Ohio Public Policy Archives

Congressional Staff Oral History Project

Randy Rydell

April 14, 2025

Interviewed by Cory Ackerman

Transcribed by Teresa Bergen, History Associates, Inc.

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Abstract

This oral history interview with Randy Rydell explores his career in nuclear nonproliferation and his tenure working for Senator Glenn as a member of the professional staff on the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs.

Rydell recounts formative childhood experiences abroad that inspired his commitment to international policy, leading to advanced studies in international relations and political science. His expertise in nuclear security, particularly breeder reactors and plutonium policy, aligned with Senator Glenn's legislative priorities. Rydell discusses Glenn's leadership on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Act of 1978 and the Nuclear Proliferation Prevention Act of 1994, emphasizing Glenn's advocacy for strict export controls and global disarmament norms. The interview highlights Glenn's bipartisan approach, integrity, and respect for staff, as well as his ability to communicate complex issues with clarity and conviction. Rydell reflects on navigating the complex diplomatic and policy challenges involving Japan, China, and Pakistan, and the challenges of balancing national security with geopolitical interests.

Personal anecdotes illustrate Glenn's humanity, humor, and dedication to public service. Rydell also shares his transition to the United Nations and continued commitment to Glenn's legacy through support for the John Glenn College of Public Affairs. The interview offers a rich portrait of Glenn's impact on nuclear policy and the enduring value of principled public service.

Biography

Randy Rydell is a political scientist and expert in international security and nuclear nonproliferation. He served as senior professional staff on the U.S. Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs under Senator John Glenn from 1987 to 1998, where he helped draft the Nuclear Proliferation Prevention Act of 1994 and edited the committee's newsletter *Proliferation Watch*.

Rydell holds degrees from the University of Virginia, the London School of Economics, and Princeton University, where he earned his Ph.D. in political science. His early career included work at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory and a postdoctoral fellowship at Harvard's Kennedy School. After leaving the Senate, he held senior positions at the United Nations, contributing to global disarmament initiatives and advising leaders including Kofi Annan and Ban Ki-Moon. He received the "Unsung Heroes" award in 2009 from the Center for Non-Proliferation Studies at the Monterey Institute for International Studies. Rydell continues to advocate for nuclear disarmament and public service and serves as Executive Advisor to Mayors for Peace.

Editing Practices:

The first reference to a Member of Congress is underlined in the transcript. For more information about individuals who served in the House or Senate, please refer to the Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, http://bioguide.congress.gov.

In accord with oral history best practices, interviewees were allowed to review their transcripts and make additional notes, edits, or redactions to the transcript. Additional notes or clarifying comments are noted by [brackets]. Changes to facts and/or changes requiring additional explanation are in footnotes.

Transcripts were edited with the goal of preserving the spoken word and the conversational tone. That said, changes were made to improve the accessibility of the transcript. Excessive false starts and filler words were removed where they did not affect the meaning of the ideas expressed by the interviewee.

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CORY ACKERMAN: You know, it would help if my mic was hot. (RR laughs) Good afternoon.

RANDY RYDELL: I had the same trouble, so. (laughs)

ACKERMAN: My mic has a hardware mute button on it. And sometimes I turn that on just for extra security if I'm in a meeting. And then I join a meeting and I'm looking at my, you know, the software mute and it's off. Alright.

RYDELL: We can do it by hand puppets.

ACKERMAN: Smoke signals. Do you have water? Are you ready to get started?

RYDELL: Yeah. Yeah. I'm just cautioning. We have another phone in the house that occasionally will go off with spam calls. So there might be some minor interruptions of a grandfather clock. And I was actually going to take this outside, because it's a beautiful day here today. But then I thought of the noise that's out there, I thought maybe it would be better to do it in here. So, anyway, it will work out.

ACKERMAN: Appreciate it. Okay, let me read my intro and then we'll get into it. My name is Cory Ackerman. And I am an oral historian at History Associates, Inc. Today's date is April 14, 2025 and I am speaking with Randy Rydell. This oral history interview is in support of an oral history initiative to explore what it was like to work with Senator

John [Herschel, Jr.] Glenn from the perspective of his staffers. We are going to record today's interview via Zoom. First question, do I have your permission to record this interview?

RYDELL: Yes.

ACKERMAN: Second question. Can you please state and spell your name for the record?

RYDELL: Randy Rydell. R-A-N-D-Y Rydell, R-Y-D-E-L-L.

ACKERMAN: Perfect. So, to get started, did you have an interest in politics—I'm sorry. When and where were you born?

RYDELL: I was born in Missoula, Montana in September of 1952.

ACKERMAN: And what was your childhood like?

1:59

RYDELL: Oh. Wonderful. Born in '52. By 1956, in that time, we lived in a log cabin in a canyon outside of Missoula, Montana, part of which my father built by hand. He was a professor of accounting at University of Montana in Missoula, having graduated from Notre Dame University in accounting. And went out to teach at University of Montana. Also had his own private accounting firm. So we had, the first four years we were living in a log cabin in a canyon in Montana, which was a real delight. I was very young at the

time. I only have a few memories of that. But things changed quite a bit in my life. In 1956, our family packed up from Missoula, Montana in 1956 and moved to Rangoon, Burma, where my father was a financial advisor, accounting financial advisor for the Burmese government at the time. Working on a predecessor of what's now, used to be known as the Agency for International Development. He was a specialist in providing financial advice to developing countries.

3:27

One of his interesting projects in Burma was to advise the Burmese government on how to calculate the depreciation on an elephant. He was sent up into northern Burma where they used exclusively only elephants to remove teak logs from the forests there because the tractors there was no infrastructure for. So he had to figure out how to do a tax system for controlling elephants in northern Burma. You imagine doing this in the mid-1950s. Really amazing story.

In '58, we moved from Rangoon to Karachi, Pakistan, where I spent my first four years of school. And I guess this is germane to your interview here because it was those six years that really infected me with a conviction that I've got to work on international issues, on issues of global significance. It affected me the rest of my personal and professional life. I ended up majoring in international relations at University of Virginia. I went to the London School of Economics, got a master's degree in international relations there. Came back to the US again. Master's degree at Princeton and a PhD at Princeton in political science.

But my specialty was on the problem of international security involving nuclear weapons and nuclear weapon materials. And I was going to get into this later, but just before I'd gotten my doctorate, well, I might as well go ahead and explain this. I did my PhD on the study of the US and Britain, their experience in running down the rabbit hole of investing in breeder reactors. Which is a nuclear reactor that was known because of the high quantities of plutonium that it produced. Which at the time was believed to be a wonderful asset to be used for making new nuclear fuel. Plutonium, of course, was the metal that caused the devastation at Nagasaki in 1945. And the other counterpart to that is the highly enriched uranium that was used in Hiroshima in 1945.

5:52

And the reason I'm mentioning this is because these two metals, these two highly specialized metals, were a huge part of Senator Glenn's professional legacy in the Senate. He focused on strict export controls, on sanctions for violations, and on toughening standards for international use of these materials. He even went so far as to advocate the elimination of the use of these materials, both plutonium and highly-enriched uranium. And if you look over his legislative record, you look at the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Act of 1978 and the Nuclear Proliferation Prevention Act of 1995, which I was involved with, the common denominator there is a laser like focus on the conditions under which these two specialized materials are produced and used. And what he sought was controls that were basically so strict that he favored the ultimate elimination of these weapons, of these materials altogether.

So my dissertation in ’79 dealt with the politics of bureaucracies. How bureaucracies use and manipulate technical information for political ends. And I did as a case study this breeder reactor which was designed to produce more plutonium than it consumed. It was uneconomical, it was a dangerous proliferation threat. It was a terrorist threat. It was a boondoggle for contractors. It was a complete travesty, the fact that the two great countries, the US and Britain with their fine minds and great history would waste so many billions of dollars pursuing this horrible technology, which eventually they abandoned. But again, what interested me was the way that bureaucracies—I’m a political scientist, not a physicist—how bureaucracies use and manipulate technical information for political purposes.

8:10

You might be interested in the fact that in 1979, hotshot Randy Rydell, fresh out of Princeton with a PhD, applied for a job with Senator Glenn. I still have the letter of rejection from that application. I was quickly sobered by the realities of, the difficulties of working on the Hill. There’s budget constraints, there’s limited spots available. I still have the letter with his signature on it. And I’m actually quite proud of that. Because that was in ’79, I believe it was. And it was in 19—well, let me not jump the gun here. Continuing on this narrative, after I left Princeton, I went for a year at the Harvard School of, Kennedy School of Government for a post-doc. And then I went, starting in 1980 to ’86, I worked as a political analyst at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, where I did studies, mostly for the Department of Energy, on the subject of the spread of nuclear weapons. You know, who’s getting them, how are they getting them and the like. And in the course of doing my dissertation, I happened to interview a man named

Leonard Weiss, who later became staff director of Senator Glenn's committee on government affairs. And I liked Len Weiss. We got along really well. Saw the world in similar views. I had enormous respect for his background. He was a mathematician and totally unlike me, who's nonquantitative in the extreme. But we were able to talk to each other and shared similar worldviews and interests and goals.

And lo and behold, in 1986 the Senate had a major electoral shift. And the Republicans were kicked out and the Democrats had control now of the Senate. And as part of that process, Senator Glenn rose from being ranking member on the Governmental Affairs Committee to being the chairman. And when that happened, Len Weiss became staff director of that committee. And Len was no longer, he had previously done all of the senator's work on nuclear nonproliferation issues, and was a legend in that field.

10:53

So Len contacted me and asked me if I would be interested in moving from Livermore back east to work on nonproliferation issues for Senator Glenn on the Committee in Government Affairs. I should point out that the committee has one of the most, or had, I believe still does have, one of the widest-ranging mandates of any committee in the Senate if not Congress. Believe it or not, their jurisdiction extends to anything dealing to the efficiency and effectiveness of federal government operations. Across the board.

Alright. So, the real mandate is largely a function of the priorities of the chairman. And in this case, the chairman was Senator Glenn and he was interested in nuclear nonproliferation. He wanted to stop the spread of these weapons around the world and

was really, really worked up on it. And so, you know, we had a committee newsletter that I edited called *Proliferation Watch* that came out for I think four years, between 1990 and ’94. And that was a vehicle for Glenn to express his own policy views. But it also had a lot of facts. Substantive details broken down by country. It had some tutorials on certain aspects for people who were nontechnical, like me, to learn something about what plutonium is. How is it produced? Why is highly enriched uranium so sensitive? Why is it so dangerous? What’s the value of export controls? Don’t export controls just simply hurt us and prevent us from capitalizing on world markets? Under what circumstances should we punish other countries for violating their own obligations with respect to the spread of these weapons? And these are all issues, you know, thorny issues that we addressed in these newsletters and in countless statements by Senator Glenn.

12:53

I have here with me, this two-inch-thick volume is volume two of Glenn’s speeches on nonproliferation issues while he was in the Senate. I have another file the same thickness of volume one, which is everything from I think ’87 to ’75 and ’87 to ’98. So he was really a prolific spokesman for this issue and did a lot to establish its priority as a foreign and defense policy priority of the United States. And logically through cooperation with other countries as an international priority as well.

So I’m sorry I’m rambling here, but just in brief, that’s—if you can call that brief—that’s pretty much how I got into this work and how I became associated with Senator Glenn. And the rest is history.

ACKERMAN: Alright. So, I have so many questions based on what you said. You were not rambling at all, and it was all fascinating. So I'm going to drill down on some of it. So, you move to Karachi. And you say you wanted to work on international issues. But was there a spark? Was there a reason you got interested in policy and international policy in particular?

14:17

RYDELL: My first four years of school, grades one through four, were in Karachi. I went to the Karachi American School. I had to sing the national anthem in Urdu. I learned how to count to ten in Urdu. When you go to the movie theater in Karachi, you have to stand up and sing the national anthem in the theater. I remember so many things. I remember the food, I remember the wonderful friendly people there. The blazing hot weather. The occasional locust invasions we would have. I mean, it was an unbelievable place for a young kid to grow up in, I mean, in terms of being exposed to diversity. Now that diversity has become a bad word that is condemned, I learned at a very young age the great value of recognizing the cosmopolitan nature of our world community. And that really affected me. And I'm sure that it was a value that Senator Glenn held closely to himself. I mean, I wouldn't have worked for him if he didn't, if he didn't subscribe to that view of the common good of humanity. To tell you the truth, it often baffled me how, given the local pressures that are on politicians from states coming from the home companies from citizens that were unhappy, from labor unions, from environmentalists, from all these different directions on what are you doing for Ohio, what are you doing for state issues, here's a senator who was able to recognize how the pursuit of a global cause like this spread of nuclear weapons would benefit the citizens everywhere, including in

his own home state. He was not elected because of his leadership in stopping the spread of nuclear weapons; he was elected because of the things that he did for the state of Ohio. But I would argue that one of the greatest things he did for the state of Ohio was to protect its citizens from some of the world's worst weapons. And so for that reason, I was stunned by the, unlike many Washington politicians, they are so myopically focused on their own immediate, short-range, material interests of their state that they forget the interest of the country at large. And even more so, the interest of a global international community. And somehow, through the genius that he was, he was able to balance these and to come up with a coherent posture that was impressive to listen to, to listen to his statements, his press conferences, his impromptu comments to the media. And I just found that out. I was really, really impressed with his ability to do that. I was impressed with his ability to think on his feet during debates on the floor of the Senate. I'd be sitting down there on the floor and he'd go on and on about the minute details of US, of Pakistan interaction on illegal exports and missile tests and all these details. Just come right out like this. I can assure you, no senator was going to be willing to debate John Glenn on issues, anything related to space weapons or missile defense. It was amusing to see them occasionally try to do that and get wiped out as a result. He was a terrific—

18:18

I remember one time we were debating on issues relating to plutonium. Plutonium is the metal that blew up the, that was the content, the center core of the Nagasaki bomb. And you only need about 16 pounds—it's about the weight of a bowling ball—to make a plutonium bomb. But since plutonium is really dense, like lead, the actual size of a ball is like about a softball. So I took a softball, wrapped it up in aluminum foil, and had Glenn

hold it up in a Senate debate to show his fellow senators like the small quantity of material that we'd need to devastate an entire city. And it's those little gestures like that that help to take something very complex and make it intelligible to anyone with an open mind or an interest in public affairs.

Speaking of public affairs, I want to say one thing that I want to be sure to get across. Because it's one of the last things I remember about Senator Glenn. He had a meeting in his office. And after he had announced that he was not going to run for reelection in 1998, I had not left yet. I applied for and was accepted at a job in the secretariat of the United Nations. And I started that job in September. But I remember in his office him saying that in his retirement his goal was to try to rekindle public service among young people. Because he was furious at the way the Republicans at the time had been trashing the whole concept of public service, working in government. As we look around, what's going on today with this bloodletting going on, and emptying out of the bureaucracy, the ending of, for God's sake, the Institute of Peace, the Wilson Center for International Scholars, the Agency for International Development. All these programs that made America great, again, so to speak, being trashed and eliminated. It's just so—such a shame to see how farsighted, I mean, not a shame, but it's magnificent to see how farsighted he was in recognizing, even back then, the need to rekindle this whole idea of public service. And I think that that message is, if anything, more relevant now than ever. I only hope that there are young people who are not buying this ideological argument that government itself is bad and public service is something to be ashamed of. I'm glad there's a John Glenn College of Public Affairs to help counter that.

21:36

ACKERMAN: So, thinking back to the ’79 rejection, which you kept, why, what about Glenn attracted you to him in that first round of applications? Like why Glenn specifically?

RYDELL: Right. Glenn was elected in November of ’74. That was just a few months after the Indian nuclear test in May of ’74. And I think it had a profound effect on him. In November, in the summer of ’74, I was still in London as a graduate student. London School of Economics. And I remember exiting the Holborn subway underground station and looking at one of these London tabloid newspapers that have, you know, Elvis pictures and flying saucers and things, and seeing the headline “India explodes atomic bomb.” And I thought, right, yeah. And was Elvis there? But it was just such an outrageous idea.

22:47

And I think that with Glenn it really did have a stimulating effect of getting him to recognize that this is a real, real important issue. And it’s one that he wants to devote some time on. That was in ’74.

My dissertation on the breeder reactor focused largely on the hazards. First the economic lack of merit in that thing. The environmental dangers. But also the hazards associated with using large quantities of plutonium. And I specifically addressed the issue of nonproliferation, the idea of trying to stop the spread of these weapons. I learned that Glenn was a leading opponent of the breeder reactor in the US. And that led me to meet

Len Weiss and other people that were working on plutonium issues. And so that, I liked his focus on those particular issues. And that was a big part of why I decided to, I wanted to work for Glenn himself. I also thought, I, you know, somewhat pragmatically I recognized that Glenn had a lot of support on the Hill. He was recognized everywhere. He had, you know, in the field of rhetoric, which I did a lot of speechwriting, the ancient Greeks had three tricks for how to persuade people: pathos, ethos and logos. Pathos is fear and emotion. Ethos is character, charisma and the person. And logos is reason. And in all of the speeches I wrote for him, I tried to weave these three together in such a way that it had an impact. With Glenn, it was not much of a challenge. This guy had charisma and character that you could see. Walking down the aisles of the US Senate, people would recognize him immediately. The had enormous respect for his knowledge and his heroic commitment to his country, and the sacrifices that he made. I don't know how many hearings I was in where this kind of character issue was prominently on the table. But it wasn't just a charismatic appeal; his arguments were solid. He could debate anybody. And also, he, I think at his heart he recognized that the grave human calamity that would happen if any of these weapons were ever to be used again. He was deeply moved by the consequences of these weapons and what they did in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and wanted never, ever to see that happen again to any human being. Wherever they are. And you can't help but be moved by someone like that, and to be, you know, to sit back and think, be forever grateful of having the great pleasure of working for a man like that.

26:11

ACKERMAN: So, after Livermore, right—oh, actually, before I get into that, I did have one more question for you. Because you were talking about breeder reactors.

RYDELL: Yeah.

ACKERMAN: And I was curious if at any point you or Glenn engaged with the idea of using thorium nuclear power.

RYDELL: To some extent. I remember that we were being lobbied by certain industrial groups that were arguing that thorium is a less dangerous source of material. There is some argument for that. But a dubious one. Thorium reactors, like any other reactor, churn out a lot of neutrons. And neutrons are the fuel that sustains chain reactions. And if you take a thorium reactor and you cover it with natural uranium, you're running the risk that that natural uranium will gain neutrons and become plutonium. So that's one risk. There's also a form, oh, God, what is it? There's an isotope of thorium that can also be used as a fission weapon. And I have to verify that, since I'm not a physicist. But I think that was another concern. In addition, the cost sticker shock of this, of shifting gears to a thorium system would also be an economic problem as well as a potential proliferation and security problem as well. So I think as far as I can recall, that was the main reason why we did not robustly support that as an option.

27:54

ACKERMAN: Thank you. I used to coach debate at the college level. And we had a topic back in 2012 about alternative power. And there was a lot of research on thorium. And

the reason it comes to mind is because you talked about breeder reactors producing plutonium. And there was a lot of evidence of, I would say, dubious authenticity that basically argued that people pushed plutonium and uranium reactors because they could be weaponized. As opposed to thorium, which would be much more difficult to make a weapon out of. That's why I was curious about your thoughts on that. And Glenn's thoughts on that. But it sounds to me it was more just an industrial policy question. It would have been expensive and the claims may not have been born out.

RYDELL: Yes. I think that's putting it rather well. We, I remember hearing the same arguments with respect to fusion reactors. Oh my God. What a wonderful glory fusion would be if only we could get it to work on a largescale. The problem with that, of course, is the if clause. Which seems to be disappearing into the distant future as more of a dream than anything. And it would be wonderful to be able to produce unlimited electricity without having the problems of weapon proliferation. I'm just not convinced personally myself that either thorium or fusion will, in our lifetime or future generations, will offer any immediate prospect of that ever occurring.

29:35

ACKERMAN: So when did you formally join Glenn's staff?

RYDELL: I formally joined in, that would be January of 1987, 1987.

ACKERMAN: And in what role did you join?

RYDELL: I was a member of the professional staff, the senior professional staff of the Committee on Governmental Affairs. And I say that aside from my reasons for, professional reasons for wanting to work for Glenn, I also had some personal reasons that drew me back to the east coast. My mother was dying of cancer at the time. And she lived in Fairfax, Virginia. Actually, she passed away in '86, in the fall of '86. So to be back home my mother's last year, and also to be with my father having just lost his wife, that was another compelling reason for—oh, I also had a, fell in love with someone who worked at the State Department at the time. A woman named Beth Frisa, who is my wife now. She lived here, she worked for 44 years in the State Department. And we met while I was at Livermore. So for a combination of family reasons and professional reasons, it just was a no-brainer. I mean, it was a job that just was a perfect fit.

ACKERMAN: Actual State Department, or CIA?

31:19

RYDELL: Actual State. She was in the Bureau of Intelligence & Research, I&R. But was a professional civil servant. Not CIA.

ACKERMAN: For the record, the reference I'm making there is that frequently CIA people will say they work for State Department because nobody knows what the State Department does. (laughs) So.

RYDELL: Probably less so now.

ACKERMAN: Yeah. Alright. So what was your application process like the second time around? How did your interviews go? Did you meet with the senator? Things of that nature.

RYDELL: Let's see. Really good question. I'm not sure I remember my first meeting with the senator. I do remember basically being somewhat intimidated in these personal meetings with him because of what a giant he was in the field. He was a national hero. And I deeply admired his commitment to the issues. I admired his conduct while in office, his leadership, his stances on public policy issues. He was more conservative than I was on certain issues. But on other issues, he was surprisingly more liberal. Like on the death penalty, for example. Or a lot of other social issues like that, he was a lot more progressive than he was given credit for. Let's see.

ACKERMAN: Well just to start us off, were you recruited for the job or did you just apply again?

33:01

RYDELL: Actually, my recollection was is that I was approached by Len Weiss and asked if I would be interested in that position. And I could not imagine a more welcome phone call than that. But my recollection is that I was called and offered the position. Because Len, we had been in touch for years. And ever since my dissertation. And he knew where I stood on these issues, and he knew my background. And I don't think there was a long vetting process underway. I was able to come in pretty knowledgeable. I had full security clearances. Both nuclear weapon clearances and the top secret clearance. So

I had, I had credentials. I had some background and expertise working in Livermore. And I had a personal connection with Len that enabled him to testify to the senator that I would be a good person to have on his staff.

ACKERMAN: You say you don't remember your first meeting with the senator? Is it possible you would have met with the senator before you took the position? Or was it just Len's call?

RYDELL: I honestly think it was probably Len's call. Because the senator had great respect for Len's judgment. How he had been relying on Glenn ever since 1974 for advice on proliferation issues. And if Len goes in and speaks with the senator and says look, I've got this guy here from Livermore. I've known him for years. He's with us all the way on policy issues. I think he'd be the kind of person we need help on the committee. So I think that's how it happened.

ACKERMAN: Was there a particular initiative going on at the time that they needed the help with?

35:00

RYDELL: Um, there were a lot of things coming down the pipeline. And they were not easy. They were not easy. Not easy. There was a, when the United States cooperates with another country under the US Atomic Energy Act, there are certain standards that have to be satisfied in order for that cooperation to go on. And it's under Section 123, the Atomic Energy Act. And it has a list of criteria that must be met. And thanks to Senator

Glenn, largely, one of those criteria is that the state that receives our cooperation must have what's called full-scope IAEA safeguards, International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards. Full scope means covers all nuclear material in the country. And that was a standard that Glenn succeeded in getting inserted into the Nuclear Nonproliferation Policy Act of 1978 and has since been, now become a global norm. There's a great example of how, not just a country, but a person within the country, can take actions that can become a global norm. That Glenn may not deserve full credit for being the only person to do that, but he sure was a champion of it. And it became a global norm. So it's really an impressive achievement. Now I'm trying to come back to your question. You were asking—

ACKERMAN: If there was a particular initiative that they needed the back, you know, they needed your expertise on, that's why Glenn offered you the job.

36:47

RYDELL: Yeah. So in the early, shortly after I came onboard, we had a number of, I mean really tough legislative issues to grapple with. We had the US Nuclear Cooperation Agreement with Japan was valid for 30 years. And it was up for renewal. And under existing law and policy and practice which Senator Glenn championed, the rule was that we can cooperate with Japan provided that we have the ability to control Japan's subsequent uses of nuclear materials that we sell to Japan. If we sell uranium to Japan, Japan irradiates it, produces plutonium, then we will have a right and a say over how that plutonium is used. That's called prior consent. Well, our State Department, Ambassador Richard Kennedy in particular and his team there, decided to reinterpret US law so that

instead of having case by case approvals where you're evaluating circumstances based on the facts on the ground at the time you're making the decision, they decided well we're going to do what's called an advance consent. And we're going to give you a 30-year green light to work with plutonium and use it for certain designated purposes without having to come to us for individual approval. Glenn was adamant that that was not what the law said, and thought that that was an egregious watering down of our standards. So we had to go to battle with the Democratic presidency over this issue. Which was just a nasty political fight. We succeeded in getting something like 30 or 35 votes against, which is more than I think had been done before. But we really had no chance of winning that because of the industrial stakes involved. The Japan lobby, the State Department working full steam. We fought a good battle, but that one we didn't win.

Similarly, in the same timeframe, late '90s, the issue came up of what should be China's most favored nation trading status. And what Glenn argued was, again, based on a, one of my favorite speeches I wrote for him was a one-hour lecture on the evolution of US-China trade history. Starting with the clipper ships in New England. By the way, do you know what our first export to China was?

39:42

ACKERMAN: What was it?

RYDELL: Ginseng.

ACKERMAN: Huh.

RYDELL: We would sell them furs from the Northwest, we would sell them sandalwood from Hawaiian Islands. We would sell them sea slugs that we picked up in the Southern Pacific Islands, and bullion, gold and silver. And in return, they didn't want our industrial goods. We had crude cottons and things like that. And in return, we would get silk and gold and other things like that.[1] And then I went through the history of the open door policy and the policy of dollar diplomacy, there was another one. And I drew parallels between all these old postures that we had of a quasi-imperial nature versus China and their relevance today. So after going through all this history, he said look, we have a trading relationship with China that cannot be simply a blank check. There have to be some kind of controls and regulations and limits on this. And one of the minimum regulations is that China should not be helping other countries to build nuclear weapons. We should be willing to stipulate that as a condition for most favored nation trading status. All right? Sounds reasonable. Well, we lost that one, too.

41:18

I can go through list after list. We were the leading opponent of resuming military aid to Pakistan. Because we knew they had a clandestine nuclear weapon program. They were lying about it. And they were violating not only international laws, but our own export laws by stealing things from our own country. And we have dozens and dozens of statements and bills and things like that that we worked on to point this out. But the reality was is that the way foreign policy is constructed, it's a homogenization of conflicting priorities. Our government is not run only for nonproliferation purposes. It

[1] Sentence edited by interviewee.

also has geopolitical interests. It has trade interests. It has Cold War interests. We were trying to stop the Russians in Afghanistan. We needed to provide military aid to Pakistan. So what we found, to our dismay and hardship was that many of the goals that we were fighting for with respect to Pakistan and India and other countries like that were being eclipsed by, there's always something more important to pursue than this goal. Which we found astonishing to see. When you look at the importance of that goal, and you look at where we are now with two nuclear armed countries in an arms race right now in South Asia. Which I'm thoroughly convinced we [our country] are at least partly, if not mostly, responsible for. And so I, again, I've tracked now three disappointments: the China, Japan and Pakistan is three areas where we did not win. But we made good arguments. And I think that we come out looking good in the longer term in terms of how things resulted.

By the way, here's another interesting little tidbit. In the debate over the Japan nuclear agreement, we talked about environmental issues. And we mentioned the fact that you know, you've got to be concerned about Japan building a big plutonium reprocessing plant on the north coast of Japan. Because it sits right on the edge of the, the rim of, what do they call it, the rim of fire, I think they call that.

43:52

ACKERMAN: Ring of fire.

RYDELL: Ring of fire. That ring of fire. A subduction zone for tectonic plates that go underground and cause—and he warned specifically of the danger of a tsunami in that

part of eastern Japan. This was like years and years before Fukushima happened. So, you know, what can you say? You go on record. Make your statement. Try to persuade people. And if they are persuaded, then you win. If you don't, you take the battle to another day, and that's what we did.

ACKERMAN: So was it the winding down of the Cold War or what was going on in South Asia that was the reason Glenn was interested in bringing you in, would you say? Was it either one, or was it just general need to support the senator on this issue he cared about?

RYDELL: Honestly, I think the latter. It was one of his priorities. We had a lot of stuff going on in the mid-'80s. Just shortly before I came on. In 1985, there had been yet another flagrant, flagrant violation of US nuclear export controls where some entrepreneur in Philadelphia, I believe it was, was shipping contraband nuclear components back to Pakistan. Completely illegal. He got caught red-handed doing it. And basically, almost nothing happened. But it did lead to something that Senator [Larry Lee] Pressler, this gets me to another issue, which I think maybe we can address later, which is one of the nice things about working for Glenn is that we were able to work bipartisan. We had support from the most totally unlikely sources, including people like you know, archconservatives from the South, people that we had probably almost no common ground politically. But on this issue, we were able to work together. Jesse Helms, for example, was a constant supporter of us in what we were trying to do, even though we had no common ground whatsoever [on other issues].

46:14

But it shows you how far we've strayed from the whole notion of bipartisanship, common ground, cooperation, reciprocity. And I don't only mean inside the Senate, of cooperation across the aisle, but also between the different houses of the Congress, and even more so, between the branches. The level of comity and common ground has just dropped out entirely. And it's such a shame. And I think that we need more John Glenns in the Senate, that's for sure.

ACKERMAN: Alright. So, what was your day-to-day like in the Senate office, or on the Committee of Government Affairs? Let's focus it to when you first started. Because I'm sure your responsibilities changed as you were at the office.

47:07

RYDELL: Somebody once asked the British prime minister Harold McMillan in the early '60s, what was the greatest preoccupation of his work as he worked day to day. And his response to the reporter was, "Events, dear boy. Events." A lot of your day-to-day work is responding to fire alarms that come up. To export control violations that are unpredictable. To missile tests that go on. To press reports about some intelligence failure. The presence of plutonium in Bagdad. And it's just a constant flow of facts. Of news, of reports that come in. In our publication *Proliferation Watch,* we went through hundreds of these daily press stories about troubling developments going on in this field. And part of what we were trying to do is to give members of Congress a factual basis for forming their own views on what our country's policies should be and grappling with these challenges. But I would come in in the morning and spend a few hours just trying to

get informed of what happened the day before. And the hardest part is combining this passion for staying up to date with facts, the ability to do so without losing focus on the longer-term goals. There's an often-quoted apocryphal adage[2] that said, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result." And this is very much the case of the life of a Senate staffer. You fall into this routine of coming in and doing the same things over and over again. And then little by little, you start losing focus on what your aim is. And there's another great quote. Again, I think it's again about insanity, is, oh, no, I won't play the quote game here. But it's very much true that one of the constant struggles as a staffer is to try to keep up with the minutiae of day-to-day governance, and at the same time focus on the long-term interest of the country and the world community as a whole. And some people are able to do that better than others. Some people only focus on the longer-term issues and don't get their hands dirty. We're looking at the day-to-day facts. But you know, we had to do that. I mean, we were also overseeing government bureaucracy. We had to figure out what they're doing. And often, it was a greater challenge to figure out what they're doing than what other countries were doing. So, anyway, interesting business.

ACKERMAN: So, what was it like when you needed to get face time with the senator, to brief him on an issue or to discuss some goings-on with him?

50:55

RYDELL: The person on our staff who, in all humility, I have to say that had by far the greater access than I did was Len Weiss, my staff director. On the most sensitive

[2] Sentence edited by interviewee.

issues, on day-to-day face contact. By all means, he was the primary person on this. Even though I was doing all the substantive work in the daytime, he would be the one that would meet with the senator. And I think, justifiable. He had worked with Senator Glenn since the mid'-70s. And they had a rapport that really stood out. I would, however, be called in for certain special projects, like for example, over the five years -- I'm ashamed to say it took that long -- that I worked on a bill that ultimately became the Nuclear Proliferation Prevention Act of 1994. I think we started it sometime in, oh, I don't know, '89 or '90, something like that. And I had originally written this thing with the help of Senate legislative counsel, as an attempt to overhaul US sanctions legislation, so that the penalties we impose on other countries for spreading [nuclear weapons] were at the least similar to the sanctions that we have for other weapons of mass destruction, like chemical and biological weapons. We found, to our surprise, that many of the nuclear sanctions were weaker than for those other kinds of weapons.

As a matter of fact, one of my most interesting discoveries was—you'll love this one—since 1945, the goal of our country has steadfastly been to oppose the further proliferation of nuclear weapons. Right?

ACKERMAN: Mm hmm.

53:16

RYDELL: The notion, the concept "nuclear weapon" had never been defined in US law. So we're steadfastly opposed to stopping the spread of something that's undefined. So, what we did is we found out that of all places, lo and behold, the Lawrence

Livermore National Laboratory established [long ago] a definition of what should be a nuclear explosive device. And it said that if you get a nuclear yield out of this device that is greater than one pound of TNT, then you have a nuclear explosive device. Simple as that.

So we decided that since that had been the US policy since the early '60s, that we should make that part of the definition of what is a nuclear weapon, and use that as guidance to what should guide our nuclear nonproliferation policy. We need to stop something that is defined. You can't believe the hell that we had to go through—me in particular—at meetings with senior officials of the bureaucracy trying to say, "Oh, we don't need a definition! Everyone understands what a nuclear weapon is." But the trouble is, as nuclear weapons get smaller and smaller, these tactical nuclear weapons have yields that are far smaller than even the bomb—even, yeah—the bombs that were dropped in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And moreover, at the time there was also interest in the bureaucracy to cheat on a nuclear test ban by saying oh, well, what we're testing is not nuclear weapons. These are simply devices that make an explosion. And we wanted to have that absolutely crystal clear that if we're going to be in a test ban treaty, it has to be a test ban. And if we're going to stop the spread of nuclear weapons, it's to achieve that, and not play games over definitions.

55:23

And so we won. And we got that into the law. And that remains, as far as I know, in the law. So we did succeed in that respect. But it took four or five years to do that. It passed the Senate unanimously, by the way. No opposing vote. I believe three times. It got

involved in some really unpleasant bicameral politics with the House Foreign Affairs Committee. At one point, they wanted to take our bill and call it their bill, and enact it as part of a different piece of legislation. A trade act. That didn't work. So this went back and forth. There was a sunset clause that was put on our bill. Finally, it all came out right in the end, and we were ultimately able to prevail. I mean, in the time I was there, that was the number, without question, the number one legislative achievement that we got done was passing that act.

Now it's unfortunate, that was in '94. Four years later, India and Pakistan engaged in competitive nuclear tests. Congress folded. And did nothing. I think they passed some nonbinding resolution or something. And a similar thing was done by the [UN] security council saying oh, what wicked people they were doing those tests. You must not do that. So the, once again, there was another case of the priority of nonproliferation being pushed aside for other political, geopolitical interests. And I don't, in reflecting back on this, I'm not sure I would be surprised by that kind of outcome. Imposing the sanctions would be highly unlikely to have reversed anything that they would have done. But it still troubles me that, the departure from this being a prized national priority to being relegated to kind of a secondary interest that one can wave off, would not, certainly would not be something that Senator Glenn would have supported. And I regarded it as a great shame that that happened.

ACKERMAN: So in passing legislation, how would you say Glenn approached the actual politicking of dealing with his fellow senators? The horse trading, the compromise. How was he on those kinds of issue, from your perspective?

58:15

RYDELL: There were senators who were a lot more hardcore in terms of tough bargainers on legislation. At times I wished that Glenn had been a little bit more aggressive in pursuing some of his goals. But over time in looking upon his behavior, I understood that if he were to do that, he would have made it more difficult to build bipartisan support for what he was trying to do. So what he was trying to do was to exercise a little bit of diplomacy and tact by working with people of the other party in a nonthreatening way so that they could see that there was a mutual interest involved. And this, I think, served an enormously positive role in building support and cooperation across the aisle. But it may have weakened his overall posture in terms of creating the impression that he was somehow not aggressive enough in pursuing, he should have been tougher. He should have punished people for not supporting him. It just was not the kind of guy he was. And I certainly had no regrets over that strategy. And as a matter of fact, I think it ultimately helped us because of the fact that it was one of the golden ages of politics where we were able to work in a bipartisan way in the common national interest. I so regret those days.

ACKERMAN: You say that sometimes the senator wouldn't necessarily go—

1:00:13

RYDELL: I'm sorry. Correction. I so regret missing those days. (laughs)

ACKERMAN: What was it like when you and the senator disagreed about something? How would that go?

RYDELL: Well, (laughs) that's an embarrassing question. When I came onboard in 1987, I was greeted by an op-ed in the *Washington Post* signed by Glenn and Barry [Morris] Goldwater and Sam [Samuel Augustus] Nunn and a few others, arguing in support of the BIGEYE nerve bomb. It's a nerve agent bomb. And he was arguing passionately how it's important for the US to maintain chemical weapon deterrents. And I'm almost 100% sure that my own boss, Len Weiss, certainly probably could never have agreed with that. It was called the BIGEYE, as I remember. And I didn't go out and campaign against this. It was a fait accompli. I mean, the op-ed's out there. But what I can say is that over the years that I worked for Glenn, he became one of the great champions of the Chemical Weapon Convention. And led to its ratification by the US Congress. So he showed by that his ability to adjust his views and to learn. That it's better to pursue a zero option for these weapons rather than to try to manage their numbers or who has them. And I frankly think that I came to the same conclusion with respect to nuclear weapons. That I've gotten very, very skeptical about the ability simply to control exports and sanctions and use intelligence as a way of trying to limit the number of countries that have these weapons, or to limit their capabilities once they get them. That eventually it's the weapon itself that has to be delegitimized.

And really, I later worked for many years at the UN. And there's a two-culture phenomenon at the UN which is really funny to look at. You have both, two blocs of countries, the nuclearweapon states and the non-nuclear weapon states. And they both support disarmament, getting rid of nuclear weapons. But they differ on one preposition. One word. The nuclear powers are for progress *towards* nuclear disarmament. And the non-nuclear weapon states want to see progress *in* nuclear disarmament,with concrete steps of implementation. Reductions of stockpiles. Canceling of programs. So they both agree on the goal, and totally disagree on the way to get there. And it literally took me most of my professional career to make the gear shift from just trying to stop the spread of these weapons to trying to deal with their existential being, the fact that they exist at all. You can't have a group of countries saying that nuclear weapons are the ultimate guarantee of security on the one hand, and yet say, you can't get them.

1:04:07

ACKERMAN: They can see disparate treatment. Like how the United States treats North Korea, right, you know, nuclear powers versus non-nuclear powers.

RYDELL: But that system of reasoning just breaks down.

ACKERMAN: So the reason I asked is because I've interviewed some other staffers for this oral history project, and a few of them have asked, you know, what would you do to persuade the senator? And their response was, I would never presume to do that, you know, he was the senator. I would just give him information or speak to him. And that's something I've heard enough to know it was a common way of interacting with him.

How would you—would you disagree with him? Or was it one of those things where once he made up his mind—

1:04:44

RYDELL: I confess I was intimidated by him as well. Not because he was a mean person, but just he was a giant. And I was reluctant to take him on in a debate. So my approach was frankly through my writing. I would work stuff into his speeches that he made on the floor of the Senate. I would, as editor of *Proliferation Watch,* I'd have themes in there that would push him in the direction of raising questions about the very existence of nuclear weapons, rather than just their spread. And so I did it through, basically through my writings, mostly. There may have been some occasion where we would have internal debates. I would certainly be more inclined to take on a robust debate with my boss, my staff director, than to go in and berate the senator and question his own judgment on this. I would be, I'm ashamed to say, a good staffer probably would be willing to do that. But other staffers tried to be more prudent in their choice of method. And in my case it was through mostly I tried to be influential through my writings.

ACKERMAN: I want to follow up on that. But we're a little over an hour so I want to check to see if you want to take a break.

RYDELL: I'm fine. I'm fine.

ACKERMAN: You good? Alright, then let's just keep going.

1:06:19

RYDELL: By the way, this morning at ten o'clock, I had a two-and-a-half-hour meeting with a guy who's writing a biography of Hans Blix. I had done some work with Blix over my lifetime. And I was editor of his most recent book, *A Farewell to Wars.* And anyway, Blix suggested that this guy interview me. So for two-and-a-half hours, we went through the life and times of Hans Blix and all he did for Swedish diplomacy on Iraq and weapons of mass destruction and all this stuff. So now to be doing, shifting gears to working for Glenn, I just want to take a moment and say that I doubt very seriously—I mean this quite seriously—that you'll find someone who has been luckier to work with great people in their careers. Working for Glenn, the guy who hired me at the UN was Jayantha Dhanapala, who probably saved the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty in 1995. I worked for Hans Blix as a member of the Blix Commission Report in the early 2000s. And all these [UN] undersecretary generals. I wrote speeches for Kofi Annan and for Ban Ki-Moon. I wrote Ban Ki-Moon's nuclear disarmament proposal, which was really quite a task. Just people that have solid values and commitment. Above all, commitment to goals and people and tasks beyond themselves. That's where I've been most lucky. And Glenn was a terrific representative of that. Always had a great sense of humor. (laughs)

ACKERMAN: I'm curious about something. Were you writing for Kofi Annan in 2004, around? Do you remember?

1:08:41

RYDELL: Yeah. Kofi Annan spoke at the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty Review Conference in 2010 and I wrote that speech there. I probably, I didn't write all of his proliferation stuff. And often I'd be consulted and come in with just those parts of the

speech that would deal with proliferation stuff. But I'm sure I could go and find the speeches from '04 that I worked on.

ACKERMAN: Don't worry about it. He spoke at my high school graduation in '04, so I was curious if you may have worked on the speech that he delivered. (laughs) But it wasn't about proliferation, so I'm skeptical. (laughs)

RYDELL: One anecdote from Glenn that you've probably heard before, but I remember him telling this in his office. Two points. Really off topic, but nevertheless, it's very amusing. Testifies to who he was as a person.

ACKERMAN: Then we want it.

RYDELL: He said, he was commenting on what it's like to come back to Earth again after being in space and being in weightless conditions. And he said that the funniest thing for him is how heavy your face feels. Because when you're in space, all your involuntary muscles are just dormant. They're just flying loose. Your face is not conforming to gravity. When you come back down to Earth again, all these muscles suddenly have to start working again. So your face, he says your face feels heavy. And I've been listening to these comments of these two astronauts that just came back from several months in space. And they had very similar thoughts on that.

1:10:21

But the other funny story was in Friendship 7. Glenn maintained years after his flight—years after—that he had seen a UFO on that flight. And they went and looked over all the radar, checked everything. And they finally figured out what it was that he had seen. It was his own urine. He had just pumped the bilge on the capsule to empty the tank. And it flew out the window right by, as a chunk of ice, right by the window. So all he saw was a flash that went zipping by the window. But the fact that he would tell a story like that just speaks to his humanity. You know, it's a self-humbling comment like that. It just put him even a few notches up higher in terms of his character. His sense of humor and, I don't know, it's really, really quite a funny story.

ACKERMAN: I've heard a number of incredibly funny stories about Glenn from other staffers. Especially on international trips. That he could be definitely quite funny. (laughs) So, I'm hoping that Ohio State University appreciates these extremely, I mean, they are humanizing stories. Because like I said in our pre-interview, we have a very strong grasp of what Glenn was like as a senator, as an astronaut, as a war hero. But it's that human element that we want to capture, and what it was like to work with him and for him in the day-to-day.

RYDELL: I can give you some examples of that.

ACKERMAN: Oh, great. Please.

1:12:04

RYDELL: Christmastime. He'd invite his staff into his hideaway office, where he'd have some friends' children. He'd hand out candy canes. This was a marvelous office with a terrific view overlooking the mall. He would hand out little ceramic mugs that had the John Glenn name on it that were made by hand in Ohio. He would hand them out as presents for members of his staff. I still have some of those mugs left. At one time, he had a reception at this house in Potomac, Maryland. And you'd go into his house and he's got pictures of John Kennedy all around the house. All these famous people shaking his hand. And you go into his study, where he had a big easy chair and a library there. And he had a little stand, nightstand, next to the easy chair. And sitting on top of the stand was this stick for Friendship 7, the control stick. I'll never forget that. This is like aspects of this person that you never expect to see that are really potent reminders of what an interesting character he was.

ACKERMAN: Any others like that?

RYDELL: Oh, yeah. Another kind of heartwarming story. The members of the Senate and House have a great privilege of relying on assistance from an outfit called the Congressional Research Service, CRS. They're part of the Library of Congress. And they're nonpartisan. They are experts in very different fields. There was a senior analyst there named Warren Donnelly, Warren H. Donnelly, that knew Glenn very well over many, many years. And Donnelly provided all kinds of analytic reports and fact books and legislative analyses and things like that for Glenn. And also, Donnelly was a huge supporter of Glenn personally. He really liked him. So anyway, word got out that

Donnelly was going to be retiring. So Glenn found out about this and said, "Here, let's go over and say hello to Warren."

1:14:56

So I get in a car with him. And this was one of the rare times I had some close personal time with him. And he takes off, high speed, across Capitol Hill to the Congressional Research Service. Parks his car. And we go up to the fourth floor of the Congressional Research Service. And they have a little informal reception there. And everyone is shocked beyond belief that here's John Glenn walking in, because, oh, we never have senators come here to pay respects for staff. Imagine that. Paying respect for staff. Who'd have thought? Anyway, it was a really heartwarming tribute to Donnelly. And I can't imagine a better sendoff for him in terms of a show of professional respect of the highest order that the senator would take some time off from his day to go over and pay his tribute to his old friend and professional colleague, Warren Donnelly. And Donnelly, like many of the other old-timers there, has long ago passed away. But still, I'll remember that for a long time as yet another indicator of who John Glenn was as a human being.

ACKERMAN: Yeah. No, that tracks. I've heard, not that story, but similar stories of his humanity, his compassion for the people who worked for him, around him. So, professionally, well, actually, before I ask that question, let me ask this question. What was your career like? I believe if I have my numbers straight, you worked with the senator or for the senator for about eleven years?

RYDELL: Yes. It was 1989, I'm sorry, 1987 to '98. So it was—

ACKERMAN: So what was your career arc like in those 11 years?

1:17:10

RYDELL: Well, in those years, I basically stayed put. There was no vertical hierarchy at all in that committee. I had the top-level position as a senior professional staff member. I could have maybe become an assistant director or staff director or something like that. But that was really out of the question. I was just, you know, entirely content with the position I had. And I had certainly no desire at all to move to any other congressional office. And it was only when Glenn announced that he was leaving the Senate that I considered what it is I needed to do in the rest of my career. And I didn't want to work for Senator [Joseph I.] Lieberman at the time. He didn't seem to have the same kind of background or interest that Glenn had in this field. He also had his own people that I'm sure he would want to work with. So I knew the writing was on the wall. So that's why I left. It was hard on my family. My wife[-to-be] -- I had to inform her that I was suddenly going to be working at the UN in New York. This was not a happy occasion for us, as you can imagine. And it was hard for me, and for her. I went to New York on an 11-month, nonrenewable contract. So I had to find an apartment up there. And I go up there. And 11 months come up. Then there's a week or two hiatus where they negotiate another nonrenewable contract. And this goes on for a few years. And eventually I ended up working in the UN for 16 years, commuting back and forth from New York to Washington to be with my [future] wife. We finally got married when I retired from the UN in 2014. So, congratulations. You've just met the first man that got married in the year of his retirement.

ACKERMAN: Was there ever any thoughts of moving to the executive branch from the legislative? Well, I guess right around that time, [William Jefferson] Clinton is on his way out. And the election is happening, right?

1:19:47

RYDELL: I had spent about six months in the Pentagon on a detail assignment from Livermore while I was still there. And then after that was over, I spent about another six to eight months working in the intelligence office of the Department of Energy in the basement of the Forrestal building in Washington. And I worked on various different reports there. And I saw a combination of things. First, I saw a lot of confirmation of the bureaucratic politics that I studied when I was doing the politics of the breeder reactor program in the, the rivalries that go on between departments, the personal battles that take place. The competition for information, the exclusion from meetings, the petty bureaucratic behavior like that. And it really did not, I didn't find it very attractive. But I did think about it. At one time [before my Glenn years], I was interviewed for a position in the office of [Amb.] Richard Kennedy [at the State Department]. They interviewed me for a possible staff position there, which I didn't get. And in retrospect, I'm delighted that I didn't get it. But there were a lot of my colleagues, some in particular I can think of, whose raison d'etre was to rise up through the bureaucracy, and to get to higher and higher positions. And that was never my cup of tea. I was delighted to work where I was. And you can, you know, fault me for not having a higher ambition. But I don't think I've lost anything in my life because I didn't work on the National Security Council or some ambassador somewhere. I was lucky to do what I did.

ACKERMAN: So, when Glenn announced, well, speaking of the transition out after he announces his retirement, did he provide you any assistance in terms of finding your next position?

1:22:00

RYDELL: No. The chronology there was, again, I left in ’97. Ninety-eight, I’m sorry. And three years earlier, I had participated as a member of the congressional delegation attending the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons [(NPT)] Review and Extension Conference that took place in 1995 in New York, at the UN. And both in preparation for that conference and as a witness to the conference as it took place, I got to know a man named Jayantha Dhanapala, who was the Sri Lanka representative at the time. Dhanapala, D-H-A-N-A-P-A-L-A. And I just had enormous respect for him as a diplomat. He was, had supreme talents of being able to find common ground and to overcome differences, and to find ways of establishing something that could resemble a common interest. I ended up later, several years later, writing a book with him about those experiences that he had as president of that review conference. Because he basically saved the NPT as a treaty. And anyway, I wrote to him sometime in ’98 asking him whether he had any openings on his staff since I was going to be leaving the Glenn staff. And I sent him my resume. And he invited me up for an interview. Which was not so much an interview, it was a chat. A conversation about what, you know, what should we be doing in this field? Where are we falling short? And one thing led to another. And they came back at me with an offer for this 11-month contract. But no, it was not done by Senator Glenn. It was something that I initiated.

ACKERMAN: Was there a particular reason for, I mean, if you didn't know at the time he was retiring, was there a particular reason you wanted to move on?

1:24:32

RYDELL: Oh, no, I did know he was.

ACKERMAN: Oh, you did know. Okay.

RYDELL: That was the whole reason I was leaving.

ACKERMAN: That's what I thought. I thought I had my timelines right. So did he encourage you at all? Or was it just you found this opportunity, and then when it was available, you took it? Did you tell him you were leaving? Or did you just talk to your immediate supervisor?

RYDELL: I think more the latter. I don't actually remember talking to him. I think it was probably just me talking to Len, and then Len informing the senator of what was going on. I have to do this, just remind you, that the politics of a Senate staff are such that the people who work on the personal staff, who deal with home state issues, have a lot more face time with the senator. And they get to know them a lot more personally, and a lot more time. Committee staff are consulted as issues necessitate. Something's pending on the floor, something, there's a hearing coming up. Investigation underway and the like. But in terms of the day-to-day running of the office, it's the professional staff of the

committee does not have as much time at all with the senator. So I relied a lot on my staff director, who I know did have time with the senator because of their longstanding relationship. So, yeah, in retrospect, I do wish that I had an opportunity to thank him for the privilege of working with him. One of my treasures that I have on my wall here as a result of this was a copy of a facsimile of the Nuclear Proliferation Prevention Act. And it's framed and signed by John Glenn. And it says, "For Randy, thank you for your great work on this." And you know, it was just a nice gesture. It was a whole bunch of work, five years of work or so. And the fact that he would thank me was just, I'm just enormously grateful. I wish that I had, again, I don't recall having done this, but I wish that I had also thanked him for the privilege of working with him.

1:27:09

ACKERMAN: So I think that answers my next question, but I want to make sure. I take it that means you did not stay in touch with Glenn after you left his office?

RYDELL: That's correct. Yeah. And I really don't know why. I could have. But I guess I felt somewhat that, you know, in some small way, I think his own priorities had shifted a bit. I'm engaging in pure rampant speculation here. But I think the accumulation of some disappointments in this field, the lack of further progress, may have led to a certain degree of frustration on his part and a greater interest in focusing on his space pursuits. And the best evidence I have of this is his memoir. Where he skips over entirely all of these years of public service in the Senate and talks only about his adventures in space. And I really, not just because he neglected to focus on the work that he did in my field, but on all of the work that he did in the Senate. On improving the efficiency and

effectiveness of federal government operations across the board. All of the GAO investigations that he launched. He created the position of chief financial officer in all these different bureaucracies. He created the inspectors generals, who now have all been fired by the Trump administration. So he did all this work, this pioneering work. And had got very little credit for it. And when the time came to do his memoir, he focused only on space. So that was just a real disappointment. I wish he had—again, I don't think that a real fair and objective biography has yet been written on Glenn in terms of his entire career. It's focused always on space.

1:29:32

ACKERMAN: Okay. To actual—I'm not going to use a pun. So, I am curious if you ever, just on the human aspect, did you ever attend the softball games?

RYDELL: (laughs) I forgot to mention these.

ACKERMAN: Okay. Excellent. (laughs)

RYDELL: Absolutely. I have every single, the Right Staff t-shirt and hat that's ever been made. I never, I did everything I could never to miss a game. We played on the mall, we played on different fields all around the town. Glenn himself only participated in a few of these. But you should have seen his mitt. He had a glove that I think had three fingers on it and must have been from the '40s. It was a short, short-fingered glove with just like Mickey Mouse type hands. But he was decent, competent softball player. But you could imagine what spirit we had on that team. It's one of the rare moments where

the staff as a whole could come together and just have fun together and not just working the legislative process. I remember there was another, there was another lawyer, Steve Ryan, who was one of my legal colleagues. He decided that he was going to have an open bar in his office. So every like Friday afternoon, he arranged to open his office up for people to come by and have an after work drink. And he called this place The Launching Pad, in honor of Senator Glenn. But it was one of those things where it was a very, very rare social opportunity. Generally speaking, our work was pretty much in isolation. We worked on our own, whether it was, I remember one of my good colleagues on the committee was Bob Alvarez. And he worked very, very strictly on the phenomenon of the Department of Energy and its workers who were being denied due process. And the Energy Department was classifying their medical records so that their doctors didn't see what kind of ailments that they were getting from being on the job. He did all of that work on his own. And he had an ally in the then-Secretary of Energy, Hazel O'Leary, who was supportive of what he did. But just an example, I was kind of like off on my own doing the nuclear proliferation stuff. Bob was doing his stuff. Others were doing, oh, investigations into, you know, budget issues and a whole bunch of other things like that. But every once in a while, we'd have these common events like the softball games and the late afternoons and The Launching Pad, such as they were. But it was all just part of the office environment. It was a formula that worked.

ACKERMAN: I'm going to ask you a question. And you can not answer, if you prefer. But I am curious if there was any truth that when the Glenn staff would play the [Howard

Morton] Metzenbaum staff, if ringers were ever brought into the game. (RR laughs) I've heard tell that it happened. But I have never received any concrete testimony to that fact.

1:31:40

RYDELL: Well there's no truth to Derek Jeter was there.

ACKERMAN: Alright. (laughter)

RYDELL: No, I know there was a lot of rivalry there. And I know why. Because they were competitors. But it was friendly. Friendly rivalry. Because I know actually Glenn and Metzenbaum ran against each other, I think, in one race. Didn't they?

ACKERMAN: I think towards the very beginning.

RYDELL: Yeah.

ACKERMAN: Metzenbaum was appointed to the Senate when Glenn was thinking about running for it. It started an acrimony, though as I understand it ended a lot more collegially.

RYDELL: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Definitely. Definitely. And it's certainly better than when [Michael] DeWine came in. I remember DeWine ran a nasty campaign ad against Glenn where he was complaining about Glenn's run for the presidency. And this was in oh, '92, something like that. I don't remember the year, but when Glenn ran for the presidency he

ran up a big debt, apparently, in campaign expenses. And Metzenbaum[3] ran this ad that had the Ever Ready Bunny with a space helmet on. And the voiceover said, "There goes John Glenn. He keeps on owing and owing and owing."

1:35:13

And then there was another ad that ran against him. Which it had a one-liner that said, "There goes John Glenn. What on Earth has he done?" Another, I'm not sure whose great gift to the rhetorical world that was. But frankly I wish Glenn himself would have answered that question with a really good book about what he did do while he was in the Senate. Maybe that's a [project] some retired staffer's got to [take on].

ACKERMAN: I think there is someone working on it. Or at least they might be working on a book on their own career. I'm not sure if it's focused on Glenn. Okay, so we'll say no ringers at the softball game. I know that Glenn generally played in the Glenn-Metzenbaum game. You say there were other games he would show up for. Were there any other particular ones that stick out to you that he would make sure that he participated in?

RYDELL: Could you hold on, just for one moment, please?

ACKERMAN: Please.

[3] Interviewee corrected to Dewine.

RYDELL: I don't know how this will work or not. Here's our softball team [showing a photo]. There's Glenn.

ACKERMAN: Right.

RYDELL: There's me in the back in the yellow shirt there. And that's pretty much, they were right near the Lincoln Memorial. Obviously I can send you a better picture than this. This guy, this guy here, his name was Ted Hirsh. He was an office colleague of mine in his early twenties. He died of a brain tumor while probably still in his twenties. It's just really shocking. We've all gone four corners. I probably could identify no more than three or four of these people now. I recognize the faces. Oh, by the way, the building in the background there is the Lincoln Memorial. So that gives you an idea of where we were playing. But it wasn't common that he would show up, but it was noteworthy when he did.

ACKERMAN: Yeah. That's why I wanted to know if there was any other game in particular he would show up for. Or it just sounds like, other than the Metz game, he would just show up sometimes. Okay.

1:38:41

RYDELL: One question that, I'm aware that there's a House and Senate baseball game that takes place every year. And I don't know whether he ever participated in that or not. I just don't know. And I think it was baseball. It might have been softball. More likely, softball, I think, come to think of it. But you might remember, it was just a few

years ago when the Congressman [Steve] Scalise, you know, that rightwing Republican guy, was shot in one of these softball games. There was some crazy guy opened fire on the players. And oh, another interesting story about Glenn, again, my inauguration to Washington, welcome to see John Glenn. The *Washington Times* newspaper ran a front-page story about Glenn that featured his picture, big color picture on the front page, in the *Washington Times,* of the precise moment when a man ran out of the audience and slugged Glenn in the face. Punched him right like this on the cheek. And the astonishing thing about that picture was, it was like, it's like punching a tree stump. The guy, he has a huge neck. All muscle. And boom. And he hardly flinched. And they wrestled the guy down to the ground and herded him off somewhere. I don't know what, possibly, it was at the Air & Space Museum in New York. But that told me what Glenn was made of physically.

1:40:58

ACKERMAN: Did you have much interaction with Annie while you worked for the senator?

RYDELL: No, unfortunately not, other than at these various different Christmas parties and events there. And I am awestruck with her ability to conquer her stuttering affliction. It afflicted her a good part of her life. And it's such a heartwarming story that they lived together for so long together. God, I don't know how many years they were married. And that she conquered this and was constantly supportive of him. I did not have much engagement with her, no. I wish I had.

ACKERMAN: So, was Glenn involved in the negotiation of the agree framework with North Korea in the ‘90s? To your recollection?

RYDELL: No. That was pretty much handled exclusively by the executive branch, as one would expect. That’s the way these things are done. I am 100% certain that he was consulted and briefed on what was going on. And, you know, in the early ‘90s, the framework agreement was really not that bad an agreement. It’s one that Glenn would not have any trouble with. As I recall, it committed the North not to build an enrichment or a reprocessing plant. Which Glenn would have strongly supported. Because frankly he would not like to see either of those in South Korea, either. And now, of course, it’s open season. And so he may have had some reservations. Again, I’m a little bit hazy on this over the issue of whether the US should supply a light water reactor to North Korea as part of the bargain. That’s a tricky issue. And although it never happened, it still raised a number of thorny political issues. And I don't know ultimately how it was resolved other than the North recoiled and said that basically the US had not fully implemented the deal. And then basically the deal fell apart. After the Bush people came in. They didn’t have any stomach for maintaining it. Big disappointment altogether.

1:43:59

ACKERMAN: Well, given, yes, what we know now. Certainly. That actually raises an interesting question. How did Glenn think about civilian nuclear power?

RYDELL: He was entirely a pragmatist. I don't think he embraced the elimination of nuclear power. I think he saw that, he understood that there were certain benefits to

nuclear power. For example, in the climate area. It would not be contributing to heating up the global climate. There were issues relating to nuclear power that he felt strongly about in opposition. Namely, the production of plutonium and highly-enriched uranium. And he was also very much concerned about the pathetic way that the government had treated workers at nuclear facilities, especially nuclear weapon facilities around the country. But also, you know, civilian nuclear facilities. And he was also troubled by the lack of a national solution to the problem of radioactive waste from these facilities. These nuclear plants are cranking out irradiated nuclear fuel in the metric ton quantities each year and we still don't have a policy for disposing of that waste in a safe and economical way. And so as a result, what's happening is these spent fuel rods are simply being stored in site. And one of these days, someone's going to see that as an opportunity to cause trouble. Big trouble. Because it's an enticing target for some kind of horrific terrorist act. A couple of explosives here and there and you can wreak havoc. So, you know, that's a big concern. This is a ticking time bomb.

1:46:20

ACKERMAN: Did he see that particular concern? The concern of spent fuel being used, potentially making an attack worse? Was that something that was on his mind?

RYDELL: Yeah, he, I vaguely remember being, the Department of Energy was trying to open up a nuclear waste repository in the state of Nevada. And at the time, the majority leader in the Senate, oh, name is, can't recall the name, from Nevada.

ACKERMAN: Harry Reid?

RYDELL: Yeah, Reid. That's right. Harry Reid was not in favor of building that facility for environmental reasons, largely. Nevada had been the host of several hundred underground and aboveground atomic tests. And a large part of the state is already radioactive as a result of that. And he was reluctant to have his state become a dumping ground for the national repository for radioactive waste. And I think Glenn was probably sympathetic with that as well. But we didn't get involved. I remember he had some home state, Fernald, Ohio, for example, had some severe health and environmental issues that he was very much concerned about. But I don't recall him getting deeply involved into the issue of civilian radioactive waste or the regulatory side of nuclear power domestically.

ACKERMAN: Did the first Gulf War, Iraq 1, would you say that had any effect on the senator's thinking when it came to weapons of mass destruction or proliferation or any of his issue portfolio that you worked on him with?

1:48:32

RYDELL: Well, it's quite interesting that the committee newsletter, *Proliferation Watch,* issue number one was July 1990. And it was right in this environment of heated argument and debate over whether weapons of mass destruction were present in Iraq. That later served as, years later, as a basis for military, US military action in Iraq. There were clearly differences within the government over whether weapons of mass destruction existed or not in Iraq. And that's part of the reason why we decided to do the newsletter. To present evidence to the extent we could about what was being reported

about these weapons worldwide. And as you look through these issues, Iraq was a very prominent subject of commentary.

We were obviously limited in what kinds of information we could talk about. This is a totally unclassified publication based only on press reports of, you know, making allegations. But for certain, we were, we thought it was a subject worthy of attention of Congress, that they should be focusing a lot more on the generic problem of weapons of mass destruction. Because of their hardship of controlling them and the uncertainties concerning where they area and who's producing them. And many of those risks and uncertainties prevail today.

ACKERMAN: Alright. So We're nearing the end of our time. And I want to ask you kind of a very broad question, which is, to your mind, what is the quintessential Senator Glenn story? What is something everyone should know about him?

1:50:45

RYDELL: Hmm. [pause] Hmm. Pinpointing a particular example of that, because when I think of my years working with him, I see a, almost a kaleidoscope of scenes. Of moments in, it's like a patchwork where no one particular light is, captures the entire picture. And I would say just certain generic qualities that he had. His prodigious memory. His sense of humor. His kindness and his humility. And his respect for his staff. There were stories of senators who would yell at their staff and berate them and embarrass them in public. Never happened with Glenn. He didn't. He was not, he didn't do that. If for some reason he was disappointed with someone, you may eventually learn

about it, but in a way that would permit you to do better next time. But it was his kindness and gentleness with his staff and his legendary ability to build allies across the aisle and to work with people who didn't agree with him on many issues. But it's a, really an honorable quality to have. And, but again, I can't pinpoint any one particular occasion that epitomizes all of these different qualities. He's a hard guy to pin down in that respect.

ACKERMAN: Fair enough. Well, I want to thank you very much for your time and for the stories. They're fantastic. And I hope you have a really good week. This was great. It was very good speaking with you.

1:53:54

RYDELL: If for some reason I wake up at night and the lightbulb goes off and I suddenly remember some astonishing detail that I should have mentioned, I have your email address and I'd be glad to send you anything.

ACKERMAN: Please do, because we'll add it for the archive. Mr. Alvarez sent us written testimony, mostly because I think he has trouble speaking lately. Bob Alvarez. So, yeah. Anything you want to write, please send in.

RYDELL: Okay. Well, thank you very much. I really enjoyed this. I'm delighted that you're doing this. And I've been a supporter of the John Glenn College, I've been a donor for some time now. And I'm looking forward to continuing that support. I'm determined that what I'd like to do is to help the college rekindle what Glenn was trying

to do with public service. And I'd like to help, not just in helping the internships that, the Washington area internship program, but also to provide a full record of Glenn's statements and the publications that he had, I sent over a whole bunch of like 50 different hearings. A full set of *Proliferation Watch.* A legislative history, the Nonproliferation Policy Act, a full set of all of his speeches. And my goal there was to ensure that the students, when they go to Washington to do public service, are not just giving their service to their country, but they have some substantive foundation for the issues that Glenn really worked on and cared about. And if I could help even a small way in that respect, it's extremely gratifying. And it's something that I feel personally obligated to help address.

ACKERMAN: Well, thank you again. And this is all going on the record. So, the school's going to get it all for the transcript. Yeah, no, it was great talking with you as well. And have a very good rest of your day.

RYDELL: Thank you. Same to you. Bye bye.

ACKERMAN: Bye.

1:56:15

[End Interview.]