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Bernard Weisberger

Rosie the Riveter
World War II American Home Front Oral History Project

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Interviews conducted by
Sam Redman
in 2011

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Bernard Weisberger, 1942



Bernard Weisberger, Age 88

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Also available in The Bancroft Library supplementary to this interview is Bernard A. Weisberger's My War Memoir: 1942- 1946.

Interview #1 September 6, 2011

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01-00:00:04

Redman: My name is Sam Redman, and I'm sitting down over the phone today with Bernard Weisberger in Evanston, Illinois. Is that correct, Bernie?

01-00:00:15

Weisberger: That is correct.

01-00:00:15

Redman: All right, sounds great. Today is September 6, 2011. This is our first chat together. Bernie, would you be willing to state your full name and your date of birth?

01-00:00:27

Weisberger: Absolutely. My full name is Bernard A, for Allen—I almost never use it—Weisberger. I was born on August 15, 1922.

01-00:00:39

Redman: All right. Well, the first thing that I'd like to ask you to do is I'd like to begin this interview with a pretty basic request. Would you be willing to introduce yourself to me? If you were to introduce yourself to a stranger, how would you introduce yourself?

01-00:00:54

Weisberger: I'd say, to a stranger, "Hello, my name is Bernie Weisberger." I guess I'd start with that.

01-00:01:05

Redman: Tell me a little bit about your career later on in life and who you became as a person, I guess.

01-00:01:14

Weisberger: Sure. I'll make it short. I am a retired professor of United States history at the college and university level, although I'm not emeritus anywhere, because I actually left teaching before I officially retired from any institution. I grew up in New York City. I attended Stuyvesant High School, and then Columbia College. Went off to the big war, and returned to take a doctorate in US history at the University of Chicago. I wanted to see what the Midwest looked like.

01-00:01:55

Redman: That's a great place to start. It's good to sort of contextualize here that I'm speaking to someone who's not only lived through this, but thinks about these issues historically, as someone who has studied history. I'd like to begin, though, by stepping back and asking, would you describe your parents to me? What do you remember about your parents' personalities from when you were a child?

01-00:02:20

Weisberger:

All right. I'm a second-generation American, meaning that my grandparents, all four, were East European Jews. I have both a father and a stepfather. My mother and father married in 1920 and broke up, I think, around 1927. My mother, at the time, took the somewhat radical step of saying that she would not go home to live with her mama and papa and wait for another man to come along. She determined to go to work as a bookkeeper or secretary, office worker in New York, and to raise me by herself. The project of the raising me by herself didn't last all that long because, in a few years, she met and married my stepfather, who was, at the time, a Canadian immigrant, and actually born in Europe himself, in what was then Austria-Hungary. Also Jewish. I grew up with them. As for their influence, my mother was a very powerful woman. It took a certain amount of guts to be independent in the middle 1920s and say, "I'm going to be a single parent."

01-00:04:05

Redman:

I'd like to explore that, thinking about how your mom was a pretty independent person. For her to be working in the twenties, and as a single parent, that might not have been too common.

01-00:04:19

Weisberger:

It was both uncommon and almost impossible to do. Almost all employers at the time would say, "Oh, you have a child? Well, then, we really don't want you. We want somebody who can give full attention to the job." That was true even then. I learned early the art of telling white lies. She said at work that she was single. She generally kept a wall between her office life and her private life. But eventually, when I got old enough to be seen in public with her, I was told—she passed me off as her nephew.

01-00:05:01

Redman:

But you knew early on that this was so that she could continue working. Is that correct?

01-00:05:09

Weisberger:

Yes, I knew why. She told me. She explained it to me. Children tend to take the situation they're in as natural. I just felt, oh, yeah, I guess there must be a lot of kids whose mamas work. If it damaged my personality, I'm unaware of it. There may have been other things, but.

01-00:05:30

Redman:

So that didn't strike you growing up as unusual? Like you said, with a lot of kids, you just sort of went naturally with what you were told. Is that an accurate way to describe it?

01-00:05:44

Weisberger:

Yes. I'm just reading the biography this morning of Bel Kaufman, Sholem Aleichem's grandchild. When he was in Russia, as a child, he remembered stepping over the frozen bodies and corpses of pogrom victims and thinking, "Well, I guess all kids do this."

01-00:05:59

Redman:

Pretty striking imagery. We all sort of have the kind of unique perspectives of our upbringing. I'd like to then get into a little bit about school, your early schooling. What kind of a school did you attend as a young man? I'm curious about the other kids in the neighborhood. I believe I read in your memoirs that you grew up in Queens. If you could tell me about what the other students may have been like in terms of their race, religion, and language. Were they pretty similar to you in background or were they pretty different?

01-00:06:39

Weisberger:

Pretty similar. First of all, I have to explain that I had two kinds of schooling and upbringing. My mother's problem as a single mother was when I had long vacations from school, anything longer than a week or two. Babysitting wasn't as common then as it is now. So what she would do would be to send me off to my grandparents', her parents, who lived in Hudson, New York, which is a city 120 miles north of New York, on the east bank of the Hudson River. Hudson was a small town with about 10,000 people. I spent every summer and any lengthy vacation with my grandparents in a small town, where I enjoyed the security, and they enjoyed the security, of my wandering safely anywhere in town, because I couldn't get into much trouble without somebody who would see me.

01-00:07:47

Redman:

So it's one of those things where a quintessential small town, everybody knows who you are, and if you get in trouble, they'll go straight to your grandparents and report back. Is that the sort of idea?

01-00:07:56

Weisberger:

Exactly the case. Then during the school year, in fact, on two occasions, my mother became ill and I spent almost an entire school year—this was in the very early grades, second and fourth grades, I think—in Hudson. For the rest of the year, most of the time, I lived in—you can cut me off if I get too long-winded.

01-00:08:20

Redman:

Oh, no, that's fine. That must have been quite a contrast between the life in New York City versus life in Hudson, New York. Can you tell me, did that surprise you in any way growing up, or was that sort of another thing that sort of naturally came about?

01-00:08:38

Weisberger:

As I approached adolescence, I became more aware of it. As a seven or eight-year-old kid, you never do think about these things, but I realized, even then, certainly by the time I was going to high school—and I'll get back to that in a moment, what I had in New York was—first of all, New York wasn't quite as scary a city then as it is now. You had not only excellent schooling; the New York public schools were very, very good in the 1930s. I had the museums. The Museum of Science and Industry, and the aquarium. All the cultural and dynamic attractions of a big city for nine months of the year, and then the ease

of a small town for three. So I liked that. When I first began to become seriously aware of myself and schooling, when I was about ten or eleven, we lived—I did mention living in Queens. My mother and stepfather moved around a lot. It was during the Depression. Landlords desperate to fill their empty apartments would offer what they call concession, meaning a month or sometimes even two months of free rent, plus decoration, which meant painting, to get us so we'd sign the leases. You could find plenty of poor guys with a truck who, for a few bucks, would move you. So my mother and stepfather moved around to a number of locations. I lived at three separate addresses in Manhattan in my last two or three years of grade school and my first year of high school, then moved out to Queens. The schools that I attended were all on what is now the fashionable East Side of Manhattan. It was less fashionable. The kids, pretty much the same. Working-class and lower-middle-class neighborhood. My stepfather was a salesman for an electrical supply store, sold radios and refrigerators and stoves. Between them, they may have made, in good times, fifty bucks a week, which, at that time, was white-collar employment. The kids I knew were mostly working and low-level white-collar kids.

01-00:11:25

Redman:

Was there a way that you could tell, at that young age, maybe having some awareness of what life was like before the start of the Great Depression versus life after the start of Great Depression? I imagine you're becoming more and more aware about things like money and jobs and whether or not some other kids' moms or dads have jobs.

01-00:11:50

Weisberger:

Oh, absolutely. First, in terms of being aware of what it was like, since the crash came in 1929, when I was only seven, the depths of the Depression—the Depression didn't hit bottom until about 1931. At that point, I'm not even quite ten yet. So no, I didn't know. My family wasn't reduced from prosperity to poverty, or even semi-poverty. To pick up what you're saying, pick up on the thread, the Depression did become the overwhelming reality of almost everybody. Most of the kids I knew in school had parents who were either unemployed or part-time employed. Kids don't talk much about that.

Within the family, my mother was one of six. She and my stepfather were in and out of work. They never were both out together for any protracted period, and I was the only child, so I didn't suffer any real poverty. We always managed to have something on the table and a decent place to live. At least one aunt and one uncle, I think, were almost permanently scarred by the Depression, by the experience of long periods of unemployment, on relief. The other three siblings, one was married to a lawyer, smalltime lawyer. She was okay. Another uncle had made it in the movie business—the only tinge of prewar prosperity that I was aware of. All of these were on my mother's side. I had no contact with my father's family, although with my father. If you want me to, I'll get to that later.

01-00:14:01

Redman:

I did want to ask if maybe you could talk about—even on that side of the family would be just fine—if people had, in your family, particularly strong opinions about Franklin Roosevelt or Eleanor Roosevelt. I know a lot of people identified with the programs of the New Deal, with him personally, but I’m wondering if they had any particular thoughts on, say, the WPA or CCC or the other New Deal agencies that were rolling out around that time.

01-00:14:30

Weisberger:

Right. Let me get back to my maternal family for a moment, because they’re the ones that I knew best. The question that always came up in family discussions and discussions of small groups was, who has a job, who doesn’t. That was the overpowering reality of life. Who was really at home because they couldn’t find a job. Things like that. As far as politics goes, there were passionate political arguments. My mother, at that point, considered herself a Republican. She later changed her mind. The 1932 election, I’m only ten years old that summer, so I don’t remember much. But the 1936 election, I remember violent arguments between my mother and one aunt, who was not only a Democrat but a Socialist, and an uncle who was sort of Democratically-inclined. My mother said the New Deal was just the government was trying to—sounded remarkably contemporary—the government was trying to take everything over, would turn us all into automatons. My uncle, who was on relief several times, kept insisting that, without the New Deal, Lord knows what would happen to him. I don’t remember specific discussions of projects like the WPA, but my mother read the *New York Sun* and the *Herald Tribune*, both pretty Republican papers. The WPA was leaf raking and make-work and it was hard on business. She had the point of view of small business employers. I must say, the arguments always ended reasonably peacefully. The CCC, you mentioned. By the time I graduated high school in 1939, the CCC was still in business. I guess the war pretty much finished it. Actually, I had at least one fellow graduate who went to work in the CCC right after he graduated high school. That was a very real option.

01-00:16:55

Redman:

But you decided to go to Columbia College, now Columbia University—correct?—at the end of high school. We’ll maybe get back to that turning point in a moment, but if you’d like to finish up some thoughts on the Great Depression and New Deal and Roosevelts and your family’s reaction to that, that would be fine.

01-00:17:15

Weisberger:

No particular thing, except, at the age of 89, I am still an unrepentant New Dealer. So you can imagine what I think of contemporary politics.

01-00:17:24

Redman:

Right, right. I’m thinking, geez, between the elections of ’32 and ’36, if you’re between ten and fourteen years old, that is the large political issue of the day, as far as the domestic politics of the country. I’m curious to hear a little more on that, if you have anything else to say.

01-00:17:51

Weisberger:

No. I think it'll shade into the war. I think there was a general sense, despite the violent debates in the family and in the newspapers—I'm sorry about that noise. That's my hearing aid.

01-00:18:06

Redman:

Oh, no, that's fine.

01-00:18:12

Weisberger:

The country approved the New Deal. The 1936 election ratified it, with an enormous majority for FDR. The thing about the New Deal—and if you get me started on current politics, I'll go on for hours—there was a general sense that the government was what our votes chose to make it. Roosevelt was very good. In his famous fireside chats, he would only refer to you as "my friends." He would talk about what *your* government is doing for you. I think we all felt that it was our government, and that, in a sense, it was our obligation to take care of each other. I'm not romanticizing it. I just mean, we're all in the same pickle. We all need to help each other, and helping each other through paying taxes for Social Security and relief and whatnot was just part of the package. I think that's one of the things that made it a lot easier for those on the home front, and on the service, to pull together during the war. It wasn't merely a question of wartime propaganda. We're all in this damn thing.

01-00:19:28

Redman:

So you think the experience of the Depression and the New Deal did have some carryover in terms of, culturally, how people were sort of thinking about facing these major problems? There's a sense of unity there.

01-00:19:45

Weisberger:

I would say that. I would say that. Not that there wasn't always strong opposition, but I do believe that. But I don't believe we were the greatest generation. I don't believe that sort of—

01-00:19:54

Redman:

Yeah, that's a phrase that I would love to get back to and interrogate a little more with you a little bit later on. You're sort of anticipating where I'm going here, which is a good sign. I do want to ask about your decision to enroll at Columbia. Can you talk about that a little bit?

01-00:20:11

Weisberger:

Yes, I can. My initial interest in Columbia was sparked by the fact that on January 1, 1934—in the fall of 1933, Columbia, which had something like an eight and ten record—now I'm a kid reading the sports page. Columbia is invited to the Rose Bowl. At that time, it wasn't done by conference. The Rose Bowl looked around and picked a couple of teams. So they went out to Pasadena and beat a heavily-favored Stanford team seven to nothing on a rain-soaked field. I said, oh, boy, that's the kind of school—

01-00:20:55

Redman:

Little did you know, Columbia's athletics program was—

01-00:21:01

Weisberger:

By the time I was getting to be a junior and senior in high school, I was more aware of the college's reputation, and I also knew that doing the tuition was possible. I'll talk about that more, if you wish to, later. I knew I wasn't going to be able to go out of town and add dorm fees or living cost to tuition. The tuition, in fact, was, I still remember, \$400 a year. A hundred and ninety a semester, and a ten-dollar, what they call "activities fee." My parents could put up sort of half of that, and my part-time work in the summer and some part-time jobs I got through the National Youth Administration, another New Deal agency, I could provide the rest. So I never applied anywhere but Columbia. I thought of NYU in my adolescent way. It just wasn't as good. What I did not know was that City College of New York, to which tuition was free, had some very, very brilliant and gifted students and faculty members. I wasn't aware of that. So I blithely applied. My kids laugh at this. I blithely applied to Columbia and no place else.

01-00:22:35

Redman:

Tell me a little bit about your National Youth Administration job. That helped pay for tuition, and I understand that young men between sixteen and twenty-four were eligible to find work with the National Youth Administration. What type of work did you do?

01-00:22:54

Weisberger:

What I did was I was a research assistant to a member of the faculty of Columbia, Eugene Sheffer. Lovely man.

01-00:26:06

Redman:

Could you spell that last name for me? Eugene Sheffer?

01-00:23:09

Weisberger:

Yeah, I think it's S-H-E-F-F-E-R.

01-00:23:13

Redman:

What did he do? What was he researching?

01-00:23:16

Weisberger:

He taught French, and I can't remember exactly what assignments I had for him. Some were just picking up papers and distributing exam booklets and collecting them and bringing them back. I got into it because I was a good student in French. I don't remember being required to read any French documents. That part is a little vague. That was the only federal employment I had as a junior. It got me through my junior years. I'm not sure whether they paid money directly to the college for tuition or gave it to me to hand over to the bursar.

I did a series of a few part-time jobs as a college student, furnished by the Columbia employment office. One of them, I remember, involved—this is pre-computer age—going down to the office of Merrill Lynch. At that point, it was Merrill Lynch, Pierce, Fenner, and Beane on Wall Street. Every month, they would send out statements to their stockholders. The statements were all

made up by IBM machine. I think the addresses were made by addressograph. What we had to do, four or five of us would work straight through from Saturday afternoon until early Sunday morning, folding these things and putting them in envelopes and addressing and putting addressograph labels on the envelopes. I remember doing that, and I also remember getting a job as an usher at a celebrity tennis tournament for British war relief.

01-00:24:55

Redman: So some odd jobs to get through, right?

01-00:24:59

Weisberger: Yes, the jobs certainly helped.

01-00:25:05

Redman: I'd like to ask, in particular, just to pinpoint one of those, back to the NYA, can you just summarize for me how that may have helped you get through school? It provided some tuition money for you over the summers, in particular for your junior and senior year?

01-00:25:28

Weisberger: First of all, Professor Sheffer recruited me. I was one of his students, and I was good at languages. He called me in one day and said, "I've gotten a grant from the National Youth Administration to employ someone." He asked about my age. I don't remember if he asked my parents' income, but I think he asked me what they did. He asked a couple more questions to see if I was eligible, and I was. That was during the school year. I had two summer jobs in 1940 and '41. I haven't mentioned those.

01-00:26:09

Redman: That's fine. Tell me a little bit about your experience at Columbia as a student. What were some of your most significant recollections of that time? What do you remember from that time?

01-00:26:24

Weisberger: Oh, well, the fact is, I loved it. It's an urban school, as you know. It's in the middle of New York City. Once again, I didn't live on campus, so I didn't meet many of the students from other parts of the country after hours, but they were in my classes. This is the first time I had seen people who came from places like Montana and Arizona and California. It sounds silly nowadays, because we are so interconnected. Meeting people from other parts of the country, even in formal classroom settings, that was an eye-opener. That's number one. Number two, the curriculum for the first two years consisted of two core courses. I guess they're still taught at Columbia. One, essentially, a great books course, and the other a course in Western civilization, which in 1939, '40, was considered the only civilization worth studying. They have since changed that. I still remember my humanities one reading list. It started with Plato and Aristotle and went on to the early nineteenth century. The closing book was *Tom Jones*, by Henry Fielding. We read bits and pieces, and

sometimes whole books, of Aristotle, and selections of the Bible, Greek plays. It was—

01-00:28:06

Redman: So a very traditional Western civilization course.

01-00:28:10

Weisberger: Very traditional. In spite of its limitations, which I think have since been expanded, it was exciting. This was a whole new world. They didn't teach stuff like that in high school, and the high school that I went to was a damn good high school. We had wonderful teachers. Columbia University already existed, and the college was within it. I don't know when it became a university, when the college expanded into a university. The college was small to begin with. There were only about 400 people in each class, so a student body of 1,600, all male. What they did was the big-time professors, the big-shot professors, all were supposed to teach sections of these introductory courses, and the sections were limited to twenty-five people, twenty-five men, per section. Many of us—and it was luck of the draw—were assigned to junior faculty. Some were very good and some weren't. A lot of us took courses with the likes of Jacques Barzun, and Lionel Trilling, and a man named Gilbert Highet, a superb classicist. He was the teacher of my section. I sound like an ad for Columbia.

01-00:29:43

Redman: I was going to say that many of those thinkers went on to become the most prominent thinkers of the twentieth century, so that must have been a pretty amazing experience for you as a student.

01-00:29:56

Weisberger: It was. Those two courses, they were my education. The rest was all commentary.

01-00:30:07

Redman: So that was really foundational.

01-00:30:09

Weisberger: It really was. I had some good people. I've been an academic. You're an academic, I guess. We both know there are good and bad people. I didn't get Jacques Barzun in contemporary civilization, but when I went on with my studies, I wound up in one of his courses. At 104, he's still going strong, and he was a great teacher. Columbia was exciting. It really opened a new world for me.

01-00:30:41

Redman: Now, before Pearl Harbor, I understand that there remained some pretty strong divisions against America's potential entry into World War II, especially in certain regions of the heartland, or at least that is how we typically remember it. Can you describe for me what the political atmosphere of New York was in 1941, before the bombing of Pearl Harbor? Did you know anyone who would have considered themselves an isolationist, or were

most people you knew by the early 1940s in favor of supporting Great Britain through programs like Lend-Lease?

01-00:31:11

Weisberger:

I haven't discussed at all the role of fascism and what was going on in Europe in the thirties, but let me stick to Columbia in the period you're describing. First of all, the left was pretty active. I don't know if there were any chapters of the Communist Party on campus, but Communism wasn't regarded with the horror of the Cold War. It was sort of disrespectful. The Communists themselves contributed to this. You're asking about isolationism. In August 1939, just before Hitler invaded Poland he signed a non-aggression pact with Stalin. The Communists who had been very active in whipping up anti-fascist sentiment, and sentiment in favor of supporting the great democracies the Soviet Union, France and Great Britain, turned on a dime in the last week of August, 1939. Suddenly, Stalin and Hitler were buddies, and therefore the war became simply a war between capitalist powers, and no decent person would have anything to do with it. So they were strong isolationists, but on June 22, 1941, Sam, Hitler breaks the deal and invades Russia. Guess what?

01-00:32:41

Redman:

It becomes even more complicated.

01-00:32:43

Weisberger:

We have to get into the war, the Commies say. In other words, there was a left-wing isolationist element from 1939 to 1941. There were, I suppose what you'd call, right-wing isolationists. I don't want to mischaracterize them totally. There were honest pacifists who were against intervention, and then there were moderate leftists who were still thinking in terms of World War I as we had come to view it, which was that that war was a great mistake. Our intervention had only prolonged it, and we'd pulled Britain's chestnuts out of the fire, and we'd only gone into the war to save our loans and recoup our loans from the Allies. There were a number of people like us who were suspicious of what we saw as a rush to war, which could only benefit Great Britain and France. We weren't going to send our boys to the foreign wars again anymore. That was Roosevelt's promise in 1940. There was the far left isolationist sentiment, and the moderate left isolation sentiment, and then what you mentioned, the heartland anti-intervention sentiments, stemming from World War I.

As I think I said at the beginning of the memoir, Roosevelt was trying to stir us into the war. I don't think he was deliberately deceptive, although I suppose you could argue that often he was. But he stops always short of war. We started, as a result of World War I, with an embargo on sending war material to any country. It was supposed to prevent us from getting entangled in the war through our banking system. Then at the beginning of 1939, they met. Congress just barely managed to get that lifted. It became *cash and carry*. The Allied powers could buy weapons and material from us, but they had to pay for it immediately. The French were defeated by the summer of 1940, and

the British couldn't do that anymore, and they were going broke. So Roosevelt introduced what was then called a Lend-Lease Act, which was a question of actually "lending" them war equipment until the end of the war. Then Roosevelt, who had a gift for homely metaphor, used the garden hose metaphor. "If my neighbor's house is on fire, I don't make him buy a hose from me. I lend him my hose, and when the fire is out, he gives it back."

01-00:35:43

Redman:

What about as a student? How are you looking at these transitions between cash and carry and Lend-Lease and the debates on the right and the left? Personally, how did you sort of divide this at the time?

01-00:35:58

Weisberger:

Well, the truth is, I started as something of an isolationist myself. I had read books like Walter Millis' *A Road to War*, which sketched out our gradual involvement in World War I through propaganda. It made the Kaiser look like a great Prussian autocrat who was going to enslave the world and the brave democracies. One of my heroes was Robert La Follette of Wisconsin, who is still a hero because he was a great progressive in domestic matters. He bitterly resisted the war because he didn't like it. Also, because he came from Wisconsin, and Wisconsin and the Northwest had a very heavy German-American and Scandinavian-American population. So I started to think, "Yeah, we don't want to get into the war again." My dad was in that war, and it didn't do him much good. The situation changed dramatically in the summer of 1940 because Hitler drove the British off the continent, overran France, and seemed very likely to overrun Britain. I started to think, well, that's not a good thing.

01-00:37:28

Redman:

I've spoken to a lot of students who were enrolled at universities on the West Coast. In particular, I speak with a lot of Cal Berkeley alums out here. It seems that while everyone was aware of the likelihood of war, some students still managed to get lost in their studies and in various campus activities, and sort of isolate themselves within the campus community. It seems like you were maybe more reading the newspaper or listening to fireside chats. I'm wondering what it would be like to be a student in New York City with all of this activity going on, but then in a campus community. I know it's an urban campus, so it might have had a little bit of a different feel in that sense. Were the other students aware of the rapidly changing global-political environment as we've sort of laid it out, or did you find a lot of students were sort of lost in their studies or something else—or even having fun?

01-00:38:18

Weisberger:

I understand that. There were a large percentage of urban students who tended to study hard. There was a large percentage of all students who studied hard, but there was a small group of—we had frat boys, not party animals. Columbia wasn't a particularly great place for that, but there was a number of students, a few of whom I knew, but didn't know well enough to really have many opinions about them. They had names like John Sturtevant Stuyvesant

the Fourth, and grandpa had gone to Columbia and made it clear in his inheritance he expected his grandchildren to go to Columbia—grandsons. It's hard for me to answer that. There were political organizations on campus. There was a young people's Socialist association. Most organizations obviously were very much involved in politics. YPSL, Young People's Socialist League. There was a Communist front organization. We all knew it. They didn't make any bones about it. I don't know if there were any conservative organizations on campus, believe it or not. Things like the Young Conservatives of America hadn't been invented, probably because the conservatives were such a minority. I think all of us in class had to have some awareness of what was going on because you would come into class, Contemporary Civilization in the morning, or American History, and Germany would just have invaded Russia, or the Battle of Britain would be on, and the teachers couldn't resist talking about it. So the answer is, yeah, there were probably students there who just—

01-00:40:31

Redman: But it was hard to avoid the changing political atmosphere.

01-00:40:36

Weisberger: Right. You couldn't avoid it. That was the whole point. It was so overpowering, like the Depression itself. There were probably rich kids who never knew there was a depression going on.

01-00:40:47

Redman: But for the majority, it would have just surrounded you at all times.

01-00:40:51

Weisberger: We were aware of it. As I say in the memoir, I think the only thing is we were aware of it. If you'd taken soundings on campus, should we aid the Allies, with material support and diplomatic support, et cetera, you probably would have gotten a majority. Not an overwhelming majority, but a majority. If you said, should we get into the war, you would not have had a majority. That's why I took issue with Stephen Ambrose.

01-00:41:29

Redman: Now, in December 1941, there's, of course, a major turning point. I guess it was at the end of the semester here at Berkeley. Students were in finals. I imagine it would have been at the end of the semester, too, at Columbia. Do you remember the events of that day?

01-00:41:46

Weisberger: Oh, boy. I hope you have plenty of tape.

01-00:41:51

Redman: Go ahead.

01-00:41:54

Weisberger: Actually, I've described them pretty fully in the memoir, so you can go back to that. It was near the end of the semester. Christmas recess hadn't begun,

because we did go back to school the next day. Needless to say, nothing got done in any class. It was Sunday. I had moved to Queens by then, and I was about to go into New York for an afternoon concert at the New York Philharmonic. I said to my parents, "Let me turn on and hear the football score." The New York Giants were playing somebody. I got this, "We interrupt to bring you a special bulletin. The Japanese have attacked Pearl Harbor in Hawaii." So we all look at each other. What the hell? Hawaii? That's over here, on our side of the ocean. We gave each other this blank look, my mother and stepfather and I. Oh, it's a mistake they'll apologize for tomorrow. Because that was the thought. How could this happen?

01-00:43:09

Redman:

So your initial thought was that it must have been some sort of screw-up? That there's no way that the Japanese could have actually attacked?

01-00:43:16

Weisberger:

Yes. What was all this about? Anyway, I've got to make the concert. So I get on the subway, and it's really an odd sensation. I'm walking along the streets, seeing people and saying, "They don't know this and I do." It began to sink in on me. What if it's true? What's going on? Then I get into the concert hall. I cannot remember whether any announcement had been made beforehand. I actually checked that in the *[New York] Times*. I think after the first number the concert director or whatnot came out on the stage and said, "Ladies and gentleman, Pearl Harbor has been attacked by the Japanese." The draft had been on for a year, by the way, by the time of Pearl Harbor, so there were a lot of servicemen in the audience. At that point, they were allowed to wear civilian clothes off duty, so you couldn't always tell they were servicemen. He said, "If you are in service, please return to your unit immediately." Many guys got up and started hurrying for the exits. Then, I believe, the orchestra played *The Star Spangled Banner* and then went on with the concert. So it was a memorable day. By the time I got back home in late afternoon and evening, we had the radio on all evening. By then, it was clear that it had been an attack. Then, of course, the war started. By then, the Japanese had also attacked the Philippines. It was all on.

01-00:44:49

Redman:

By that evening, as you're sitting at home, listening to the news, was it clear at that point that it would have a pretty transformative effect of young men like you?

01-00:44:58

Weisberger:

Absolutely. I said, "I'm young, I'm healthy, there's a war, I'm going to be in it." We knew it. My mother looked at me with the dismay of a mother. My boy is going to be taken to go to war.

01-00:45:15

Redman:

Can you tell me the actual process of what happened to you then after Pearl Harbor?

01-00:45:26

Weisberger:

I do remember going back to school Monday, the eighth. As I said, all I remember about that day is, in all our classes, nobody could talk about anything else. The professors, too. Nobody knew what was going to happen or when, what, or where. All of us were all nineteen-, twenty-, twenty-one-year-old males. Unless you were, at that point, disabled, you knew you were going to be in it. I can't remember the rest of that week. Around the tenth or eleventh or twelfth, school did close down for what was then a fairly long winter recess, from the third week in December until the second week of January. Something of that sort. Then you came back and had a reading period, and then exams at the end of January. I can't remember my feelings or experiences on my vacation. What I do remember, and I also do mention it in the memoir, is getting back to the campus and being summoned to an all-college assembly, in which the dean addressed us. The thrust of the dean's message was, boys, we know you're all going to go to war, but keep your pants on. He was cute. He was an old-fashioned dean, and he looked like—I always remember he wore a gray two-piece suit with a vest, and a watch fob and a chain. He was white-haired. He was a very nice man, Dean Herbert Hawkes. I remember he was saying, "keep your nether garments in situ." I swear it really happened. What he was saying was, the government will have need of you and want you, but there are going to be special training programs set up, so don't rush off and enlist today. Stick around for a while and see what—

01-00:47:29

Redman:

See how it plays out.

01-00:47:31

Weisberger:

How the government could best use you. I don't think I thought anything of it. Later I thought, "Oh, that's elitist"; he was saying, "you're college kids. Don't be cannon fodder." I've cut him a little slack on that in my memory, but it was just taken for granted. Like I said, we were all draft-eligible anyway, so we knew when the draft got cranked up, one way or another, we'd go in. I cannot remember exactly when somebody said that there was a critical shortage of Japanese interpreters and translators in the country, partly because, of course, we'd put 110,000 Nisei in war relocation camps.

But at some point, that announcement was made. If you have a good track record of languages—we're going to beef up our elementary Japanese classes. Columbia was one of the few universities in the country that had an Asian studies program and offered courses in Chinese and Japanese art, language, history, et cetera, so it had a core of instructors. They said they would either institute or, I think, enlarge, the beginning Japanese courses. I thought, well, that sounds like it's for me, so I signed up for the class.

01-00:49:13

Redman:

It must have been a very interesting experience, starting to learn a language that's associated with a country that you're in the midst of a war with. Was

that an unusual feeling, or did you sort of, again, roll with this as, this is what I've been asked to do, and you just sort of go ahead and do it?

01-00:49:35

Weisberger: No, I found it very easy. What I'm doing, Sam, is going over some of the ground in the memoir, but this is what you want for the oral history, so—

01-00:49:47

Redman: Yeah, this is fine. I'll maybe pause there for just one moment. [pause tape] In the interim here, during the break, I was asking about the language class that you were taking in the spring semester of 1942. Is that correct?

01-00:50:09

Weisberger: Right. Correct.

01-00:50:10

Redman: Tell me about who the other students were in that class and what that experience was like, if you don't mind.

01-00:50:14

Weisberger: I don't mind at all. I think there were a couple of sections. In my section, there were no students that I knew—and again, my campus acquaintance was limited to those students with whom I shared classrooms, because, as I've said, I wasn't around after hours and didn't make friendships in the dorms. The majority of the students in my class were undergraduates, like me. I didn't know very much about their backgrounds. There were only two or three of them whose names I remember. There were some civilians who were also interested and looking to function as civilian translators. I remember one elderly gentleman whom I just called the Brit. He had a very British accent and he looked like one of the screen stock Britons. I think there was an older woman in the class. The British guy, I remember.

I wanted to step back just a minute and say that the experience itself was—you had asked me whether I found it a strange experience. Well, yes, first of all, the language is supposed to be so fantastically difficult that the Japanese trusted that Westerners couldn't learn it in a hurry. It is difficult, especially written Japanese, because, like written Chinese, words are ideographs or pictographs. You have to be able to learn each word as a separate picture. My introductory experience in the class was there is a Japanese phonetic alphabet, called the kana, K-A-N-A, which they used to inflect the verbs. If you want to say "America's army," you say "America"—that's a character—Beikoku, I guess. And then "no rikugun." The rikugun of America, and the no is not a pictograph. It's an alphabetical letter. I can't remember how many of them there are, but it was like learning the alphabet. So the very first assignment we got was to go home and memorize the kana. Boy, I felt so empowered doing that. My god, we can read—

01-00:53:10

Redman: Right, yeah, exactly. You could read a new language.

01-00:53:14

Weisberger:

But at the same time, reading the enemy's language. This is very interesting. I don't remember discussing this with anybody else, though I may have. If I go home and open my Japanese book on the subway and start doing my homework, hmm, is that the right thing to be doing? Am I blowing a big secret that we're studying Japanese? I said to myself, "What if I'm trailed by an enemy spy?"

01-00:53:46

Redman:

I'd like to ask another question about visual culture at the time, because historians have spent a lot of time studying the propaganda posters and things of that nature. The classic "Loose lips sink ships" type of—

01-00:54:03

Weisberger:

Certainly, yeah.

01-00:54:06

Redman:

Was that pretty noticeable, walking around the cities after the start of the war, those types of war bond advertisements, things of that nature?

01-00:54:15

Weisberger:

They hadn't gotten into full swing in the spring of '42. I remained in the US, or in the zone of the interior, they used to call it, until September of 1943. By then there were not yet so many posters. Just all the newspaper ads, there were cartoons. Now, where would those posters have been put? I'm trying to remember. Yeah, I know there was "Slap the Japs" and "Loose lips sink ships." "Rosie the Riveter."

01-00:54:54

Redman:

Then, in September '42, you end up in the Army. Can you tell me about how that came to pass?

01-00:55:01

Weisberger:

Sure. After we had completed our initial semester of Japanese, we were still civilians. But the various agencies and branches of intelligence in the military began to send people around to recruiters to earmark us, to recruit us. I always wondered why they had to do that, because sooner or later we'd be drafted anyway. But it was much easier to have us enlist directly into these special programs rather than try to keep track of us scattered through the services and re-assign us.

In May, a Commander Hindmarsh from the US Navy showed up. It was announced to us in class that he would be conducting interviews in a room in a hotel in Midtown, Manhattan for a Navy program. So we all went down and got interviewed. I cannot remember how much detail the commander gave about what we might be doing, but he said we'd be translating Japanese documents, and possibly interpreting in Japanese conversations. I don't know on what basis, but we went home, or went back to our classes, and then, after a while, envelopes started arriving to those whom he had picked, to report to Boulder, Colorado, where the school had been moved, I think from San

Francisco. The Navy language school. It was removed with the relocation of the West Coast Japanese. I didn't get one, and I was absolutely crushed. I have no idea why. I finally secured an official explanation that, well, I would graduate from the program in the spring of 1943, I guess, in June, and I wouldn't be twenty-one yet, and they couldn't commission me. I have never known what the real reason was.

Anyway, after we finished our initial semester, the American Council of Learned Societies granted summer fellowships to those students who hadn't already left for the military or civilians who were older. I entered an intensive language program. It was more Japanese, but this time, it was about eight hours of class and three or four hours of homework every night. It was very intensive. During that summer, we were visited first by somebody from the OSS, the predecessor of the CIA; I guess one of the recruiters for civilian jobs in Washington. Some people may have taken them. I didn't want to. I wanted to get into the war. Then we were visited by a Major Svensson. I hope I'm not being too detailed.

01-00:58:24

Redman:

No, that's fine. So someone from the Army finally comes and—

01-00:58:28

Weisberger:

Someone from the Army finally comes. Now, there were two Army programs. I didn't know that, and I don't remember ever being recruited by the second. One ran a camp somewhere up in Minnesota, at Fort Snelling, and that was the language interpretation program. That was where people were trained to interpret conversations and read Japanese documents, which would have meant learning a lot more characters. The other was Major Svensson's program. When I sat down with Major Svensson, I said, "What will I be doing?" He said, "Well, you'll be doing very important work for the government, translating Japanese." I said, "Yeah, well, what kind of work?" "Well, whatever the government finds important." I said, "Well, where will I be doing it?" "You'll be doing it in places where the government can use your skills best."

01-00:59:24

Redman:

Very vague.

01-00:59:26

Weisberger:

On we went fencing, and finally I said, "Oh, okay. I'll sign up." I did have a mistaken notion that I would actually be up near the front, reading captured documents and interrogating prisoners. I had no idea whatsoever, and many of us didn't, you can't do that with six months or a year of Japanese. The people who went to the interpreter school at Fort Snelling were mostly Nisei, born in the US to Japanese parents. For them, it was how to do a military briefing or a military interrogation, and they all spoke Japanese. They did most of the front work.

01-01:00:13

Redman:

Did you have any feelings at that time, or what was your awareness of the executive order to intern the Japanese and how that had played out, especially in a place like California? Is that something that you were aware of? I'm especially curious since you were taking Japanese language classes.

01-01:00:33

Weisberger:

We certainly did become aware of it. I said I wasn't a Communist, or even a Socialist, except intellectually. But I was a liberal lefty, as I've been all my life, and I didn't like the relocation then. I'm proud to say it. In the summer program, we had two Nisei—maybe even Sansei, third generation—but probably Nisei instructors. We would sit there in class with two very nice, flawlessly English-speaking Japanese professors, one of whom was a jolly soul who was just a wonderful teacher and a wonderful guy. I was already seeing Japanese as human beings, and Japanese Americans as American guys. So no, I did not like the order. Even then, I thought it was unnecessary, although, needless to say, there was no organized protest against it. I may have been very much in the minority.

01-01:01:36

Redman:

I'm wondering about if you could describe, sort of along the conversation about race, if we could talk about for a minute if you had experienced or any viewpoint at that time of segregation in the military. My guess is that that was apparent to a certain degree, but you also may have had some different experiences in language training programs.

01-01:02:01

Weisberger:

Number one, the language training program that I wound up in had no African Americans, and I'm not sure if there were ever any African Americans getting into it. Well, the North wasn't segregated, but social segregation was just plain and obvious. You knew the black unemployment rate was higher than the white unemployment rate. You knew they all lived up in Harlem, and there was a great deal of—oh, I don't know what to call it. In American Jewish families, many people employed what they call a girl, a black girl, as a domestic, including my mother for a brief period. Also referred to among Jews as the shvartz. Black woman. Moderately pejorative or at least a disdainful label. I couldn't help but be aware that blacks were treated differently. There were none in my unit because there were very few in college.

01-01:03:26

Redman:

I'm curious, then, when you ended up being sent to Washington, DC.

01-01:03:35

Weisberger:

I think Washington was still segregated. Did I notice it and did it make much of an impact? That's a good question. I went down to Washington to enlist on September 14, 1942. I remember the date. We went and enlisted, signed up, at a recruiting station at Twelfth and New York Avenues. I have a memory for detail. Then we got on a bus to go down to Petersburg, Virginia, where Camp

Lee was. This was a Greyhound bus that ran to Virginia. It may well have been a segregated bus, but there weren't any black guys in my group, so I don't remember it becoming an issue. It's odd. I really don't remember the public transport. I don't remember getting on a streetcar or a bus in Washington and sitting in a whites-only or color-only section. My memory is too vague on that.

01-01:04:36

Redman: That's fine. I'm wondering if you could maybe describe for me, generally, what Washington, DC was like as a soldier at that time.

01-01:04:44

Weisberger: Well, it was a good city. It was full of soldiers, of course. It's surrounded by military bases. We got into National Symphony Orchestra concerts for free. We may have even gotten into movies for free. There were loads and loads of freebies. The town was booming. It had suddenly become, as it had in World War I, a boomtown, with temporary buildings popping up everywhere, housing government agencies that were expanding threefold, fourfold, tenfold. The Pentagon was still in the final stages of construction and—

01-01:05:25

Redman: Do you remember hearing about that and knowing that that building was this major new structure?

01-01:05:33

Weisberger: Well, it couldn't be hidden, really. At one point in my training, I'm already in the Army, I think it was maybe January or February of 1942, '43, and somebody came in and said, "Who can drive a car here?" I had just barely learned. They needed somebody to run a courier service from headquarters in Arlington Hall, Virginia over to the Pentagon. I don't think I volunteered to drive. Some functions had already been transferred there. I know one of the things they did, that we did in training, was to see some Japanese movies, to which I'll get back to later if you ask me. So we did drive over there in trucks. Surrounded by mud. I think everything was finished but the interior work and the external landscaping, so the building up, but it was just a big sea of mud. Yeah, we were aware of it. I wish I could remember more about the segregation, but I can't. As I said, I have an experience later in the war that vividly reminded me of it. It was a good town for a soldier. It was full of young women, who'd come from all parts of the country to work in the offices, mostly in a secretarial capacity.

01-01:07:10

Redman: Certainly. Now, I understand that a lot of young women who came to work for the government at that time would have been living in apartments of four or more women to an apartment and taking turns going to work at various government agencies. Do you recall that phenomenon?

01-01:07:28

Weisberger:

I don't recall the phenomenon because I never dated any of them on whom I called in their living quarters. I'm sure it was true. It was crowded. We had numbers of them. Where I went after I was inducted into the Army was to Arlington Hall, Virginia, which was a girls' school just outside the city, in Arlington, which had been taken over for what was then the Signal Intelligence Service, now the National Security Agency. There were a number of temporary buildings. They looked like they were made of cardboard and spit.

01-01:08:12

Redman:

I was going to ask about that, because I understand that FDR fretted about those buildings, and he personally wanted them to be so ugly and flimsy that they would almost collapse at the end of the war. I think they stuck around until the sixties. Can you talk about those temporary structures?

01-01:08:30

Weisberger:

Well, there were some temporary ones from World War I.

01-01:08:34

Redman:

They were still there.

01-01:08:36

Weisberger:

The gap wasn't all that—it was 1918 to 1941. Twenty-two-odd years. It was a short span of time. I never heard that, but yes, many of them did hang around until, certainly, the Cold War. There's a story about that that I will probably tell.

01-01:09:02

Redman:

David Brinkley, in his book *Washington Goes to War*, notes that during the war that Washington, DC actually had a fairly active social life and nightlife. He argues that, because of the war, a lot of these elites could no longer travel, so they would spend their nights out in the city. Presumably, this is something that many soldiers weren't privileged to experience, but I'm wondering if, when you were off-duty, you saw any activities as far as nightlife or a pretty active society during the war years.

01-01:09:34

Weisberger:

Well, that's interesting because I had always felt that Washington had a very active society, but I thought because they all retired early to get up early in the morning, they all were entertained in each other's homes. The high-level parties. What I am aware of, though, was, yeah, there were bars and nightclubs galore for the soldiers coming in in the evening. I remember a couple of buddies and I used to go—I didn't drink beer then. I'm sighing over those missed opportunities. We used to go to a joint called The Merry Land. We'd usually get a bus into town from Arlington, and would go there every night and listen to music. I guess I drank soft drinks. I had just become twenty years old.

- 01-01:10:30
 Redman: Was there a pretty active jazz scene in DC at that time? Do you remember?
- 01-01:10:35
 Weisberger: I think there was. I think there was, but I wasn't into jazz. I still bear the earmarks of a very restricted social life in New York, when I almost never went out in the evenings. It was lively. The streets were always full, the streetcars were always full, the movie houses were always full. The town buzzed. It was a great place to be stationed. As I said, because of my own cultural preferences, I do remember going to National Symphony concerts for free, and of course all the galleries and all the museums were free to servicemen. Your uniform was a passport to get practically anything you wanted.
- 01-01:11:24
 Redman: I'd like to ask about the Smithsonian in particular during World War II, because that's something that I'm very interested in. Do you recall visiting any of the Smithsonian museums during the war?
- 01-01:11:35
 Weisberger: I wish I could help. I certainly must have visited the main museum. The old fortress on the Mall, the red brick—
- 01-01:11:45
 Redman: The old castle.
- 01-01:11:48
 Weisberger: The old Joseph Henry thing [Smithsonian Castle]. I don't know how many of the subsidiary ones. The Museum of American History did not exist yet. I know that.
- 01-01:11:56
 Redman: Right. Then there was the Natural History Museum.
- 01-01:11:59
 Weisberger: Right, and I did visit that. I recall visiting it. I do remember visiting the Army Medical Museum.
- 01-01:12:08
 Redman: Yes, and I wanted to know if you had any thoughts on that as well.
- 01-01:12:13
 Weisberger: Well, my thoughts on them—they were very interesting. It was like seeing museums in New York. You learn interesting things. I don't know what led me to the medical museum. It was full of grisly stuff. Have you been there? It's now up in Bethesda, I think.
- 01-01:12:32
 Redman: It's at a different location now. It was on the Mall until the 1960s.

01-01:12:37

Weisberger:

That's right. I remember seeing the shattered leg bone of General Sickles, who took a cannonball at the Battle of Gettysburg, and other interesting specimens of guts.

01-01:12:57

Redman:

Was that a pretty dramatic experience as a soldier to see something like that?

01-01:03:05

Weisberger:

It was reminding me of what war could look like upfront, or at least what it looked like when you extracted the innards of dead soldiers. That gets into another issue. By then, I knew that I had actually enlisted in a virtually bomb-proof job. Want to stop there?

01-01:13:30

Redman:

I'll get back to that in a moment, but that's really interesting. Let me just go back. One final question on the Smithsonian. I'm curious; I understand that soldiers were encouraged to use the Smithsonian and they were offered free postcards to send home. Did you see other soldiers going to the museums? It would have been a common sight, I assume, to see uniformed men in the museums at any given time, but I'd like you to correct that assumption if that's incorrect.

01-01:14:04

Weisberger:

No, it's not incorrect. It was common to see uniforms everywhere. Probably more soldiers went to the nightclubs than to the museums. You're dealing with a small segment of about a million guys. You get a pretty good attendance. There was a USO center, United Service Organization, recreation hall and whatnot, in town we would go to. You could make a free round-type disc recording of your voice and send it home to your folks. You could send free postcards. Your mail was free. Your mail was franked. You got that from day one. Your impression that you could see uniforms everywhere is spot-on.

01-01:14:55

Redman:

Despite the fact that most soldiers probably would have preferred to go to the nightclub as opposed to the museum, some people would have taken advantage of the cultural offerings of the city as well?

01-01:15:06

Weisberger:

Yes. For many of them, I would think it might have been a first-time thing. It's a bit of urban snobbery to think people out in the small towns "just don't got no culture." Lacked the opportunities. I'll have to read the Brinkley book, by the way. I never have, and you inspired me to do that.

01-01:15:27

Redman:

Yeah, it's an interesting account. One of the things that they mention in the literature are National Defense exhibits. I understand that they would, on these sort of green spaces around the city, that they would set up maybe a new model of a fighter plane or something like that that was maybe being

produced in southern California or who knows where else. Do you remember anything like that, National Defense exhibits?

01-01:15:51

Weisberger:

No, I don't, although, remember, the war went on for a good two years after I left, so a lot of stuff went on from fall of '43 to the fall of '45. Exactly two years. I left in September in 1943, and I left China in December 1945, three months after V-J Day. I can't verify that. I do remember the impact of the war in a funny way. The shortages were just beginning. There was a little town called Buckingham, right outside of Arlington Hall, which we were free to go in the evenings. You had to get a pass, but that was usually a formality. I remember taking uniforms in there to be pressed and cleaned. We didn't have an on-post laundry yet. You had to bring in your own wire hangers. Maybe you got the first one, but thereafter when you went to pick up your shirts, no wire hangers. They were running short of that.

01-01:17:04

Redman:

That's a nice, subtle little remembrance. I like that. That's interesting. I want to gauge your reaction to this, because I suspect there won't be many folks that I'll be able to interview who are living in D.C. during the war. I'd like to ask, during World War Two, war agency officials in Washington, D.C. frequently visited the Smithsonian. What they were hoping to learn about was everything from poisonous snakes to indigenous societies, and sort of cataloging as much information as they could. Were you aware of this, or does this come as a surprise?

01-01:17:39

Weisberger:

It comes as a surprise. I didn't know that. Well, there was the scientific government agency since the middle of the nineteenth century. You know that if—

01-01:17:52

Redman:

Certainly, certainly. But—

01-01:17:55

Weisberger:

Real intellectual center.

01-01:17:57

Redman:

Given the Smithsonian's position in the city, you may not have been aware that it was actively involved in the war effort, but on the other hand, it seemed like every branch of every part of the government had some way of being involved. I'm just wondering if you could parse that out for me. When you went to the symphony or the National Zoo, are you thinking at all about how this may be connected to the war effort? It touches every aspect of your life.

01-01:18:34

Weisberger:

It does. At first I didn't think of it in that way. But it soon became clear that the war touched every aspect of your life in that, first of all, everybody in your peer group, the country over, was going into the Army. You knew that. You would run into grade school buddies who you hadn't seen in ten years. You

were aware of millions of servicemen who were corresponding with their families, which gave more millions a direct stake in the war. What else?

01-01:19:18

Redman:

Last question on Washington. Were you ever instructed in any particular way, or do you think it was the standard sort of Army instruction that you were given about venereal disease in particular? I understand that venereal disease and murder rates were the two big problems in Washington, DC, and I'm wondering if, soldiers stationed there, were they given any particularly harsh instructions on that? Especially with all the nightclubs in the area.

01-01:19:51

Weisberger:

They certainly were, and I'm sure there was a lot of it. In the peacetime Army—I have to organize my thoughts. At the end of every month, before you got paid, you had to undergo what was called short-arm inspection. I don't know why that was the name for a penis. You would line up in front of—usually a camp doctor didn't do it. An assistant did it. I'll be graphic.

01-01:20:21

Redman:

No, that's fine.

01-02:20:27

Weisberger:

If you had foreskin, the doctor pulled back your foreskin. If you were circumcised, you pulled back whatever was left. Squeezed it between your fingers and ran your fingers down back to the head of it to see if it had any gonorrheal discharge. It was known as milking it down from the bush. It's the Army. We were also shown movies, in which it was explained to us that if we did have intercourse with a strange woman, much less a prostitute—

01-01:21:04

Redman:

[Tape break] All right, we left off with the short-arm inspections at the end of that. You were talking about the various steps that the Army would take to keep you healthy, so to speak.

01-01:21:22

Weisberger:

The Army was especially eager to keep you from getting venereal disease, which was a problem in the peacetime forces and actually punished. Old-timers made a joke of it. We newcomers, after a year or so, were almost all awarded a "good conduct" medal. I ran into a peacetime Army guy once and asked him, "What was the Good Conduct medal for?" He said, "That's for a year of not getting VD." That might not have been true, but I'm not sure.

01-01:21:59

Redman:

That's a funny way to phrase it, though. I'd like to hear a little bit about the Japanese movies that the soldiers would be brought to in your unit to screen at the Pentagon. Can you tell me a little bit about what that experience was like?

01-01:22:15

Weisberger:

Sure. We went down to Camp Lee, Virginia—now it's called Fort Lee, I think—and were inducted to the usual Army process of lots of shots, getting

your uniforms, this, that, and the other. Then we were recalled to Washington within ten days. Back in Washington, we found out within a few days, obviously, that what we were doing was top-secret work, translating Japanese radio intercepts, and that therefore we would not be doing verbal interpretation. Also, tangentially, we would not have to learn many new characters, because in order to send radio messages, the Japanese had to translate the sounds into the Roman alphabet and then send it that way. That's a subject for more exploration later. People say to me, "Gee, did you speak and read Japanese?" I say, "After a fashion." They did give us great training. My class was a very small class. Fifteen to twenty of us. We had our instructors, who were top line instructors. Edward O. Reischauer. There was a little oral drill, I think mostly to keep themselves from being bored, and also just to give us a flavor.

It was in connection with that that we were taken to see these movies. They were Japanese propaganda movies. I don't think our teachers intended them to have any effect on our personal lives. I think they were intended, possibly, I guess, to give us familiarity with spoken Japanese. In fact, the familiarity was such that I think a number of my fellow students went on to become scholars of Asian language and history and politics after the war. The effect they had on me was rather curious. As I said, they were mostly propaganda films, but they weren't entirely about fighting. They were about life in the Japanese Army, and life at home. I presume they were selected by our professors. They had the effect on me of humanizing the Japanese, on several of us. All our wartime cartoons and posters showed these little yellow monsters with fangs for teeth. Crude, raw, savage stuff. Then we saw these movies. Well, geez, they had wives and children. When they got drafted, they were lonesome for home. One of my classmates—I do mention this in the written memoir, got sentimental about it, and asked virtually with tears in his eyes on the bus going home, "You read that story. How do you make war on a people like that?" Somebody said, "We're only making war on their goddamn Army!"

We were also informed that what we were doing was absolutely one of the big secrets of the war, because if the Japanese knew we were reading their codes, and especially their diplomatic code, which we had broken a year before, they would switch it, and then you lose all that wonderful, immediate access to the Japanese headquarters. So secrecy was beaten into us. What has that got to do with what I was talking about?

01-01:26:22

Redman:

On these trips there, you were loaded up from the barracks and you'd take a truck down to the Pentagon. Was this for the classes as well?

01-02:26:32

Weisberger:

No. The classes met in small rooms in Arlington Hall, in the old school building. The central building of Arlington Hall was a large, brick building, I think in neo-classical style, with a lot of small rooms that had been classrooms and offices. I don't know whether that included dormitories, too, because,

come to think of it, I never—it was a very small school, this Arlington girls' school, and maybe everything was in that one main building. I don't remember seeing any other permanent buildings. I don't know where the young ladies were housed. Anyway, our instruction was in classrooms that hadn't yet been converted to offices. As I say, the drill usually consisted of some oral drill, some talk about the Japanese, some memorization, some learning of Japanese Army ranks and badges and uniform recognition. Then reading very, very old translated messages, translating them aloud, or messages that the teachers made up.

01-01:28:02

Redman:

So some of it, you were maybe given some glimpses of how this process would actually work out of intercepting a message, and then going through the steps of actually translating them?

01-01:28:15

Weisberger:

Right, after they were decoded. I still don't know how they decoded messages. But when they decoded them, yes, we learned to translate them. I meant to say, I realized—it was when I was getting back to the extreme secrecy—we were told flat-out that we weren't going to be sent anywhere. We might be captured. This meant I was going to be a rear echelon soldier for the whole war, and I felt kind of funny about it, when so many of my classmates were risking life and limb, but that's the way the Army was.

01-01:28:52

Redman:

Tell me about that. This is a major theme that we'll get into next time, that's in your essay. Six out of seven soldiers didn't live the frontline experience, but instead were doing some other sort of operational type of duty during the war. You talk about the fact that there's sort of this misperception that the war was more like the movies, that everyone was on the front line and there were these dramatic acts of heroism. That's certainly a part of the story, but I think it exaggerates reality in some key ways. I'm wondering if you could talk about when you learned that you weren't going to be participating in maybe the way that you had sort of imagined in your mind might have been your military service or your time in the Army. Was there some sentiment that you were maybe leaving your classmates behind? You mentioned that there was a funny sort of feeling about that, and I'm wondering if you could try to describe that for me a little more.

01-01:30:06

Weisberger:

I can. Well, I can only speak personally. I don't know whether any of my fellow Japanese students felt it. I'll talk more about the conscript Army World War II, as I said. We'll put that off until a little bit later. Yeah, it did bother me. As I said, I had innocently thought that I would be in the front lines when I signed up—well, when I started learning Japanese. That's what I was going to do. You join the Army, go out with an intelligence and reconnaissance platoon in the regiment. Which, of course, some guys did. I still feel it a little bit. I know it's silly. It's not that I want to be a hero, and I might very well, if I were an infantryman, at the first bombing, I might have become a psycho case

and run screaming through the field. Nobody ever knows. But I had enough traditional macho to think that men ought to be doing the fighting. The job we're doing is essentially a job that civilians could do, which is true. I felt it very strongly.

But the way the Army works, your intentions don't matter. Sometimes I say, why didn't I just let myself be drafted, or why didn't I join the infantry?

Number one, even if you joined the infantry, you could be assigned as an instructor in the States to spend the war teaching others how to clean their rifles. That's number one. Number two, if you just wait until you're drafted, you also can be assigned to handing out paychecks in the finance department. The Army is a great big—

01-01:31:57

Redman: Bureaucracy. Yeah, they need different people to do different things.

01-01:32:04

Weisberger: There was nothing to be ashamed of, and actually, the work I did was work that you had to have a certain level of education and intellect to do it. I'm sure I was much more valuable to the war effort, translating secret Japanese messages, than I would have been firing a rifle. Still, it's always nagged at me a little.

01-01:32:23

Redman: Let's end today with—let me just ask, was there a clear concluding point of your training? Was there a conclusion of the Japanese language classes?

01-01:32:36

Weisberger: No. That's interesting. There was no formal graduation like in Officer Candidate School. One day, you're in class, and the class will end on January the sixteenth, and there will be a little graduation ceremony, and we'll all get "Language Officer" badges or something. When Dr. Reischauer felt you were ready enough, judging by your results on exams, to be of any use over in the operations buildings, he just said, "All right, go on up there." Whether a whole group did it at once or whether it was on individual basis in this way, the operations was always calling for more. "Hey, send us more guys." He sent us piecemeal as we were demanded, but he always felt we needed to learn more, which we did. I don't remember more details.

01-01:33:40

Redman: Do you remember what time during the war that you ended up going from the class work to the operations?

01-01:33:49

Weisberger: I would guess January or, at the latest, February of 1943. I know it was still in mid-winter. I was trained from mid-September to certainly mid-January. By that time, you could handle it.

01-01:34:16

Redman:

This is always a really tough question to sort of wrap up on. We started with your early childhood and upbringing, and we talked a little bit about how the Great Depression influenced your life and your family, and then also how that sort of experience carried over into the war. Then we talked about what it was like for you to witness the events of Pearl Harbor and figure out how you were going to play a role in this large story that was developing. Then we talked about your life in Washington, DC. Can you maybe summarize for me a little bit, or maybe if you have any additional thoughts on any of those things, I'm wondering if maybe you have anything else that you'd like to add.

01-01:35:08

Weisberger:

Well, I think what I'll add now is really almost the theme of my whole memoir. The war, I'd say for my generation, spongy phrase, for those of us who were born sometime between 1916 and 1926, probably, the war was a good growing up experience. My home upbringing was, as I said, a bit sheltered. I didn't experience the really rough side of the Depression. I lived at home in New York, most of the time, with my mother and stepfather. For various reasons, I didn't have much of a social life outside of school, except in the summers. This is not a lament, just a fact. I was kind of naïve about the way the world worked. Suddenly, I am pitched into this crazy environment, meeting people who you've never met before and never would meet again. The unit I was in, this military intelligence unit, of course, was an elite unit. I was involved with the mathematicians and linguists and people who cracked codes. We escaped what I call the grunt work of the camp. Drivers and guards and cooks and things of that sort. They had "ordinary" draftees doing that. So for the first time, I encountered—just as I said I first encountered people from Montana in college—now I encountered guys from the Ozark Mountains, West Virginia and other such places.

01-01:36:49

Redman:

Right, and they maybe weren't as well academically prepared as some of the students who had ended up at Columbia.

01-01:36:59

Weisberger:

Right, though sometimes as students we were "pulled" for kitchen duty or other chores. Anyway, that was a tremendous experience. The whole experience of being part of this enormous—what Stephen Crane in *The Red Badge of Courage* called a vast demonstration, I think. A vast blue demonstration, though for us the uniforms were a different color. A demonstration of the variety of America. Being out in the world that way and learning how to conduct yourself suddenly with people from different classes and different areas, and then being subjected to these strange rules of behavior, and becoming part of what I call enlisted men, the military proletariat. You may be a Japanese translator, buddy, but you're a private in the US Army. Any corporal who didn't get beyond sixth grade can tell you shape up. So that was a great experience. Subsequent experiences were even more so. Looking back, I feel it was transformational for me. How's that for a summary?

01-01:38:18

Redman: That's terrific. I really appreciate your sitting down with me today, and we'll pick it up from there.

Interview #2 September 7, 2011

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02-00:00:03

Redman: My name is Sam Redman, and today is September 7, 2011. This is my second session of an oral history interview with Bernard Weisberger, who now resides in Evanston, Illinois. We left off our interview chronologically, in January or February of 1943, but I'd like to begin by taking a couple of steps back and expanding on a few of the themes that came up in our first session together. From there, we'll pick up and move forward with your story. As we begin today, though, I'd like to ask if you had additional thoughts from yesterday's session. You had mentioned to me before we got started that you had a couple of additional thoughts on America in 1940, before the entry into the war.

02-00:00:42

Weisberger: Yes. We were discussing the impact of the great debate over American intervention on the side of the Allies in World War II and whether people on campus were aware of it. I said you couldn't avoid being aware of it, but I wanted to mention that isolationist sentiment was pretty widespread. It was a mixed bag. I mentioned that there was a large organization, which was really the poster boy, the best funded organization for isolationists. It was called America First. Its membership, I think, was a good cross section of isolationist feeling. There were some pacifists in it. As I said, in the interim between the Hitler-Stalin pact and the invasion of Russia, there were the Communists, who did a 180-degree turn in 1941. There was also a good deal of strength from people who, on the right such as it was in 1941, who just hated Franklin D. Roosevelt and all his works. If he was for it, they were against it. Their most conspicuous member was Charles A. Lindbergh, a hero, and deservedly so, I might add. America First, which was led by Robert Wood, the head of Sears Roebuck, they were very anti-Communist and they didn't think Hitler could be all that bad, because he was anti-Bolshevik, except for this little 1939-1941 interlude. Simply put, their anti-Communism was much stronger than their anti-Fascism. I would not call them outright Fascist sympathizers, but they were not as hostile to Fascism as, in my opinion, they should have been. They also admired, many of them—and I think that's what enrolled Lindbergh in their ranks—they kind of admired the order and discipline that Hitler and Mussolini imposed on their countries. First of all, they had solved their unemployment problems by creating jobs in their armament programs. They appealed to conservative virtues: family, country, honor, all that, which people like Wood believed were being trashed by the culture of the thirties. They objected to the draft and to almost every move toward intervention, but I will say that on the day after Pearl Harbor, they turned right around and supported the war whole-heartedly. It was a matter of patriotism.

02-00:04:26

Redman:

Can you describe for me, maybe, what their activities might have been on campus? Were there regular meetings of these groups and organizations? Would there have been signs of their activity on campus? How would you find them, let's say, if you were interested in joining one group on campus or another?

02-00:04:47

Weisberger:

I do not think America First had any on-campus chapter, certainly not at Columbia. I think the Young Progressives of America, which was basically a front organization, did. That doesn't mean everybody in it was a Communist, but it followed the party line fairly closely. I think they had a chapter. There may have been a Young Republican club. I honestly can't remember. It was such a Democratic time, with a capital "D." I don't know. Nationally, the organizations sponsored radio broadcasts and public appearances and things of that sort. That's where America First got really active. It sponsored ads and radio speeches.

Actually, the Republican Party, it was quite interesting. There was a strong isolationist element in the party. I think its major champion was then Senator Robert Taft of Ohio. There was also an internationalist wing. The breakdown tended to be that Eastern Republicans, members of the mercantile and banking elite, were more interventionist than those coming from what we described yesterday as the heartland, the old Northwest, especially Minnesota and Wisconsin, North and South Dakota, whose politics are both leftist and isolationist. I don't remember the other campus organizations. After this, I'll tell you a personal story about General Woods' attitude and how I found out about it.

02-00:06:50

Redman:

I'd be interested if you could describe for me a little bit about your discovery of US history as a subject of interest, and where that led you as a teacher. I'd also be interested if you could share with me who your mentors were at the University of Chicago.

02-00:07:09

Weisberger:

Absolutely. I'd be very happy to. I got interested in history when I was ten years old. Almost can date it. It would be the 1930s already. The United States Navy, every few years, would pay a call on New York. Ships would anchor in the harbor of New York, and also all up the Hudson River, all the way north of Yonkers. That becomes relevant because one day—I can't remember how old I was. 1932, maybe, or '33. Tied up at one of the Hudson piers there was a replica of a convict ship that the British had used to transport convicts to Australia. These two things may not sound related, but they are.

02-00:08:17

Redman:

I'm curious now.

02-00:08:19

Weisberger:

My mother took me to see the convict ship. I could feel history. They showed the cells that they imprisoned the recalcitrant prisoners in, and the whipping post where the convicts who made trouble were beaten, and the abominably tight quarters, and all the instruments of torture and horror. I felt I was there. This really happened to real people. It didn't have that feeling of being in the distant past and not connecting with me. I was very upset, and visibly upset. Whether I was crying or not, I can't remember. My mother wanted to soothe me. The Navy was running tours of its ships, so she took me on a tour of a cruiser, and then a very nice young swabby showed us all around. I liked that, too, but it was a question of whether I was going to be a historian or a sailor.

02-00:09:27

Redman:

And historian seemed like the better route?

02-00:09:30

Weisberger:

Right, history did seem like the better option. I know that sounds exaggerated. I've always had, when I went to museums of any kind thereafter, a tremendous sense of immediacy, of connection, with the past. Yeah, there were real people then. They ate, they drank, they talked, walked, moved. They were just like us. So I got interested in history and I read a lot of children's history books. I started venturing into more popular serious books. I can't remember which ones. Well, I remember my grandparents had a set of some history of the United States by J.M. Andrews on their shelves. I devoured all of those. I wanted to write. Actually, I had dreamed of being a fiction writer, a novelist. As I got older, I found out that I had no particular gift for fiction, but I had a lively imagination. I could recreate historical scenes in my head and on paper that were accurate, they were truthful, or at least as truthful as my sources allowed, and tried to bring them to life and make them dramatic. That has always been my goal with history. I'm a storyteller. I don't disdain serious detailed research on small segments of history. The things that scholarship is built of. A dissertation on the German vote in Illinois in 1848. I'm not making fun of it. You need that stuff, but I want to tell stories.

At Columbia, they didn't have majors at the time, but they did have concentrations, and I concentrated in history. By that time, I felt I might be a journalist, but history was always in the background. So I go off to war, and I come back, and I'm advised by the jobs counselor in the Veterans Administration, the job market is a little tight. This is 1946. Since I have the GI Bill, why don't I go to graduate school? I'm still talking about journalism. And acquire a specialty that an editor might be interested in. So I went out to the University of Chicago and enrolled in the history program. I'm laughing because you know how many editors are dying to have a historian. You asked about teachers who influenced me. First of all, Jacques Barzun influenced me at Columbia.

02-00:12:26

Redman:

Jacques Barzun at Columbia?

02-00:12:29

Weisberger: Yes. He was a superb teacher and a good writer.

02-00:12:39

Redman: His work on William James is remembered as significant. I wonder if he taught that when you were a student.

02-00:12:51

Weisberger: As a teacher, I say he was an influence on me. I only took one course with him, but it only takes one course. The course was called European Thought and Culture of the Nineteenth Century, so we didn't get William James. What we got was—and this is interesting, because it wasn't the kind of history that eventually came influence me most. What I do remember is a reading list composed of books, the most amazing books, that didn't seem like they had anything to do with history. Novels by a fellow named Thomas Lovell Beddoes. Berlioz's memoirs. Barzun was and remains a historian of culture and ideas. Novels that I hadn't heard of before. Critical works by literary scholars. I think he had just completed his book on Darwin, Marx, and Wagner, so that influenced his reading list. It was a splendid reading list. Again, it shook up my preconceptions. Oh, this stuff had to do with history, too.

02-00:14:07

Redman: How about Lionel Trilling? You had mentioned that he was a professor there as well when you were at Columbia. You had mentioned that he was one of the professors who frequently taught the core course. Did you have a chance to take a course with him?

02-00:14:20

Weisberger: No, I never got to Trilling. I never got to Irwin Edman, who was a distinguished philosophy professor. In my two semesters of humanities, in the fall, we had a very nice young man named Bradford Smith, an aspiring novelist. He was okay. As I said, talking about great teachers and how they inspire you, whatever the subject, for the spring semester, we got a man named Gilbert Highet, whose name would be familiar to members of my generation. He was a classics scholar, trained at Oxford, and had translated a definitive book on Greek culture by Werner Jaeger called "Paideia." What we were doing with Highet was reading—I think we started with Dante and then went on to Rabelais, and then on to Moliere and Shakespeare, right on up through the eighteenth century, with *Tom Jones*.

He was a man of enormous vitality. He would bounce into the classroom and say, "Good morning, gentlemen! Today we're going to talk about *Hamlet*, the best goddamn play you'll ever read." It wasn't a put on. He was on fire with ideas. He had a brilliant scholarly reputation, but he was able to popularize without cheapening material. While he remained at Columbia, he ran a weekly radio program on New York's WQXR, which was the local classical music and intellectual fodder station, in which he lectured briefly on great books to a broad audience. Then he later became a member of the judging panel of the

Book of the Month Club. I suppose he was what we now call a public intellectual. What's uncanny about him was how he could succeed in three worlds. One, the world of close classical, demanding classical scholarship. Two, the world of communicating ideas to the public. And three, the world of classroom teaching, which he loved. One of his own published books was *The Art of Teaching*, I think. He bubbled over with his subject, whatever it was. He just made you feel so excited in the class. "I can't wait to get to the next play or book!"

02-00:16:57

Redman: Right, exactly. Those are the professors that really inspire that love of learning that carries—

02-00:17:05

Weisberger: He loved learning for its own sake. Simply as an aside, the poor man suffered, when the sixties hit, and produced the on-campus rebellion and extreme behaviors of some of the campus radicals, who would not only interrupt classes but also stand outside the library and shout, "Forget about Dante and Homer and Shakespeare and those people. Read Marx!"

02-00:17:30

Redman: So those folks were there as well on occasion.

02-00:17:33

Weisberger: Well, they weren't there when I was an undergraduate. We all took for granted if our elders and betters said these are great books that we ought to read, we read. And, by golly, some of them were great. Some were. But poor Professor Hight, I understand, he retired early because he was sort of broken-hearted that suddenly these things that had had such value to him all his life were disdained by some members of a younger generation. But that's an aside. That takes us away from 1942.

02-00:18:10

Redman: Tell me, then, at Chicago, if you had any particular influences that you'd like to mention.

02-00:18:16

Weisberger: I sure do. There's a major one, and that's kind of interesting. I expected, when I went to Chicago, I was only going to take a master's and stay there a year, and then hit the job market again. I signed up for a class given by one Avery Craven, C-R-A-V-E-N. Craven, he gave a series of courses centering around the Civil War era. He gave a course on the pre-Civil War West, the pre-Civil War South, pre-Civil War North states, and then a course in the Civil War and Reconstruction. He, too, like Hight, loved to teach. He would come into class with a folder stuffed with primary source notes. He would just read the notes but with passion and running comment. That's another story. I did have professors who opened a primary source folder and droned from notes so old the paper was flaking.

02-00:19:19

Redman: They've used it every semester since arriving in 1900.

02-00:19:24

Weisberger: Well, that's true. You're usually getting people who were trained about a generation or two before you, so I was getting professors in 1942 who'd done their training in the World War I era. But Craven wasn't doing that. What he had was letters, almost all primary sources. He assigned us histories and bibliographies, but he fed us newspaper editorials, letters to the editor, private correspondence exchanges, excerpts from speeches, all pulsing with the actual life of first hand experience. When he talked about the Wild West, the history was sound and all that, but he brought to life prospectors and ranchers and wild-eyed cotton speculators down in Alabama and Mississippi, when they were still the "West." He painted panoramic pictures, live pictures. I couldn't get my notes down fast enough. I take lectures in a flowing narrative style, instead of just scribbling, "West, very exciting. Prospectors in the West. Very exciting place for prospectors," he turned me on. That was all there was to it.

I turned in a couple of interim papers during the semester, and one day he was walking up the aisle, past my seat, and he said, "Come and see me in my office." So I thought, "What have I done now?" Since I had gotten an A on the paper, I didn't think it was too bad. He sat me down in his office and said, "You write very well." I said, "Well, thank you, professor. I like to write." He said, "What are you planning to do?" I said, "Get a master's and go out and see if I can find me a job as a reporter." I already know I can't write fiction." He said, "Well, why don't you stick around? I need a research assistant. Stick around. Be my research assistant. It will supplement your GI Bill income a little bit. Get a PhD here and become a historian, a history professor. You'd be good at it." So that was sort of a revelation, but I did exactly what he said. That's why I became a history professor.

The interesting thing, as kind of an aside—well, it's not an aside. I think it's important. Craven had very firm views on the Civil War, and they were views which, even then, I didn't quite agree with, though I didn't make a big point of it. He believed that the Civil War was unnecessary. That irresponsible agitators on both sides, the ultra-proslavery Southerners and the hotheaded abolitionists, had whipped up passions that made a peaceful solution to the slavery question impossible. I think he was influenced both by—he had Quaker ancestors on one side, I think from North Carolina, and I think he was something of a pacifist. He had also been a young man during World War I, in which he did not participate, and I think had seen how savage propaganda inflamed people and made them lose their senses. He wrote a book called *The Coming of the Civil War*, but basically he thought what William H. Seward had called the irrepressible conflict in 1860 was very repressible. I didn't particularly care for that interpretation then, and I now think it was wrong. I won't go into my own views on it. Still, I loved him so much, and he was so kind to me I didn't want to challenge him. But I resolved that I was not going to write a dissertation that simply echoed his views, which, as you know, if

you're a graduate student, many professors had their students do. You're aware of that.

02-00:24:06

Redman: What did you end up writing your dissertation on?

02-00:24:09

Weisberger: That's part of the story. As I said, I was a war veteran myself. In the early days, I had read an anthology by Ernest Hemingway called *Men at War*, writings on World War II. I had been a great fan of the war correspondents of, of all things, the *New Yorker Magazine* during World War II, which was not a battles-and-leaders kind of reporting, but what life at the grunt level in various odd corners of the war. Anyway, I thought: Were there newspaper correspondents in the Civil War? I don't know. So I went, did a little homework, and lo and behold, there were. There were, but they were as yet unsung. I started with a master's on just the reporting of the *Chicago Tribune* in the mini war in Kansas in 1856. I don't know whether you're doing US history or—

02-00:25:20

Redman: Yes, US history. This is right up my alley. I'm interested.

02-00:25:26

Weisberger: If you remember, again, without me going into a lecture, Kansas was open to settlement in 1854. Both pro-slavery and anti-slavery settlers streamed into the state, each trying to make sure that when it got to statehood, it would be either pro-slavery or anti-slavery. There was a kind of miniature Civil War there. I covered the *Tribune*'s correspondence on that. Of course, papers in those days were all unashamedly partisan. The reporters for the *Tribune* all made the Border Ruffians, the pro-slavery settlers, black as coal, and the abolitionists all angels.

02-00:26:18

Redman: Certainly. From their perspective.

02-00:26:22

Weisberger: Right. Anyway, I wanted to expand that to the Civil War, and I wound up writing a dissertation on the Civil War. The dissertation was called "The Role of the Northern War Correspondents in the Civil War." It got passed onto Craven. I tried to write it as a book. I wasn't really thinking of getting it published, but again, I didn't want to write in academic jargon. I wanted someone to be able to sit down and read this thing the way they'd read a novel. Lo and behold, when I had completed it, the subject being fairly neutral, it didn't require me to take a stand, and it was important. Bottom line, Professor Craven not only liked it, but one day when a traveling editor from Little, Brown came to his office, selling Little, Brown's latest books of the year, textbooks, he asked what was a routine question, which was, "Do you have any interesting dissertations that we might be interested in publishing?" Craven, without bothering to tell me, handed over mine. The next thing I

know, my final year there—commencement is approaching—one day, I get a letter. “My name is Ned Bradford and I’m an editor at Little, Brown. We would like to, with a little work, publish your dissertation. We can offer you an advance of \$500.”

02-00:28:05

Redman: You felt like you were rich.

02-00:28:07

Weisberger: Oh my god! I knew immediately what had happened. The fondest recollection of Craven. As I said, I still regard him as kind of an intellectual godfather, at least to my style in history and to my interest in history. I was not one of these grad students who—and I don’t demean them either, they can be important—who just faithfully executed the wishes of his supervisor.

02-00:28:44

Redman: Right, exactly. Certainly. That’s a great way to sort of wrap up that section. Before we dive into your History News Network essay that’s based on your memoirs, I’d like to make sure to go back and visit the Army Medical Museum one last time. We pinpointed that you would have visited the museum at about 1942. Is that correct?

02-00:29:19

Weisberger: Yes, that is correct. ’42 or ’43. Sometime during September ’42 and September ’43. I tend to place it sometime in the spring of ’43. I’m not sure.

02-00:29:38

Redman: By this time my suspicion is that the exhibits would have largely started to downplay the subject of race, such as exhibits directly comparing the bodies of different individuals of different races, which is what the Army Medical Museum was known for in the nineteenth century. But by this time, it would have put more effort into showing medical pathologies, so things like battlefield injuries and examples of the effective disease. Would you characterize this as an accurate generalization of what you remember about the museum?

02-00:30:10

Weisberger: Certainly, based on my experience, all that I remember indeed is—there might have been exhibits about racial differences in the Natural History Museum. I don’t remember that. Definitely what struck me, and the only thing I recall in my visit was, as I told you, mostly examples of battlefield wounds. I think some diseased organs that might or might not have been caused by military action or military diets. Your perception certainly is supported by my recollection. The other thing about it, what I do remember, is museums, at that time and in my day, certainly, very old cliché, but objects in dusty glass cases with placards. That was what museums were. They weren’t with it like now and like later museums. I do remember it as sort of a dull place. It wasn’t terribly well-lit. The exhibits weren’t arranged in any kind of narrative or explanatory order. It was just a bunch of glass stations with, as I said—

02-00:31:44

Redman: With dusty bodies punctuating each of those glass cases, it sounds like. That seems to fit with my understanding of what it would have been like at that time, certainly.

02-00:31:55

Weisberger: Yes, you're quite right in that.

02-00:32:00

Redman: By this time, any time after 1910, the Army medical school would have moved out of the medical museum. Did you get the impression that the museum was aimed towards a more general audience? By that, we can include visitors like yourself, rather than strictly medical students or medical practitioners.

02-00:32:17

Weisberger: Yes, I think so. Here we go again. I went to museums just naturally, without being urged or encouraged for an intention by my interest in them as a historian. It wasn't technical. They showed you a bullet hole and an intestine. They didn't say, "This shows extravasation of the mucosa of the colon." You know what I'm getting at. It seemed one that was direct and exclusively for the attention of medical students would have been much more medicalized in its language, I would think. Certainly the exhibits were labeled in plain English.

02-00:33:12

Redman: Bernie, let me ask about natural history museums in particular. We've mentioned that, growing up in New York City, you had had a real keen interest in museums. I'm wondering if you can estimate for me maybe when your first visit to a natural history museum might have been. Maybe the American Museum of Natural History in New York?

02-00:33:32

Weisberger: It was definitely the one in New York, on Columbus Avenue, between Seventy-Fifth and Seventy-Sixth Street in Manhattan. Which is more than you need to know. I tend to do that. I probably was either in eighth grade or maybe first or second year of high school, which meant sometime between 1935 and 1938, maybe.

02-00:34:05

Redman: How would you say that natural history museums have changed since that time? I know that's a big question, but what are some of the ways that you think you've seen, as a visitor, natural history museums change?

02-00:34:21

Weisberger: You'll send me off on a riff. I'm going to talk, but interrupt me if you want.

02-00:34:27

Redman: No, that's fine. If you just have a few sentences of thought on that, that would be perfect.

02-00:34:38

Weisberger: The last natural history museum I was in—Chicago has one.

02-00:34:41

Redman: The Field Museum.

02-00:34:43

Weisberger: Field Museum. Needless to say, museum curatorship has changed dramatically. There are more moving exhibits now. Natural history didn't quite grab me. I have to say, I can't remember, from those first visits to the New York American Museum of Natural History, I can't remember whether they had, for example, large glass cases with reconstructed landscapes and figures showing different stages of manhood or human evolution, as they now do. What, again, I remember is a lot of pictures. Some skeletons. Cases full of different kinds of shells with labels on who the shells came from and what waters they were found in. The emphasis was not on pictorial attractiveness or on recreating the natural environments in which animals and humans move, the way they are now. That may be a little unfair to—this is 1938 and today's technology was not available. As for little movie presentations and all the interactive exhibits in a contemporary museum of natural history, I remember none of that.

02-00:36:22

Redman: That's a terrific little summary there, and that's very useful for me. I really appreciate your taking the time to remember some of those things. I recognize I'm asking you about a visit to a museum that you took in the spring of 1943, which was almost sixty-nine years ago.

02-00:36:42

Weisberger: You are quite right. If I'm doing them an injustice, and you find out, by god, yes, they were showing films.

02-00:36:50

Redman: No, this is good. If I may, I'd like to now, if it's all right, shift gears back to the war. I'd like to ask three questions that are pertinent to our project in particular. Much of our focus began on the home front in California. I'd like to just simply ask, being stationed on the other side of the country, I'm wondering if you'd learned of the growing defense industry on the West Coast. I'm curious in particular if a soldier would have learned about Henry Kaiser and the many other shipyards in the Bay Area.

02-00:37:30

Weisberger: No, I wasn't aware of the defense industry that was relocating to the Southwest. You don't read papers for things like that when you're a twenty-year-old kid. But the reason you hear me laugh at Henry J. Kaiser was this. In the newsreels, they would show defense industries gearing up. That was a big story. I don't remember taking cognizance of locations. However, in the case of Henry Kaiser Shipyards, Kaiser got an enormous, and, I suppose, deserved, amount of publicity, because, if you remember, it was he, I believe, who speeded up the construction of ships by having parts prefabricated in other

shipyards and reassembled in his shipyard, in particular the one he had, I think, outside of San Francisco—on the West Coast.

02-00:38:37

Redman: That's right, in Richmond, California, right next to San Francisco. Very close to Berkeley.

02-00:38:42

Weisberger: Thank you, that's correct. To jump ahead in my story, it really opened the door. People talked about making ships in thirty days, from laying the keel to launching it. It could be done in thirty days. On September the first or second, the first week in September 1943, I get placed on a train with ten or eleven other members of a small detachment that I was with. We were taken by railway out to California, to Los Angeles, and then trucked to a place, now long gone, called Camp Anza, which was a port of embarkation. It served, I think, Wilmington, California. From there, we were supposed to go on a ship. Now, we were a small detachment. We wait and we wait and we wait.

02-00:39:46

Redman: Was this military intelligence in particular? Do you know how the detach—?

02-00:39:52

Weisberger: It was Signal Intelligence. It was what I was doing. Signal Intelligence is the code-making and code-breaking arm of the Army. We're part of military intelligence as a generalized description of activities. Because the process begins with a guy sitting at a radio set, and the radio is in the Signal Corps' province, we were in the Signal Corps. The point of my—

02-00:40:22

Redman: I'm sorry I interrupted; you said you were in California.

02-00:40:26

Weisberger: We thought we would be embarking right away. Well, no, we weren't going to be embarking right away. We sat around, day after day, people calling up their wives and sweethearts and families and saying, "Goodbye, I'll be shipping out soon." The next day, call back again and say, "Well, I didn't ship out yesterday. I'm still here." But we wait. One day, after about a week or ten days, we are put in trucks and put on a railroad train and taken back up to San Francisco, to Camp Stoneman, I think it was called, which is in Pittsburg, which I guess was also a shipyard, wasn't it?

02-00:41:09

Redman: Sure. In Concord, there's a place called Port Chicago. Did you ever—?

02-00:41:15

Weisberger: I don't remember that. The name I remember was Pittsburg, without the "H" at the end. It was in the Bay Area. Oh, well, we're going to ship off from here, we thought. We wait and we wait and we wait. These things happen in the Army. Then we get on the trucks again, get on a train again, right back to Camp Anza.

02-00:41:39

Redman: A lot of hurry-up and wait, I hear.

02-00:41:41

Weisberger: Right. What this lengthy story is all about is we finally, around November 1, we left. What we went on was a Liberty ship. Liberty ships were big, heavy, bulky, unlovely-looking ships that could carry a lot of cargo and could be built in a hurry. That was their great virtue. They were the ones that were being built at Henry Kaiser's and other comparable shipyards to carry the burden of transporting supplies across the ocean.

02-00:42:31

Redman: You had maybe heard of Liberty ships, even before getting aboard.

02-00:42:36

Weisberger: Yes, we had heard of them, I think. I can't remember for sure. They may have been in newspaper headlines, and again, newsreels. Newsreels were the TV newscasts of the day. They would last fifteen minutes, and they would consist of a set of short acts. A big news story, a national news story, an international news story, a sports story, little comedy segments. So I'm sure that we had heard of Liberty ships, but we didn't know we were going on one.

02-00:43:15

Redman: Please, if you could put me back on what it felt like to be on a Liberty ship, and then you can pick up on your story. I am really interested in that ride in particular and what your thoughts and feelings were as you're going on the Liberty ship and finally embarking.

02-00:43:37

Weisberger: I'm willing to do that. The story is part of it. We knew what a Liberty ship was. We did not know what we were going to be shipped out on, because what was happening was that, if the Army wanted to move a whole division overseas, it went on the Queen Mary or the Queen Elizabeth or some troop ship that could accommodate ten, twelve, fifteen thousand men. But we were in what was called a casual detachment. A casual detachment means you're not attached to any larger unit. You're just a small bunch of guys, and they've got to fit you in somewhere. Let me see if I can do a chronology of this. We got off the trucks, and there was this cargo ship tied up to a dock with the cargo booms that load material from the dock into the hold sticking up in the air there, with, by the way, anti-aircraft guns pointing from tubs at bow and stern. Just behind the single funnel, we saw two little wooden shack-like structures. We march up the plank, and it turns out, each of these, which they referred to as doghouses, carried twelve bunks. Four triple tiers of bunks, two on each side. So it could accommodate twenty-four "casual" people. We happened to be twelve. Our first thoughts on boarding were, "A, thank god, it's not a troop ship, and B, oh, look, we're going to live in this little house."

02-00:45:23

Redman: Okay, so it wasn't that bad.

02-00:45:27

Weisberger: No, it wasn't. No, my god. We got the luxury cruise.

02-00:45:30

Redman: Compared to some of these troop ships, where I'm sure they were jammed in like sardines.

02-00:45:36

Weisberger: They were indeed jammed in like sardines. What they had to do, as a matter of fact, was stand in line for hours just to eat twice a day. It takes time to feed 15,000 people. Let me develop that a little later, because I want to get back to the shock of discovery. Okay, that was fine. I still remember the name of the ship. The sum of this is in the memoir, by the way, or a lot of it. It was called the Cyrus T. Brady. Cyrus T. Brady had been a missionary to the Indians in the Far West in the nineteenth century, and I think he had written a couple of books. Anyway, we get to our bunks. The other doghouse was occupied by twelve Navy personnel who were working for the Office of Strategic Services, the OSS, which is also an intelligence organization. I don't know what they did. We all were under these strict security rules, so we never said to the sailors, what are you swabbies doing?

02-00:46:43

Redman: Right, and they never asked, but—

02-00:46:47

Weisberger: They never asked us. One of the first things we did was, in the early days, after we'd all gotten over violent seasickness for the first few days, was to be taken down to the engine room. One of the things we had said as the days and weeks dragged on at the port of embarkation was, "They must be building a goddamn ship for us." Well, there's a plaque in that engine room, and it says, "Cyrus T. Brady keel laid September 5, 1943" or something of that sort. Just about the time we arrived at Camp Anza. "Launched October 1. Sea trial, October 1 to October 15." We said, "Goddammit, they *did* build this tub in thirty days!"

02-00:47:41

Redman: Wow. That must have felt like they were personally building that ship for you.

02-00:47:48

Weisberger: Maybe not that, but certainly in the right time frame.

02-00:47:54

Redman: It was a fresh boat. It probably had that new boat smell.

02-00:47:58

Weisberger: It probably did. We weren't aware of it. Also, to get back to the journey itself, yes, it was a nice journey for us, simply because we weren't exposed to the sardine-like conditions of guys on a troop ship. We ate in the mess in the crew's quarters. We ate the crew's food, which was pretty good. Much of the time, we shared the crew's showers. We shared the accommodations of the

merchant crew, which, by the way, was not enchanted with the idea of having twenty-four military personnel to share their rec room and their mess hall with. They had to wait and take turns, which they didn't particularly care for. That didn't break out into any open fights, but the merchant crew was not happy with us. I don't know where they slept. Since the Liberty ships were armed with an anti aircraft cannon mounted in the front, on what they call the foredeck, and another one on the stern, there was a small Navy gun crew that went with us, too. So all together, there were twenty-four passengers, military passengers, and I suppose maybe a dozen military guard personnel aboard.

02-00:49:35

Redman: The Navy personnel manning the anti-aircraft gun at the front and back of the ship.

02-00:49:40

Weisberger: Right, exactly. That part was nice. We liked it very much. Of course, there were no drills. We did have an officer in charge. He wasn't from our outfit. He was the officer in charge of the gun crew, a middle-aged man, I suspect a reservist, someone from civil life, or trained in one of the ninety-day wonder schools from which they made officers back then. He was simply very easygoing with us. He didn't want us to get into any disciplinary trouble.

The other part of the experience that I recollect—well, it took a long time. I tell a lot of this in the memoir, but I know you want it on the tape, too. We sailed November 1, from Wilmington, in our nice new ship, which was a slow, lumbering—as I said, they were not built for beauty or aerodynamic looks. Franklin D. Roosevelt took one look at them and said, "God, they look ugly," apparently. But they got the job done. They made about eight knots, which in nautical miles, I guess it would be maybe ten miles an hour. They had a three-cylinder engine that generated 1,500 horsepower, which is less than you have in some of your automobiles now. They were built for use. Anyway, they took a month to get from California down to Tasmania, the little island south of Australia that's part of Australia. We got a twenty-four hour leave there. I'm not piling on too much detail?

02-00:51:38

Redman: No, this is good.

02-00:51:43

Weisberger: Had a great twenty-four hour pass there, because the Australian people had sent their boys off to help the Empire in World War II, in 1939. Many of them were still in England, and then many of them had gone to parts of the British Empire and Southeast Asia the Japanese had overrun, and they were in prison camps. Locals hadn't seen many healthy young males around in a long time, so we were welcomed as if we had saved them from imminent invasion. Even though by then we were long past a danger of a Japanese invasion of Australia. If you stepped into a restaurant or pub someone would come over and say, "Hey, Yank, let me buy you a drink." In turn, we gave them—they were

desperately hungry for tobacco, which was rationed, and we got a ration of cigarettes, which I didn't smoke at the time. It was a very friendly reception.

Then we got on the boat again and we spent three weeks going up to Colombo, Ceylon. At Colombo, Ceylon we were, for the first time, in what was recognizable as a war zone. We had to wait for a convoy, and the convoy took us up to Calcutta, which was our destination. I think it took about a week in Colombo. There, we joined the crew in lookouts for submarines and aircraft, because we were within range of both. Again, there wasn't much real danger, because, by then, the Japanese Air Force was conserving fuel. I won't elaborate on that.

02-00:53:38

Redman: If you could just situate me in time, do you recall about when you arrived in Calcutta?

02-00:53:43

Weisberger: Absolutely. About the second week in January. We got to—

02-00:53:52

Redman: Of 1944?

02-00:53:53

Weisberger: 1944. What's your question?

02-00:54:00

Redman: Now I'd like to maybe jump ahead a little bit. I think the remainder of our conversation is going to be about your thoughts on the war as a general experience between, let's say, '41 and '45. If you could just, maybe briefly, since this is a home front project and I'd like to spend more time thinking about your perspectives on the war historically from that angle, but if you could summarize for me what your life was like between '44, when you arrive in Calcutta, and the end of the war. You were talking a little about operations, but if you could just summarize for me what you think are the most important points of that time.

02-00:54:55

Weisberger: Sure, I'll be happy to do it. I just might add at this point, Sam, that I cover a lot of it in the memoir. If you, when you get around to reading it, find, gee, there's stuff I wish I'd asked him about in the memoir, I'm open to your coming back and asking me for it.

02-00:55:10

Redman: Great. Okay, good.

02-00:55:15

Weisberger: Operationally, after about a week of languishing in Calcutta, our group—I am now back with my eleven buddies—we went up to New Delhi. For some strange reason, I can't remember how the hell we got to New Delhi. We didn't fly. I don't remember being trucked. I don't remember being on a train.

02-00:55:43

Redman: Suddenly, you were in New Delhi. That gap is fine. That's fine.

02-00:55:48

Weisberger: It's a funny lacuna. We spent six months in New Delhi, which was then the capital of the raj. A quick summary, operationally. That was where our group did our most important work during the war. As I've said before—or I may not have said before—codes would be changed at intervals by the countries using them because they all know that their enemies are trying to break the code, and eventually, any code that can be devised out can be broken. So they changed them frequently. By the time our code-breakers, let's say, have broken into a Japanese code, a particular code, a Navy code or a Merchant Marine code, it usually would have been changed, but you still read what they called back traffic to get whatever information you could about enemy long range plans and situations and what have you. You rarely, as they say, "read current." That is, messages in a code in current use by the enemy.

Well, by golly, in March of 1944, somebody captured a Japanese codebook, and the Japanese didn't know it was missing. Which is unusual, because they had a very rigorous accounting system which tries to make sure that never happens. For about four weeks—this would have been March '44—the front in Burma was very active. Chinese forces, trained by the Americans in India, were launching an attack to retake Burma from the Japanese, and there was one American army unit attached to them. To cut to the chase, we were "reading current." For a while, we were actually having the experience of reading what a Japanese commander might be saying to his troops, 10:00 o'clock that morning, about what they were going to do 5:00 o'clock that evening, and translating that and rushing it over to—we didn't rush it personally—rushing it over to headquarters for transmission back to our troops. So that was exciting.

We helped retake Burma, although, on the other hand, you asked me about the pattern of the war overall. We were in what they call the China-Burma-India Theater. It wasn't a terribly important theater. There weren't many American combat troops there. It had two functions. One was to support the Chinese and keep them in the war, because they pinned down about a million Japanese occupying troops, and we didn't want the Chinese to surrender. They got logistical support from us. The other was to provide bases for military aircraft that could bomb shipping lanes between the homeland of Japan and the various parts of the Empire. Also, when we got B-29s in the summer of '44, they actually had the range to fly from India to Japan and bomb it, and back. It was sort of mildly important, but we Americans weren't going to make any big commitment of troops to it, so it was a minor theater. I'm giving you too much military—

02-00:59:50

Redman:

No, but significant enough to warrant having as many ears as you can listening to the ground there, trying to see what they can pick up to try to get that or relay that information to the troops on the ground.

02-01:00:07

Weisberger:

Exactly. My hottest role was when I was working with another translator. They only assigned two translators to this group, a dear friend of mine, now long gone, and I. What happened was, when this code book discovery was made we were suddenly overwhelmed with messages, and we were working sort of round the clock, both of us. One night, I got a message that essentially was the first Japanese awareness of an air drop behind enemy lines. It had been a large operation in which troops and supplies born by glider overflowed the Japanese lines and landed behind them, and actually built a base behind the Japanese lines, from which they harassed Japanese troops for the duration of the war. Anyway, I got a message one night in which the Japanese said gliders are landing at such-and-such places. We relayed that as fast as we could to headquarters. I am told that helicopters were able to extract some of our men who were at these pinpointed locations and might have been captured by the Japanese before they could begin to operate, but I don't know. Anyway, that was that. Then, in November '44, after a very hot summer in New Delhi—

02-01:01:53

Redman:

Yeah, I can imagine.

02-01:01:55

Weisberger:

Well, there are two seasons. In the spring, from February to about June, it's very hot, but it's dry heat. Dry heat is something that, you get indoors, you're protected. No air conditioning, of course. I don't think it existed then, or at least certainly didn't exist for all offices. Then the monsoon season, when everything is damp and in the nineties all the time. You break out with skin rashes. It wasn't any fun. Go ahead.

02-01:02:28

Redman:

Jumping ahead to the conclusion of the war, the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as you know, there's a vast historical literature discussing the key elements of the decision to drop the atomic weapons, the decision to drop a second atomic bomb, and so on and so forth. I'd like to hear your perspective on those decisions and on those days. I recall it's August 6 and 9, 1945.

02-01:03:04

Weisberger:

August 6 and August 9. August 6 on Hiroshima, August 9 on Nagasaki. I'm very happy to tell you about that. I want to add, just for keeping the chronology straight, it was at the end of November 1944 by which time we had been oversupplied with translators, and I think the code had changed. I was sent up to China, where I worked until the armistice, V-J Day. I then was

flown to Shanghai, where I spent the rest of my overseas tour. That's just to nail that down.

Yes, I am very happy to talk about the A-bombs. My feeling now is that I think there were other alternatives, and I wish we hadn't dropped it. I think there was no excuse for the second bomb. At the time, I don't think we realized the extent—let me get back a little. When those of us over in China heard about V-E Day, we were cheered, of course, but we assumed that the war would go on, because, well, the war was on with Japan. We knew there were a million Japanese troops in China. The Japanese troops in the island had been fighting to the death, literally, sometimes, until the last man. The assumption was, if there was an invasion of Japan, which there would probably be, they were also going to fight until the last man, and that would take time. Then the US still have to deal with a million Japanese troops in China who weren't surrendering. So we frankly believed, most of us out there, that even when the war in Europe ended, it would take another two to three, maybe four, years before Japan was finally beaten for good. We used to joke and say, "The Golden Gate in '48."

02-01:05:18

Redman: That's funny. "Golden Gate in '48" was a saying?

02-01:05:23

Weisberger: Yes, it was. It was a joke about the troops. Don't start packing your gear after V-E Day, boys. You're going to be out here for a long time.

02-01:05:34

Redman: Maybe by 1948, we'll be passing under the Golden Gate on another Liberty ship. I see.

02-01:05:40

Weisberger: Exactly, exactly.

02-01:05:42

Redman: Okay, go on.

02-01:05:45

Weisberger: So needless to say, suddenly—I remember, it was August 1945, Kunming. Suddenly, a bulletin comes into the radio room at headquarters. Somebody starts running out. Our post in China was on the grounds of a Chinese university, and it was a series of buildings built around a large central square. People started dashing out from some of the buildings and filling the square. Somebody else is running around, alerting us all. He said, "The Japs have surrendered!" We say, "You're kidding." "No! The Japs have surrendered." It was evening, August 14. What happened was we couldn't believe it, but we all flocked out into the central square. Many of us—not me, but others—had been hiding away bottles for just this moment. Bottles began to emerge from lockers and hidden places. In a little while, it was sort of semi-drunken revel going on, until finally some of the more sober officers managed to restore

order, and the people who were already blind drunk were put to bed. I've got that in the memoir. That isn't part of what you're asking me.

It's a good question. Did we think about the bomb? Well, I think the answer is most of us didn't think much about it. We thought, oh my gosh, we are going to go home early. We were not like combat troops, who had to face the fact that the next thing they might be doing is landing on the beaches of Japan and getting killed. None of us were going to get killed, but we did think we were going to be there for another few years. Suddenly being handed back three years of our lives was very exhilarating. I don't think we understood the extent of the damage. The first reports we got simply said we had dropped two bombs of unprecedented power, and it's capable of wiping out a city. I wish I could say that, gee, I felt bad about it at the time, but I can't. I can't say that I was thrilled or anything like that. The reports of total devastation only began to trickle in after the war.

02-01:08:24

Redman: That was especially probably true for someone stationed in Asia, I suspect.

02-01:08:33

Weisberger: Yeah, exactly. I can't remember having a single thought about it. War was over. That's what mattered. Actually, the full consciousness of what was happening didn't emerge for me until, in early 1946, a man named John Hersey—you may know this—wrote an article which filled up the entire *New Yorker* issue for that week. It was called "Hiroshima," which went into chapter and verse about what a horrible experience it had been. At that point, I began to think, "Gee, I wish we hadn't dropped it." What we did know was that Japan had been in the ropes for months. Basically, Japan was beaten by the summer of 1945. Literally, they were sunk. Their Navy was sunk or bottled up in port. Their people were starving. Did you see the movie *The Fog of War* with Robert McNamara?

02-01:09:36

Redman: Yes, certainly.

02-01:09:39

Weisberger: We didn't really know about the fire bombings. Again, the news just spoke of severe incendiary raids on Tokyo. We say, "Yay, boy. Go, go, go, go, go, zap Tokyo." That's the answer. I can't say that there was much remorse. It only began to dawn on me after the war. I can't say I felt exhilarated, but I didn't feel bad about it.

02-01:10:06

Redman: You were happy to go home.

02-01:10:09

Weisberger: Yeah, exactly. In later years. And of course I've read all that literature, because I get interested in it. But, A, we didn't have to—well, we're up in your territory now, but the classic excuse for both bombings was that it staved

off an impending invasion of Japan. I think the schedule called for invading Kyushu, one of the southern islands, maybe Formosa in November, and then Japan the following February. We could set the timetable. There was no rush about it. The Japanese couldn't initiate any offensive action. They had been exploring surrender possibilities in various capitals. We knew that. We as a unit knew that, I think, because the folks back in Washington kept us informed. They were looking to get out, just looking for favorable terms. I think if we offered the terms that they actually finally capitulated on, which was that they could keep the emperor, they might have surrendered without the bomb. Our story was that the invasion would cause huge casualties and the bomb saved us from that. I no longer believe that. Even so, the second one three days later was really not necessary. The full impact of the Hiroshima bomb had not filtered into their awareness yet. I'll stop, Sam. I'm sorry, I'm running on.

02-01:11:51

Redman:

Oh, no, this is all very useful. I just want to assure you that we can return to certain aspects of things if you feel like there's more to say on particular topics. I'd like to finish our discussion today by asking you specific questions that are targeted at what I believe is the introduction to your memoir that was turned into this History News Network essay. I know a lot of this has been written down, but I'd like to ask you it in sort of a conversational setting as well.

02-01:12:33

Weisberger:

Yeah, you get a whole memoir. Sure.

02-01:12:36

Redman:

At the start of the essay, you compare two figures. You compare yourself, as a World War II veteran today, and an aging Civil War vet you remember seeing at a Memorial Day event in Hudson, New York. Despite the fact that you had no idea what this man did during the war, you were taught to venerate and respect old veterans, correct?

02-01:12:56

Weisberger:

Sure.

02-01:12:57

Redman:

Then later on, through your own experiences in the service during wartime, you learned that fighting in a war is not always as glamorous as it's portrayed. Can you explain these thoughts to me in a little more depth?

02-01:13:07

Weisberger:

Sure. You said it yourself. What we think of when we hear the word "veteran," you think of a grisly old man who bears the scars of wounds. A heroic figure. But even in the Civil War, there were soldiers who were stationed in Florida after it was occupied, who did nothing but guard duty for four years. There were those in various bureaus in Washington who arranged for getting and moving supplies and things of that sort. First of all, I was a kid

when I saw that Civil War veteran, but the public doesn't hear about things like that. There's no glamour to it. There are very few books and movies about behind-the-lines things. When I got into the Army, I finally realized how necessary massive conscription was to military readiness because back then all the jobs, all the ancillary and support jobs of the Army, from handing out uniforms at the reception center to repairing typewriters, were done by military personnel. Nowadays I guess they're contracted out. That's what they mean when they talk about a lean, mean Army. The contractors do a lot of that stuff.

02-01:14:58

Redman:

Right. Much "leaner." That money still goes places. I see where you're going.

02-01:15:10

Weisberger:

I have no idea what experience in the Army today means in contrast to ours. It was a revelation to me as part of a larger revelation of the enormous reach of the war, the scope of it. It must have been true in World War I, too; they also had huge conscript armies.

02-01:15:39

Redman:

I want to ask about—this is something I often talk to with people who worked in defense industries on the home front, in particular, men. I'm interested in young men, if maybe they were 4-F, or some people were considered necessary defense workers, or some men were a little too old to enlist in the Army at a particular time, or considered necessary workers back home. Meanwhile, there's a burgeoning visual culture that celebrates service in the military. There are patriotic songs. It's a patriotic moment, and a lot of celebration of the service, of men in uniform. For some men who maybe were physically disabled, they wanted to help out and do their part, and if they weren't participating in the defense industry or in some other way, they felt like they were missing out in some sense, or there might have been a little bit of a stigma, or a self-stigma. Regarding that sort of similar misconception of what the vast majority of soldiers actually do in the military, which is not necessarily fight on the front lines at D-Day or Iwo Jima or in Midway, do you think that there's a similar dynamic there of people misunderstanding what it means to serve or what it means to be in the military?

02-01:17:14

Weisberger:

Yes, I think there is. Again, I can't speak for the wars going on now. In places like Iraq and Afghanistan, if you're just driving a truck full of supplies, you can get blown up by a roadside bomb. It's a totally different war. There's danger even in the behind-the-lines occupations. As I said, there were some military occupations, like building bridges under fire, that expose you to death and maiming. Let me step back just a second. I don't know how 4-F felt, but obviously some people didn't want to serve at all. That happens in every country. It's very nice to talk about outbursts of patriotism, but there were some people who I'm sure were damn glad if they were 4-F. But I suspect a great many of them, as I certainly would have, felt a degree of shame and inferiority. But that was no fault of their own. I can't imagine how I would

have hated to be told I just wasn't physically able to join in this experience of fighting for my country. So there was that.

My own personal feelings, and I don't know to what degree they were shared by anybody in my unit—as I told you yesterday, what I did was important work. It helped, in its way, to win the war, as all the behind-the-lines jobs did. Mine was particularly important because of the importance of military intelligence. I feel proud of that. Even though I have very little use for wars now, I think World War II was as nearly necessary as a war can get. I'm glad I was in it, and I think what I did mattered. But I wasn't exposed to hostile fire. I didn't endure the sufferings of infantry. Like I said in the first few pages, knowing that, at any moment, in a plane or ship, you might be sunk or blown up, or being on the ground and, not really running the risk of being killed, but being horribly mangled and maimed. Combat veterans will say, with accuracy, if you're a mile behind the lines, you don't know what we're doing, what we're going to feel. It's a different war.

02-01:20:00

Redman: Bernie, I'd like to step back to the victory ship for just one moment.

02-01:20:05

Weisberger: Sure. Let me just say, it was Liberty, not—

02-01:20:07

Redman: Oh, sorry, Liberty ship. That's right. Did you have a sense of that Liberty ship being built by Rosie the Riveters? Or was that a sense that maybe emerged later in studying how the World War II home front has been conceptualized? Or when you were on that ship, were you thinking, "Hey, not only was this built in such a quick turnaround time, but this was new female defense labor that's known by the phrase of 'Rosie the Riveter'?"

02-01:20:43

Weisberger: I'll give a short answer: no. I think that emerged when we hit the home front. When we got back home in December 1945, there was evidence of that. Again, I think, if anything, there was a certain amount of unfair stigmatization of defense workers among the military. Here we are, doing what we're doing for I think it was a big thirty dollars a month at the time, and those guys are getting rich, being well-paid. There were actually negative feelings about those guys. Some. I can't tell how widespread.

Just to wrap up what I was saying about my feelings about not having endured the hardships of war. Defense workers and merchant marine sailors were indispensable to the war effort, but many servicemen did resent them, and so were we non-combat servicemen. I don't know if the combat vets looked down on the likes of us, but they knew that we hadn't *felt* the war the way they did.

02-01:21:47

Redman:

Let's talk about the term "the greatest generation." Explain to me, as a member of the generation that's often ascribed that label, why you reject that term.

02-01:21:59

Weisberger:

Was it David Brinkley who made up that phrase? I can't remember. I don't think it was Stephen Ambrose. Anyway, somebody did.

02-01:22:07

Redman:

It's been popularized by Tom Brokaw, of course.

02-02:22:11

Weisberger:

Thank you, it was Tom Brokaw. A nice man, a nice newscaster. Look, the generation of the American Revolution, they achieved great things too. So did the generation that endured the Civil War. We did experience the Depression, followed by the experience of the war. We managed to survive both. But I'm not sure "our generation" had any inherent greatness. I don't like being singled out in that way, mostly because, as I say, there were other generations that survived a great deal and contributed a great deal. It's a form of self-flattery that we too often practice. People will sometimes, not stop me on the street, but on Decoration Day or something of that sort people will say, "Hey, thanks for winning World War II." What am I supposed to say? "Don't mention it." I feel so funny when I get that kind of reaction. Once more, it's a bit of romanticization. I think it's intended maybe more to put down whatever the current generation was when Brokaw created the term than to celebrate ours.

02-01:23:58

Redman:

Let me get into this, because much of your essay is a response to Stephen Ambrose, a popular historian. His idea that buttresses a lot of his narrative, as you paraphrase it in your essay, is that the soldiers of that generation would rather have been tossing baseballs than hand grenades. To me, it really does capture the Ambrose narrative. There's sort of a mainstream, nostalgic American innocence and exceptionalism in this type of—

02-01:24:28

Weisberger:

Exactly. You're hitting the nail on the head.

02-01:24:32

Redman:

I'm not necessarily asking you to hang Ambrose out to dry, but I'd like to hear you compare this type of story to your own experiences that don't seem to line up a little more.

02-01:24:44

Weisberger:

No, I didn't hang him out to dry. Look, his basic premise was, we were citizen soldiers. Yeah, when we fought the Germans and the Japanese, we were fighting against excellent professional armies. Better officers than ours in the beginning of the war. Not our top commanders, but at the level of company and even battalion commanders. They also went through much more rigorous

training, and of course they all had prewar conscription, which we didn't have until October 1940. Their guys were much better trained than ours. But along we come, guys who were just, as the movies show and as Ambrose says, mechanics and high school teachers and gas station attendants and lawyers. We wound up beating them. It wasn't just thanks to the fact that we had much more supplies than they did. It was due to the fact that we learned our jobs, and after a little practice and a lot of kicking around, we did them well. Ambrose liked to celebrate the idea of citizen soldiers. Americans who'd changed from civilian occupations to military occupations and mastered them. The idea that we did this, willingly and happily, because we hated Fascism or we really wanted to save the world—

02-01:26:22

Redman:

Right. That element is a bit of a stretch.

02-01:26:25

Weisberger:

Absolutely. I say it in the book, but I would like it on the tape. The majority of us were drafted. That doesn't mean we were dragged in, kicking and screaming. What it means is we waited our turn in line. Nobody wanted to hurry up to the head of the line. There were a number of early and enthusiastic volunteers, and they really came from two groups. One, a savvy and self-interested group, like a friend of mine I knew who actually enlisted in 1940, who said, "We're going to get into the war. The Army is expanding. The guys who get in first are going to get first crack at opportunities to get promoted," as he put it. The peacetime draft was just going into effect in October of 1940. So, as this guy puts it, "The draftees will get the shitty end of the stick."

There were a few vigorous anti-Fascists who wanted to get into the war from the time it began. There were a few Americans who went up to Canada and volunteered to be soldiers in the Canadian and British armies. So there were those people who rushed off to war, out of either self-interest or principle. I certainly enlisted and didn't wait to be drafted.

But the majority were conscripts. There was no hesitation about wanting to fight Japan, because, hell, they bombed us. They put us into the war. And once you're in a war, you've got to win it, right? That's just a job to be done. If Germany had not declared war on us—Germany did declare war on us, not the other way around—that was pursuant to its treaty with Japan in December 1941—I'm not sure the United States Congress would have taken into the war with Germany for a long period. The idea is we wanted to get back at Japan. I'm not sure of it. But anyway, the point is, we were marched into what they call the Troop Information and Education Program, which in order to inspire us showed Frank Capra films about the horrors of Nazism and Japanese militarism.

02-01:29:05

Redman:

You describe this in your essay very eloquently, I think, as government-issued bullshit, which not only gave me a chuckle, I thought was an amusing

description of it. The upside of watching videos, you explained, is that you might have an opportunity to take a nap. I think there are points of danger for future generations of historians to taking these videos at face value, but I'd love if you could detail your thoughts on these as training videos. What was the actual experience of this? Sometimes you'd take a nap; sometimes you might roll your eyes. There might be a bit of necessary cynicism there. What do you think the overall effect of those videos was?

02-01:29:50

Weisberger:

I think they were made more for civilian consumption than for ours, to tell you the truth. I don't think they had much effect on us. Hey, we were in because we were in because we were in. Yeah, we wanted to win, and yeah, the other guys were bastards. There was so much exaggerated in our own propaganda. The Japanese might be that cruel, but to tell you the truth, there was a certain amount of, again, anti-Communist sentiment that made some guys pro-German. You know, "what's so terrible about Hitler?" Or, "why the hell don't we let Hitler and the Russkies fight each other until they're both destroyed?" There was a great deal of that kind of sentiment. Anti-German feeling, even anti-Nazi feeling, was not as strong, in my judgment, as anti-Japanese feeling.

02-01:30:44

Redman:

Was there a racial aspect of that, do you think?

02-01:30:46

Weisberger:

You bet your ass. I'm sorry I put that on the tape.

02-01:30:51

Redman:

No, that's fine. If it's true, I'd like to hear it.

02-01:30:55

Weisberger:

Absolutely. The reason I know that is because I was in China, and I do deal with that in the book, too, but I'm sorry to say, again, the guys I knew in my unit, in my small intelligence unit, but also the guys I met who were not in my intelligence unit, average GIs, so to speak, they didn't really like the Chinese. The racial stereotypes about the Chinese were in full force.

02-01:31:33

Redman:

I know there were, at various times and in various different formats, different things passed out to either soldiers or civilians working in the Pacific of the difference between Chinese and the difference between Japanese. The Chinese are your friends, and the Japanese are your enemies, and here's how to tell them apart. Sort of heavily racialized documents. Did you get a sense of any of that?

02-01:32:02

Weisberger:

Got a sense of it? Hello, we got those documents! That's exactly the case. Certainly, we were told the Chinese were our friends, and obviously they were on our side. There wasn't any debate about that. But we did, yes. We had posters up in the day room, our work room, and various other places around

the post in China. The Japanese were hairier, they're shorter, and they're lighter-skinned. There was a popular myth that what you wanted to do if you caught a Jap who was pretending to be Chinese, ask him to say "lollapalooza," because they don't have "L" in the Japanese language. Helplessly, they would say "rorraparooza." Well, I don't, man. I knew a lot of Japanese and Nisei. Our Nisei teachers back in Columbia could say "lollapalooza" very well.

02-01:33:04

Redman: That's a pretty funny anecdote. I'm curious if you could maybe describe for me, in just a few sentences, the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper.

02-01:33:13

Weisberger: Well, the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper—was that its name?—was fun. We read that. Though the name I remember was *Yank*. We also had an Army newspaper in the China-Burma-India Theater, called the *CBI Roundup*. Those we liked. They were mostly stories written by reporters who were themselves GIs, with a heavy dose of cartoons and heavy appeals to the repressed sexuality of young males isolated from female company for a long time.

02-01:33:52

Redman: But this was indeed widely read?

02-01:33:54

Weisberger: Yeah, that was widely read. Obviously, it was heavily censored and under the GI aegis. But it wasn't like the propaganda films. They were not written by guys like us. That made a difference. We didn't despise them. Just as I said, they were just a pain in the ass.

02-01:34:18

Redman: One of the other things I'm thinking about is, I have a training manual that's described as it's on hygiene, and really it's for GIs—I think it's printed in about 1944—and it warns GIs about contracting venereal disease, interacting with loose, easy women, and these sorts of things. We got into this a little bit yesterday. You talked about the routine exams by physicians to watch for this sort of thing. A second sort of narrative we hear about the war is the sort of wild, liberating experience of being in the service was, for some individuals, taking them to new ports, meeting new people. Some people that were discharged in San Francisco or places like San Diego, especially young gay men, who would stay in the city and be liberated in a new way. Can you speak to my casting of this experience of sex and sexuality and learning about the dangers of being with loose women, perhaps?

02-01:35:27

Weisberger: Sure. They required, before they paid you monthly and at other times, too, that you get a short-arm examination. I don't know where that piece of slang came from. I described that yesterday, I think, right?

02-01:35:50

Redman: Yes, yes.

02-01:35:54

Weisberger:

We did see a movie, not a manual. But of course when you see it over and over again, you begin to laugh at it. That's one of the problems of frequent repetition. The movie that we saw may have been superseded by a later one. I don't know whether we had to do this overseas, I can't remember. Once we got overseas, we were busy, and I think our work time was more guarded. I just don't remember any of this happening over there. I do remember it all during the training period here. I'm not sure you're interested in that. Anyway, the movie showed a soldier emerging from what was obviously a whorehouse, with his belt and tunic hung on a baluster of a staircase, and he lights a cigarette, throws it away, puts on his jacket. It's obvious he's been with a wicked woman. Then they flash forward to what's happening to him later, and they show a picture, and they start showing a picture of some symptoms that would develop. First, a chancre, shown in a very graphic picture of a guy peeling back his foreskin to reveal this very ugly, hard, painful sore on the penis, or else a gonorrhreal discharge. That was all first stage. Then the movie really was intended to scare us. It said, now, even if you don't show a chancre you may move into the second stage, which is, at that point, I think, incurable or very hard to cure. They showed some guy broken out all over in syphilitic sores, looking just like a smallpox victim. We remember the narration by some Hollywood actor, silver-haired, authoritative-looking, and he shows this poor pock-marked guy and says, "Unfortunately for this soldier, the chancre did not appear." The guy didn't even know he had it, so it went into the second stage. I'm giggling at it not because it wasn't serious. The pictures were scary. But by the tenth time—

02-01:38:30

Redman:

Right, yeah. You start to get it.

02-01:38:34

Weisberger:

Yeah, you start to get it.

02-01:38:36

Redman:

So that really was something that was drilled in quite a bit. Fears of venereal disease. The historian Allan Bérubé, in his work, especially in the 1980s, he talks about, in particular, US Army instructions on avoiding homosexual contact, and notably that a lot of these individuals who were being drafted into the Army had never heard of homosexuality. So it has this unintended consequence of really raising awareness of another category of sexual behavior. Was homosexuality something that you were warned against engaging in that type of behavior?

02-01:39:30

Weisberger:

No, I can't remember that.

02-01:39:32

Redman:

Okay, but more of a fear of prostitution, then?

02-01:39:35

Weisberger:

Let me talk just a minute. It wasn't prostitutes. It was *unknown* women. Streetwalkers. Prostitutes were implied. For some of us, by the way, it was news, given the environment we grew up in. I never heard about VD. I didn't know what it was. I had read a book about Paul de Kruif, a very popular book called *Microbe Hunters*, about microbiologists in the turn of the century who had made big discoveries, so I knew what syphilis was but not how it was contracted. Didn't know anybody who had it, for God's sake. I knew what prostitutes were. But VD was sort of a revelation to me.

So far as homosexuality goes, no, there were no explicit warnings not to deal with homosexuals. I don't remember any explicit reference to homosexuality as being something that made you liable to discharge at the time. They tried to get people *into* the Army then. There were these jokes about guys trying unsuccessfully to avoid conscription by pretending to be homosexual. Warnings against it weren't needed because homophobia was so common and so general. Everybody agreed, "Gee, who wanted to deal with fags?" They were telling jokes about fairies and cocksuckers. I found homophobia pretty prevalent. However, having said all that, the idea that we were going to be afraid we'd be taking a shower with some homo who was looking at our dicks—I'm sorry, I'm slipping into Army language.

02-01:41:39

Redman:

No, that's fine.

02-01:41:41

Weisberger:

Comes back in a rush.

02-01:41:45

Redman:

It's also, of course, important to understand some of the terms that were used as well. Yeah, go ahead.

02-01:41:54

Weisberger:

Anybody with effeminate mannerism was assumed to be queer, which, of course, was a big mistake, because there are a lot of people who had effeminate mannerisms who were straight. The idea, by the way, of guys like football players and boxers being gay, it was out of our realm of consciousness. We had a couple of guys in the barracks, I remember, who hung out with each other, and there was a lot of touchy-feely between them. We all figured they were gay. To my knowledge, they were not harassed by us. Even among us, there were relatively well-educated people who would tell fairy jokes and certainly would have been annoyed at being "hit on." But I doubt stories about how the troops today are just scared to death of being assailed by homosexuals. We didn't have any of that. Those guys were accepted, more or less. The disconnect there is that we knew or suspected that we had a couple of gays, and it didn't bother us. On the other hand, the idea of homosexuality was repugnant to most of us.

02-01:43:30

Redman:

That's a terrific summary of that contrast. That's very interesting. I'm moving towards wrapping up our session today with asking about life at the end of the war. You'd mentioned utilizing some of your GI Bill benefits at the University of Chicago. I'm wondering what your thoughts are on the GI Bill as a program.

02-01:43:53

Weisberger:

Oh my gosh. It was one of the great legislative achievements of the twentieth century. It created a middle class. I'll get back to my generation now. There are Elderhostels. I don't know whether you know what they are, but they are week-long programs run by an organization that gets people over sixty-five together for a week, in a motel or a designated restaurant for mini-classes on a whole, great variety of subjects. Not academically serious. They always opened with—I shouldn't say always. I haven't been there in a couple of years. They usually would open with a meeting of getting together, going around the circle. Who are you and why are you here? Where have you come from? You get up, person after person. Man after man—and it was usually men, although there are some women vets from World War II, too—man after man would get up and say, "Yeah, I was in the Army, and then I went to dental school on the GI Bill. I went to med school on the GI Bill." It created a middle class, or a hugely expanded middle class. What we paid back in taxes from our enlarged incomes, I'm sure has more than paid for the program. You're hitting an enthusiast.

02-01:45:47

Redman:

That's terrific to hear your personal perspective on that.

02-01:45:55

Weisberger:

It was so generous. I think you got an automatic year of GI Bill, even if you were drafted thirty days before the end of the war. After that it was year for each year of service, up to a maximum of four. You got an allowance for tuition that included expenses for books, which were usually recoverable back in 1946, and you got support. At the start, it was seventy-five bucks for a single vet, and I think 105 for a married vet with children. They both went up. I think I was getting ninety bucks towards the end of the year. Plus, you could buy a home, 4 percent guaranteed mortgage. You could open a business. There may have been other benefits. I've always been sorry for the fact that they started to scale down immediately after the war. I was against the Vietnam War. I was certainly against the damn war in Iraq. But I'm sorry for the poor guys who were in it, and I think they should be getting the same benefits we got.

02-01:47:14

Redman:

What you're saying is resonating with my life experience, because the GI Bill not only helped my grandparents, it also helped my father go to law school. It absolutely resonates with what you're saying. Do you have a personal sense of how American life was changing following World War II?

02-01:47:38

Weisberger:

Oh, gosh, enormously. That was the other thing about coming back and reentering society. First of all, there were so many new things. One was the rise of Levittowns, these mass suburban developments that facilitated the great move from the cities to the suburbs. It was partly facilitated by the building of a highway system that made it easier to commute from the suburbs to the cities. My parents, like many urban people, spent their lives for a period in apartments. If you lived in a big city, you lived in an apartment building. Who owned a home in the city? Who owned a home, period? That's why I laugh when they say that's part of the American dream. Well, it certainly wasn't in the thirties. I mean, it's nice, especially if you get GI mortgage interest or a tax deduction. But the idea of owning your home was very strange to those of us from the Depression generation. So there was that change. You asked if I knew about Rosie the Riveter. Well, of course, the first few years after the war, Rosie the Riveter was told to go home, leave college to make room for the guys who needed to get into college, and have a lot of babies very quickly. It profoundly affected the girls we married.

02-01:49:19

Redman:

Did you see evidence of that transition taking place as well, where the women who had assumed roles in defense work, such as the idea of Rosie the Riveters, were encouraged to leave what were supposed to be, quote unquote, "temporary jobs" and go back into the home? Then we sort of think of the quintessential 1950s suburban housewife. There's some tension in how that actually played out, but that does seem like a pretty dramatic influence, popular influence, that was taking place following the war. Did you see that taking place? Do you think that's an accurate portrayal of the course of events?

02-01:50:07

Weisberger:

Oh, I think it definitely is. What you saw was, in the women's magazines, of which there were a great many in circulation—*Ladies' Home Journal* comes to mind, and *Cosmopolitan*, a lot of those—they would run articles on how women—well, they didn't say, quit your job. I don't remember any exhortations, if you were working, to stop working and go home. But they all celebrated marriage and they celebrated domesticity. As a veteran on the campus, I was dimly aware that there were so many of us that we must be taking up some spots that women would have normally occupied.

Also, all the vets, most of them, had rushed to get married as soon as they came home and start families. I did see direct evidence of it. Oh yeah, there was plenty. There were even articles in general interest magazines on how women were at their happiest when they were homemakers. I got married in 1951. I was in my first teaching job at Swarthmore. I eventually married one of my students, who I met her senior year, who was Phi Beta Kappa at Swarthmore. We had three children within five years. Her very bright young women classmates also got married, and within six or seven years had two or three children. I did see it. I should add, by the way, that many of them,

including my wife, by the time the kids were old enough to go to school, promptly popped back into grad school.

02-01:52:10

Redman: They had other things that they wanted to do as well.

02-01:52:13

Weisberger: Yeah, sure.

02-01:52:13

Redman: Certainly. We've covered a lot of ground, and we're going to have to potentially talk about returning for a third session to go over any holes that come to mind. I have a feeling that both you and I, our brains are probably going to be spinning over the next couple of days with things that we'd love to add to this. But I'd like to just ask, by way of wrapping up, if there's anything else that you'd like to maybe add about the Second World War and how it's remembered. Maybe we'll stick to that sort of a theme as we wrap up here.

02-01:53:06

Weisberger: It's remembered, in some ways, I think, with a kind of nostalgia. I know that sounds crazy. Russell Baker, the humorist, he calls it the last really swell war, sort of tongue-in-cheek. First of all, it was the last war that Congress declared. It was the last war that followed the Constitution of the United States. I love it when these conservatives who talk about strictly interpreting the Constitution just ignore the absolute evaporation of Congress's war powers. That's a side issue, World War II. It is remembered because it's the last war in which there was no question about it. The Korean War turned out to be unsatisfactory to many people because it was the first war which we fought in which there was no victory. There couldn't be. It ended up where it started, with a truce, which is the best you could do at the time, for a lot of reasons.

Then comes Vietnam. That generation doesn't know anything like a war which everybody has somebody in the ranks, and everybody participates in scrap metal drives and saves cotton tin cans to make ammunition.

Everybody's in the war. We don't have that. A lot of the old-timers, I think, are a little nostalgic for good old World War II. You knew who your enemy was. I don't know how much of that there is, but I get that sense. The other part of it that's remembered is the fighting part, which is, as you say, somewhat glorified and glamorized. I just regard the war—as I said before, I wouldn't have missed my part of it for the world, but it was something that had to be done. I'm sure glad it's behind us.

02-01:55:01

Redman: You're glad not to be the "hurry up and wait" anymore.

02-01:55:05

Weisberger: Yeah, exactly. I obviously have enjoyed this revisit to my war days with you. I never joined vets organization, and I wasn't a big guy on being in the American Legion and stuff like that. As I've gotten older, I've been in more

frequent contact with the guys whom I actually knew in my unit. You do get sort of sentimental about it. It's basically because then you shared an incomparable experience together when you were young.

02-01:55:32

Redman: It's nothing in particular to do with, necessarily, the war itself, but more so your youthful experience with it, in some sense.

02-01:55:41

Weisberger: Yeah. As I said yesterday, it was a hugely transformative experience. I still—when I think back on it and look at it, I'm amazed at the scope of it. It involved people all over the world. Here in the United States kids from every goddamn little hamlet in the country were pulled together into this great machine, and then scattered to weird places like Guadalcanal, which they'd never heard of. Or, in my case, did I ever dream I would go to India, for heaven's sake? We had that. Then they brought us all back together again, threw us back into civilian life. We reentered civilian life at a time of huge changes, which were the fifties. I consider myself part of a lucky generation because of the fifties and the sixties, and the new changes and the relative prosperity of the period.

02-01:56:52

Redman: Certainly. With that, I will say thank you and I will stop the recording here. So thank you very much, yet again, for sitting down with me.

02-01:57:01

Weisberger: Thank you, Sam.

[End of Interview]

Also available in The Bancroft Library supplementary to this interview is Bernard A. Weisberger's My War Memoir: 1942-1946.