point out, and came up with Sandra Day O'Connor, who had an interesting career. She had been a state legislator and also a state appellate judge in Arizona.

After careful vetting by Bill and his team, this was recommended to the President. I was part of the group in the White House that, after the

Department of Justice came up with their recommendations, would sit down with the Attorney General and the Deputy Attorney General and go over these candidates before they were presented to the President.

John G. Malcolm: Did you get an opportunity to meet with Justice O'Connor?

Edwin Meese III: I met her before she was inaugurated but after she had been selected.

John G. Malcolm: Sandra Day O'Connor, by the way, was confirmed 99 to nothing; you don't see that anymore.

Then there was quite a gap before there was another vacancy in 1986, when Chief Justice Warren Burger decided to retire, and the President elevated Associate Justice William Rehnquist and then nominated Antonin Scalia for the Associate Supreme Court Justice position. Tell us about that.

Edwin Meese III: Obviously, the President looked first to the Court itself since the Chief Justice position was vacant. Bill Rehnquist had distinguished himself as being truly faithful to the Constitution, so he was elevated to the chief's job by the President's nomination. Then there was a vacancy for his job, and there were two major contenders: Robert Bork and Antonin Scalia. It was a difficult choice because they were both excellent people. Both had the right judicial philosophy.

So the President decided on the basis of age and health and potential longevity in that he didn't know whether he'd ever get another appointment. For that reason, he appointed Nino Scalia to that job, keeping in mind that if another vacancy occurred, he would nominate Judge Bork. That's how it happened to be Scalia rather than Bork. As it turned out later on, in terms of the longevity of the two men, he was correct in anticipating who would live the longer.

John G. Malcolm: At that confirmation hearing, maybe it was expected, but Associate Justice Rehnquist ended up getting all of the fire from his opinions. He was ultimately confirmed 65 to 33. And again, in a sign of the times, Antonin Scalia was confirmed 98 to nothing.

But then a year later, the swing vote at the time, Lewis Powell, decided to retire, and the President took on a fight and nominated Judge Bork. Talk about that.

Edwin Meese III: What happened was, several things kind of came together. In 1986, the Democrats had won control of the Senate. They were thirsting to do something different in terms of almost everything, but particularly in the appointment of judges.

In addition to that, some left-wing groups that had formed had a very different judicial philosophy. They knew that liberals had a hard time getting

their agenda through legitimate legislation, and their idea was to try to get it through litigation, through the courts. So they were looking for Justices of the Supreme Court who would abandon fidelity to the Constitution and make up their decisions based upon their own policy ideas or political biases. They were able to raise a lot of money on the outside, even to the point of television ads and so on. That was why there was this massive left-wing counterforce against the President's nomination of Bob Bork.

John G. Malcolm: The President stuck with him.

Edwin Meese III: All the way to the end, and ultimately he was defeated by vote in the Senate. But the President had stuck with him, and Bob himself was, I think, very stalwart and willing to go the extra mile to try very valiantly to take the position on the Court.

John G. Malcolm: It was painful to watch those hearings, just as it was painful to watch the Clarence Thomas and Brett Kavanaugh hearings too.

Edwin Meese III: Right.

John G. Malcolm: As you pointed out, Bork ultimately was defeated 58 to 42, and then the President nominated fellow Californian Anthony Kennedy, who was confirmed 97 to nothing. How did that all come about?

Edwin Meese III: The President picked Doug Ginsburg, but for various reasons, he decided to withdraw, and the other one who had been under consideration was Anthony Kennedy. President Reagan knew him personally from the California days, so when the vacancy continued, the President nominated Tony Kennedy.

John G. Malcolm: One other thing that you did in terms of the Constitution, judicial philosophy, was that you were very involved in a federalism task force. Can you talk just a bit about that?

Edwin Meese III: I was at that time chairman of what was called the Domestic Policy Council, which were the members of the Cabinet who had various aspects of domestic policy, differentiated from the National Security Council, which I was also a member of but which had the national security responsibilities.

With the Domestic Policy Council, we were very much interested in, and the President was interested in, making sure that federalism was emphasized by all the government departments. So he created a federalism task force to review regulations and actions of the various departments to make sure that nothing was being done by the federal government to usurp power that rightfully belonged under the Constitution to the various states and local governments. This was a very important aspect of, from a different standpoint, looking at restoring the validity of the Constitution.

Iran–Contra

John G. Malcolm: One of the things you mentioned about the President’s support for freedom fighters ended up causing some trouble for him toward the end of his Administration, which is the Iran–Contra affair. At the time—and correct me if I get this wrong—Hezbollah had a handful of hostages in Lebanon, and there were negotiations going on behind the scenes with the Iranians as intermediaries, largely orchestrated by Admiral John Poindexter and Colonel Oliver North. There were arms sales to the Iranians, and the funds that were generated from those arms sales were then diverted to the Contras in Nicaragua.

When this came out, this was obviously quite a controversy. So if you could, talk a little bit about the Iran–Contra affair and your role in addressing that.

Edwin Meese III: Basically, you had two situations that were separate from each other. One was the effort to deal with Iran. At the time the President took over, we had had the hostages who were returned just as he was inaugurated, but from that point on, we had no diplomatic relationship with Iran.

So there was an effort to reestablish some sort of a relationship with what were called rational forces within the Iranian government and also to seek the help of the Iranians to get the hostages back from Hezbollah, as you say, as an intermediary. Part of the showing of good faith on the part of the Iranians was to help with the hostages, and as part of the good faith that the United States would show, we sold them small quantities of defensive weapons, anti-tank and anti-aircraft equipment, for them to use in their war with Iraq where we hoped that the two would essentially fight to a stalemate with nobody winning.

That was one very secret and also very complex and very volatile policy strategy. On the other hand, you had the freedom fighters in Nicaragua. Because of some people in the Congress who were opposed to the freedom fighters in Nicaragua, there was legislation passed that would prohibit the federal government departments from providing federal funds to the freedom fighters, but they did say that the White House could solicit other governments or individuals to voluntarily provide funds. This was being handled out of the National Security Council staff by the people you mentioned. When they asked Israel to help with the funding of the freedom fighters, one of the officials then in that government said that they didn’t have any money, but they were helpful in the transfer of weapons to the Iranians, or at least they were knowledgeable about this transfer.

They said, “Why don’t you overcharge the Iranians for these weapons and then divert those funds to the freedom fighters?” Of course, this was, first of all, not legitimate. It was, if not totally illegal, right on the borderline and really over the border because you can’t have federal funds being diverted or sent to other people even for a cause like supporting freedom fighters. Money that’s going outside or through the federal government has to go through appropriations and so on.

So it was a matter where there was an excess of zeal and a deficiency of judgment on the part of the people who did this. The effect was kind of like bringing gasoline and flames together, and there was a major explosion with investigations by Congress and a potential real threat to the presidency. Ronald Reagan, of course, as soon as he found out about it, immediately took steps to stop it.

President Reagan knew nothing about it until it was discovered. At the time, we were reviewing the testimony on the Iranian initiative that was going to be given to congressional investigations, and then we found out that these funds were being diverted. The President immediately took action to eliminate the people who were responsible in the NSC staff and to convene an inquiry to make sure that it never happened again and to take whatever steps were necessary to let the public know. The first thing he said when he found out about this was, “We’ve got to make a clean breast of this to Congress and to the public.”

On this particular day, in November of 1986, the day after he found this out, he brought in the Cabinet and briefed them on what had happened. Next, he had a meeting with the leaders of both houses in Congress and both parties and then, at noontime, had a press conference in which this was revealed to the entire public and the news media. The fact that he immediately took steps to correct the situation and then also made sure that there was no cover-up and no concealment of any aspect of it resulted in him surviving what was really one of the worst potential threats to his presidency.

John G. Malcolm: I know that you were very involved in terms of leading that investigation and getting the facts out quickly.

Edwin Meese III: It actually did not start out as an investigation. These two initiatives were not only complex, but also very secret, so different parts of the government knew different parts of it. My job was really to get the information from the different components who had something to do with each of them and then be able to accurately testify before Congress, and while looking at the facts, we came across the documents that detailed the fact that the diversion of funds was taking place. That’s what, fortunately,

was ahead of the news media or Congress in finding out what wrongdoing had taken place.

John G. Malcolm: Not an easy undertaking, and I know that you were very much the point person for a lot of that.

Obviously, President Reagan had a very special relationship with his wife, Nancy. I was wondering whether you could describe a little bit about your relationship with Nancy Reagan.

Edwin Meese III: I always had a good relationship with Nancy. I respected her. Her main purpose in life—properly so, in my opinion—was to be protective of her husband. That was her major goal. I certainly supported her with that idea.

The one thing I tried not to do was essentially become a familiar family servant. I always wanted to think of the President, the governor originally, as a friend who was my best client as a lawyer. I never wanted to be in a position where I would not tell him something that he needed to know because I was afraid he wouldn't like it. So there was a certain stance, vis-a-vis both Nancy and the President, so that I would always be respectful of them and would never do anything that would not enable us to have a good cordial relationship, but also an honest relationship, including saying things that they might not want to hear but which were necessary.

John G. Malcolm: That's a valuable commodity for a good lawyer to have. After they left the White House, did you stay in touch with the President and Mrs. Reagan?

Edwin Meese III: Oh yes, definitely. After they left the White House, I continued at that point as Vice Chairman of the Reagan Foundation, which built the library, and stayed in that position until the library was built and opened. Later on, when the ranch was sold to the Young Americas Foundation, I became the Co-Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Reagan Ranch Project, and I continue that to this day.

John G. Malcolm: Both the Reagan Library and the Reagan Ranch are special places. The Reagan Ranch is so not ostentatious; it's such an intimate setting. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Edwin Meese III: Nothing reveals the personality of the President more than the Reagan Ranch. That was where he recharged his intellectual batteries, where he enjoyed the relaxation and the peace of the great outdoors, all of these sorts of things. It was a very important part of his life, and it reveals a lot about him. The Library reveals the history of Ronald Reagan and the presidency, and the Reagan Ranch reveals the personality, basic thoughts, and background of the man.

After Reagan: Building the Conservative Legal Movement

John G. Malcolm: When you finished up as Attorney General, you could have gone to any law firm that you wanted, but you chose to remain involved in public policy through affiliations with The Heritage Foundation and Hoover Institution. Why did you decide to do that?

Edwin Meese III: Even before I had a chance to look for a job as the Reagan presidency was nearing the end, The Heritage Foundation came to me with a job offer of full-time employment about the same time that the Hoover Institution, which I had been working with since the governor days, as I played a major role in donating the President's documents and papers from his governor days to the Hoover Institution, came to me with a similar full-time job offer. I was able to parlay it into accepting both. I was interested in continuing public policy, and so we worked it out that I could be full-time for Heritage and part-time for Hoover.

So for 20 years, I commuted one week out of every month to go out to California to the Hoover Institution, and the rest of the time I worked at Heritage. It was good because the two organizations had different approaches to the same thing, which was the promotion of conservative philosophies and conservative public policies.

John G. Malcolm: Were you're tempted by private practice?

Edwin Meese III: I thought about it, but those two attractive job offers came at the same time. Ultimately, the way we worked that out, I really never thought an awful lot about it other than that.

John G. Malcolm: Along with being instrumental to the founding of the Pacific Legal Foundation, you were also very instrumental at the founding, or shortly thereafter in promoting, the Federalist Society and serving as a mentor to its founders. You've also served as an inspiration to many other groups involved in the conservative legal movement, which must give you a lot of satisfaction, watching the conservative legal movement grow. What are your thoughts about how the movement has gotten to where it is and where you think it ought to be going?

Edwin Meese III: There were two aspects of this. Number one, The Heritage Foundation, when it was formed in 1973, was not just formed as a research organization. It was also formed to support other conservative groups in any way possible, and one of the ways that they chose was to support the legal organizations that had grown up since the Pacific Legal Foundation began in 1973. Other groups, maybe about half a dozen, were formed in the late seventies and then even more from that point on.

So part of my work at The Heritage Foundation was to support and help organize and expand the work of the public interest law groups that had grown up since 1973, following the Pacific Legal Foundation. What we did was organize the Public Interest Legal Group for those that were headquartered in the Washington area and also to have meetings of all the groups around the country at various other times, a couple of times a year. That was a part of it. As a result, Heritage would help to foster and expand what we might call the conservative legal movement.

The other part of it was that I was very fortunate in having on my personal staff and had recruited all three of the founders of the Federalist Society: Dave McIntosh, Steve Calabrese, and Lee Lieberman Otis. They were all working with me, so it was natural for me to be a mentor to them, but certainly to encourage this organization, which was a fledgling organization begun in about 1982 and certainly during the latter part of the eighties expanded dramatically as one of the most successful organizations in the conservative movement.

John G. Malcolm: I remember, probably my first real introduction to Heritage, other than by reputation, was when I worked in the Bush Administration attending those Public Interest Legal Group meetings that you used to host and that now I host. So where do you think the conservative legal movement is going from here?

Edwin Meese III: There's an old saying that every political movement ultimately becomes a legal movement. That is because of the importance of litigation and things that are happening in legislation which have a legal aspect to them. Many of these issues will, in fact, wind up in court, and to have a strong conservative legal movement is critical to ultimately winning the battle on a number of these important issues.

John G. Malcolm: Recently, President Trump gave you the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Did you know President Trump? And what did receiving that award mean to you?

Edwin Meese III: I didn't. I had met him a couple of times at social events, usually after the inauguration of his appointees to the Supreme Court, but it was just a slight meeting on those occasions.

So I was totally surprised and obviously very honored when one day he called me on the phone and asked if I would accept the Presidential Medal of Freedom. I was obviously extremely pleased. It meant a lot to me because of the way in which he phrased it, that this was a recognition of the work that I had done with President Reagan and the work I had done in matters of law and jurisprudence and that sort of thing. I was extremely pleased and honored that he would make that decision.

John G. Malcolm: I was honored you invited me to that ceremony. It was really quite a memorable day.

Edwin Meese III: It really was, and it showed a side of the President that was really impressive: how empathetic he was toward me, and particularly toward my family, how interested he was in the family. He spent a lot of time with them, particularly with my seven-year-old great-grandson, who he seemed to be impressed by. President Trump spoke about him in his remarks.

John G. Malcolm: One final question for you. You've had a remarkable career, a remarkable life. How do you want to be remembered?

Edwin Meese III: That's a difficult question. I think I'd like to be remembered as a person who is very grateful to God for the family that I have and for all the opportunities I've been given.

John G. Malcolm: This has been a real pleasure and a real privilege. Thank you so much, Ed, for doing this.

Edwin Meese III: Thank you.