John C. Whitaker was Undersecretary of the Interior during some of the key environmental achievements of the century, during the Nixon administration.

This interview was part of a series of public conversations with former Interior secretaries conducted by Charles Wilkinson and Patty Limerick, cofounders of the Center of the American West at the University of Colorado at Boulder. The series was cosponsored by the Nature Conservancy and Headwaters News.

Boulder, Colo.; Nov. 19, 2003

Introduction: Rogers C.B. Morton

Patricia Limerick: I want to begin with the Secretary of Interior Rogers C. B. Morton, under whom Undersecretary Whitaker served.

Rogers C. B. Morton was appointed Secretary of the Interior in November 1970, to succeed Walter Hickel. He was nominated to that position; he was confirmed in January of 1971.

He had had successful careers in business, farming, government and politics before that. There are many testimonies of Secretary Morton's affability and congeniality. He was the tallest man in Congress, when he was in Congress. Disputed reports say 6 feet, 6-and-a-half, or 6-feet-7 — it probably depends upon the occasion as to which height he assumed.

The term used by many of his friends and acquaintances to describe him was "the jolly giant."

He had a lightning mind for repartee. He was a first-class raconteur and he had a magnificent sense of humor, Current Biography said in 1971. His big brother, Thruston, was a senator from Kentucky, the state where they grew up. This is a comment Thruston made about his kid brother: "My kid brother, Rog, is a hog farmer and he weighs anywhere from 235 pounds to 275 pounds. When the price of hogs goes up, he sells them; when the price of hogs goes down, he eats them."

Secretary Morton had a lifelong enjoyment of outdoors experience. He took trips out West. As a young man, in the summer of 1933, he worked for several weeks on a ranch near Yellowstone. Growing up in Kentucky, I think he was seventh-generation Kentuckian. He was an enthusiast for carpentry, boating and outdoor sports.

He piloted his own plane. He swam, he sailed, he snorkeled, he hiked, and he hunted. His mother's family had a flour company, Ballard and Ballard. He was in that company as a young man and then that company merged with Pillsbury, and he was with Pillsbury for some time.

Yes ... there was a lot of griping. The Secretary of Commerce would call every couple of days and say the world is falling apart and this thing was just going to ruin the world.

- John C. Whitaker, on conflict in the Nixon Cabinet over emerging environmental policies

He went as an undergraduate to Yale, he was a basketball player — surprise, surprise. And Current Biography says — I'm quoting from them — I wouldn't be knowledgeable enough to make this statement — that once in a Yale-Columbia game, he scored 30 points against Columbia in the days "when that was an impressive number."

In the early 1950s, he moved to a farm near Chesapeake Bay where he could sail, which was a passion of his. It was basically a cattle-finishing farm. He eventually ran for Congress and served four terms as a congressman from Maryland's eastern shore.

In Congress, he was a member of the Interior Committee for his first years and then he left that committee when he had a chance to serve on Ways and Means. He had a great passion for concerns about Chesapeake Bay. He sometimes said the C.B.
in Rogers C.B. Morton stood for Chesapeake Bay because he was such an advocate for the well-being of that body of water.

In Congress, he drafted the law establishing the Assateague National Seashore, he was a sponsor of an oil-pollution control bill and he was an early backer of Richard Nixon in 1968. He was the floor manager at the nominating convention and — an interesting achievement — he gave the nominating speech for Spiro Agnew, who was from Maryland, so there was solidarity among Marylanders there.

He was Richard Nixon's choice for chairman of the Republican National Committee in April of 1969. His goal was to transform the GOP into what he called the "Swinging Action Party of the day." That meant to him giving a set speech called "Where the Votes Are," in which he berated fellow Republicans for "writing off the Negro, writing off labor, writing off young people, writing off ethnic groups" and encouraging the Republicans to stop that writing off and pay attention to those folks.

In 1968, Rogers was under consideration for Secretary of Interior, but Nixon honored the custom and habit of giving the office to a Westerner, so after Walter Hickel's departure, then Rogers Morton was the nominee.

He became the first or second Easterner, depending on how you define Easterner, to hold the position of Secretary of the Interior. At the time of his appointment, the New York Times was pretty darn cheery about having someone from the Eastern United States take that position.

"Whatever Mr. Morton's success in the office, we are glad to see the tradition against an Eastern Secretary of the Interior shattered at last. Only once in this century has the appointee come from a state east of Illinois. Usually the post has been considered a plum for the resource-developing states of the West where there is frequently strong local resentment against protective controls, especially when established by outsiders."

"The priority of our environment must be brought into equity with that of our economy and our defense. Otherwise, at some point in time there will be no economy to enjoy and practically no reason for defense."

We'll hear more about Secretary Morton's activities and the issues he was involved in when we get to speak to his undersecretary.

He served until 1975. He was a member of the transition committee after Nixon's resignation. He became a top Ford adviser. He was Secretary of Commerce briefly and then he, while he was still at Interior, had a bad patch of ill health, retired from public life in 1977 and died in April of 1979 at age 64.

Far too young, as Gerald Ford said: "Rogers Morton was one of the most decent, honorable, constructive, unselfish and lovable persons I have ever known."

Introduction: John C. Whitaker

Patricia Limerick: Our guest tonight is John C. Whitaker, who was undersecretary of the Department of the Interior from 1973 to 1975.

John C. Whitaker was a Nixon domestic White House staffer who coordinated environmental, energy and natural resource policies. He was born in Victoria, B.C., in 1926. He was raised in Baltimore. The contrast between those two settings was formative for him in ways that we'll hear soon.

He enlisted in the U.S. Navy and served as a weatherman and then graduated from Georgetown University in 1949. He received a Ph.D. in geology from Johns Hopkins in 1953. Having spoken to him, this is a case where it's clear that he would have been in environmental studies, if that field had existed. One of the reasons for having him here is that so many of his interests preceded the official invention of those kinds of fields.

He graduated in geology, worked as a petroleum exploration geologist for Standard Oil of California and later as vice president of the International Aeroservice Company dealing with airborne geophysical prospecting and natural resource aerial photo analysis in Third World countries.

Whitaker read a book about Nixon at a crucial time in his life and in Nixon's life and then became an advance man for Richard Nixon in the presidential campaign in 1960. He scheduled Nixon's campaign coordinating various congressional candidates in 1966. He coordinated the overall schedule of the Nixon-Agnew ticket and their surrogate spokespersons in the 1968 presidential campaign.

In 1969, Whitaker joined the Nixon White House staff first as cabinet secretary and then as the director of Nixon's nine-nation world tour in the summer of
He then coordinated the White House Policy for Natural Resources, including putting together and synthesizing Nixon's messages to Congress dealing with environment, energy, rural development and farm policy. In 1973, he moved over to become Undersecretary of Interior under Nixon and then Ford.

After he left office, he wrote and published a book "Striking a Balance: Environment and Natural Resource Policy in the Nixon-Ford Years" dealing with environmental issues including the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency.

When he left professional service, he was vice president of the Union-Kampf Forest Products Company; he was on the board of directors of the National Audubon Society. He was an adviser to President Reagan's Commission on Americans Outdoors and he was appointed by the Secretary of Interior to a panel dealing with the Garrison Diversion Project, a congressionally mandated study of a controversial North Dakota Irrigation Project.

After he retired, John Whitaker became chairman of the board of directors of a group called "Rebuilding Together with Christmas in April," a nonprofit organization which each year repairs about 8,000 homes of low-income, elderly homeowners in all 50 states with more than a quarter-million volunteers. He also volunteers serving the poorest of the poor at the Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity Home in Washington, D.C.

He has performed many important tasks, has had many important achievements and I would have to say the achievement that comes to mind as we bring him up here is his great achievement in making me finally practice the gospel that historians are supposed to recognize is that human beings are complex and we do them a disservice when we try to force white hats and black hats, good-guy and bad-guy characterizations.

As a person who started college in 1968, I had strong and I thought unchangeable, feelings about Richard Nixon and John Ehrlichman. For the kids in the room, John Ehrlichman was a figure in the Watergate conspiracy. John Ehrlichman was crucial, as you'll hear more, in the cause of bringing environmental issues to President Nixon's attention and getting his support and action for that.

Here is a quotation from Undersecretary Whitaker on Ehrlichman: Putting Ehrlichman in charge of environmental policy with Whitaker reporting to him "gave the system clout. Ehrlichman saw the president regularly and came back with firm yes or no answers. Probably equally important, Ehrlichman was pro-environment."

This was a recognition I was slow to come to in my own life.

Next, President Nixon – I think I had hints of this – but President Nixon was like all of us – a complicated person. This is a quotation from John Whitaker that I have spent some time pondering in anticipation of his visit. "Much of the credit belongs, in the author's opinion, to Richard Nixon. Nixon was there at the right moment. He grasped the issue quickly and presented a comprehensive and broad legislative agenda."

The issue is Earth Day and environmental passions.

"A number of ingredients, including a public outcry to stop pollution, a talented and dedicated group in the executive branch to put forth legislative proposals, a Congress whose majority was ready to act, and a president ready to accept comprehensive recommendations that often ran counter to the wishes of his cabinet officers, all of this combined to produce the best conservation and environmental record since Theodore Roosevelt."

It is my great pleasure and honor to present Undersecretary John C. Whitaker to you.

John Whitaker (recording begins in the midst of an anecdote):

"… Johnny, where did you come from today?" And I said, "Well, Mildred, I came from Washington." And she said, "Where is Washington?" And I realized right away that she really didn't know where Washington was.

The rest of the conversation was more or less to keep from embarrassing Mildred. Mildred lived in a setting in the wilderness of Nova Scotia. She'd never been to Boston; she'd never been to Halifax. She had never been anywhere. She's out in the middle of this wilderness.

To try to get it going, I said, "Well, Mildred that's where President Nixon is. Just like you have Prime Minister Trudeau in Ottawa." No recognition. I said, "Well, we have a Congress down there just like you have a Parliament." No. She looked up at me and
said, "Johnny, how many people live there?" And I said, "Oh, about three million." And she looked at me and said, "Think of that. Three million people living so far away from everything."

We're all a little egocentric like that when we get a job inside the Beltway. All of the wisdom is, of course, supposed to be east of the 100th Meridian. So when Rog Morton from Maryland, who was the first Secretary in living memory to be an Easterner, got the job and then Nixon nominate me, well, these Senators were getting a little nervous down there on the Interior Committee about whether they were going to confirm two Easterners.

I went through the nomination process and went down there on the Hill to do my best. I was told to think like a Westerner, which I soon discovered meant high subsidies for water and low prices for grazing fees.

I was all right when I got there, but I was trying to put a little levity into this thing at the very end. At the opening of my confirmation hearing, I had these stony Republicans and fairly loose Democrats, but the Republicans that were supposed to be on my side were kind of stony.

I said to the senators, "Well, I realize you feel you've got a problem here with two Easterners. Rog and I have talked about this and we've talked about moving the department west." I paused and then I said, "How about Pittsburgh?" All the Democrats laughed, but the Republicans just ground their teeth and I started the meeting and it went on from there.

Two Seminal Events

Only one thing to start this off. The world I lived in when I was at the White House and was Undersecretary of the Interior really had two seminal events, and the first one was of course the environmental revolution that came upon us as a hurricane.

When Nixon and Humphrey ran for president, neither one of them for practical purposes ever mentioned the environment. It just wasn't on the radar screen: The economy, Vietnam, things like that were on the radar screen.

That was kind of funny. Eighteen months later, a hurricane arrived called the environmental movement. We can discuss later how that happened and why that happened. But that was the one seminal event.

The other seminal event was the Arab embargo. When the Arab embargo came after Nixon backed the Israelis and the reaction of the Arabs was to cut off oil. In one week, the price of energy tripled in this country.

So the pendulum swung from doing all these good things we thought we were doing environmentally, and then having to find the energy to do them, which seemed to be such a contradiction.

We worked very hard to get environmentally modern leasing laws and things like that. We can discuss in general. I just wanted to mention those two things because those were the parameters that we dealt with when we start this discussion.

Environmental Revolution

Charles Wilkinson: Let's start out with the environmental hurricane you mentioned. During the first three or four years of the Nixon administration, we had an upswelling of laws and policies that really is unequalled, I think, in terms of building the foundation for modern environmental and resources law.

The president delivered a major message in '70 – the Clean Air Act is passed, the Clean Water Act is passed, the Environmental Protection Agency is established; and actually several other initiatives were either enacted then – the National Environmental Policy Act was passed.

Tell us about those times. Take some time doing it and ramble a bit about the personalities involved; about the back and forth between the White House and the Congress. The spine that different people had, or didn't have, in terms of getting that historic package of policies adopted.

Richard Nixon and John Ehrlichman

JW: I guess you'd better start with the main character in the program, the president. Richard Nixon was pretty much what you would call a traditional Republican. He wasn't eager to start out with his constituency knocking him around and getting involved in some environmental battle, so to speak. That's the reality of life. But he did see this political hurricane coming and to calibrate that hurricane.

We had good polls in those days, that were paid for by the White House. One percent of the United States
thought that the environment was the most important issue on inauguration day; 17 percent did on Earth Day. Now when I say important issue, I'm saying 17 percent of the people thought that the environment was more important than jobs, more important than peace and war and foreign policy, the traditional two top issues on any poll. Nixon understood that this was a tidal wave and that he had to do something about it.

I would like to give credit to John Ehrlichman, and we all know about Watergate and all that. But John was a land-use lawyer and he was my boss when I got on the Domestic Council. John did a great job of walking through these things. He was passionate about one part of the thing: the open spaces and the environment and parks. He was passionate about that. I'll get to the why in a minute.

[Nixon] was not passionate, or almost bored, by the arcane Clean Water Act, Clean Air Act — all the science and things that went with that. He more or less trusted that to John or me to work our way through.

Parks for the People

Parks was kind of a different thing with him. As a poor boy from Yorba Linda, I guess, he recognized that many of his neighbors and people like that could not afford a two-week vacation and had never seen Yosemite, even though they were from California. Had never been to Yellowstone. So he became quite an advocate for parks for the people.

You may remember we created in those days, the two gateways East and West. The New York Harbor and the San Francisco Harbor national parks at that time. The Park Service folks didn't particularly like that in those days. They were pretty leather-britchers. It's got to be traditional and it took quite a bit to get that around.

The other thing he did – you talked to Secretary Hickel a month ago – Wally got the president's attention very much by saying, "Mr. President, all these parks – these parks are going to be bought and are for generations to come. We ought to buy parks like we mortgage them."

This meant a great deal more debt for the federal government if that policy passed. All of Nixon's advisers were adamantly against this.

The thing was in deadlock on the afternoon that before the State of the Union address was due. When I saw the last draft of the State of the Union address, there was nothing about parks in it. I'm down there on the congressional floor the next day and there's Nixon talking on television saying, "We have a unique way we're going to finance parks."

Uh-oh. We had no unique way to finance parks. But he had stuck it in the message, his own handwriting and everything. He bought Wally's idea and overruled all of the rest of the bureaucracy, but what were we going to do about it?

Well, we solved the problem in a simple way – we took the land away from the Defense Department, for the most part — other agencies, too — and we made postage-stamp parks all over the country. As a matter of fact, we made something like, I've forgotten the numbers, but something like 600 parks in all kinds of little places like that. It really was parks for the people. We did the traditional national parks, new parks as well.

Nixon should get a lot of credit, I believe, for all these things that happened because they were against the traditional Republican approach but there was a wind blowing and a convergence there. We had an administration who wanted to do it, Congress wanted to do it — there were a lot that didn't but a majority that wanted to do it, and the public did.

A lot of good things happened. It was a frantic day. I remember the day of the 37-point message to Congress. We discovered about 4 o'clock in the morning that there were only 36 points in the message but we didn't change it because there were no mimeographs or nice machines in those days and the press never did discover it. That's to begin to give some climate of what it was like, Charlie, in those days.

CW: Was there a lot of broad sense of collegiality among people working in the White House on these issues?

Earth Day

JW: Oh, no. God, no. Never that. I was the bad guy among many of the people on the White House staff for being too "pro-environment" on this thing.

We had ridiculous things, like a guy would come up to me and say, "This Earth Day, that's the same as Lenin's birthday. That's why these environmentalists are doing this to us." Crazy stuff.

At the same time, Nixon wouldn't demagogue Earth
Day. He refused, in spite of my efforts, to try to have a National Earth Day. What we did — the White House went out and cleaned up — I organized a thing and we cleaned up a piece of the Potomac River that day and got a good photo op out of the thing.

You know what we declared on Earth Day? National Archery Week. It was really depressing. You probably know there 's more national weeks and days than any president can put out — but we were silent on Earth Day when all of this was going on. And it was really because he would not demagogue the issue.

What I am going to say now is important: He had a real sense that there was no free lunch in the environment and he was willing to take a lot of criticism for, not the question of regulation, but the intensity of the regulation: How clean is clean?

He would preach you that little story. You've all heard it. "This room can hold 100 cubic feet of water, and it only costs $100 to clean up 99 cubic feet but it costs you, dammit, another $100 dollars to clean up the last cubic foot with zero discharge."

He rightly, in my opinion, did a lot to, and took a lot of heat for, moderating some of those regulations which people now understand there is no free lunch. I remember Senator McGovern saying in those days, that the clean-up of the environment might cost the country, I think he said, almost $200 million dollars in 20 years.

Well, it cost more than that in the first 10 years after that. Everybody was underballing, or low balling, what we were talking about in those days. He took a lot of heat and, I think in the end, we had better regulations for it.

\textbf{CW:} Talk a little bit about your relationships with Congress, because with the exception of EPA and the message, they all went through Congress. Who was easy? Who was difficult? Who were leaders in favor of those initiatives?

\textbf{JW:} I would say the air, the water, the toxic things, were kind of East Coast-driven, for the most part, through the Public Works Committee. Senator Muskie was the key person on the Public Works Committee, led the Public Work Committee at that time.

The land-use issues were more Western in their orientation. In the early days, it was a little tough with the western Senators. They really didn't want to go along with a lot of this. I think that changed after a few elections and some of them lost. They were a little slow, I thought, picking up on the environmental revolution. That was part of it.

It kind of shocked me — we might get to Native Americans later but trying to transfer land back to Native Americans for religious, sometimes religious rights like Taos Blue Lake, if you know that legislation. We got a lot of fight because the senators' chain was being pulled by ranchers who were saying, "This is the nose of the camel under the tent. If you take a little Forest Service land and give it to them and take it away as a place where we can do grazing fees, it's only going to get worse."

It was tough and surprising to me as an Easterner. That was kind of the climate at the time. But in general, it was quite cooperative. Because anybody could look at the polls. It was a rush to pass a lot of things, and a lot of things got passed.

\textbf{CW:} Were there any people in particular who really made, who've made significant turnarounds. Who were obstacles to you and who effectively changed?

\textbf{JW:} I don't know about turnarounds. We had some good leaders, like Sen. Scoop Jackson, was a very good leader. The idea of a council on environmental quality, the idea of a national environmental policy act, came out of his staff. And we changed it and negotiated with it.

I will always say he was my friend, because when they were going to nominate me, Nixon picked up the phone and called Scoop, and Scoop said, "OK, I can live with this." He was from Washington and he knew better than I did, what we were up against. Jackson's always been my hero.

\textbf{National Environmental Policy Act}

\textbf{CW:} NEPA seemed, I think, to a number of people, to be almost a policy statement and without teeth. And it's become much more elaborate. Environmental impact statements can be very burdensome, can be lengthy and detailed. Did you ever have a conversation with the president or Ehrlichman or others who later on had some regrets about the way NEPA played out?

\textbf{PL:} We have some quite a number of young people who might not know what NEPA is.
JW: The National Environmental Policy Act. That's the one that said you have to do an environmental impact statement when you take a significant federal action that affects the environment. That's NEPA. First of all, NEPA was signed on Jan. 1. It must have been slow day on the news because it made headlines. I think, Mr. Berry who is here from OMB, will remember those days very well. I don't remember anybody saying to me when we did the option paper ... that it had a legal implication, and the government would end up being sued and this would be kind of a cottage industry for the lawyers and this was really going to change the world.

Maybe somebody in OMB knew. I certainly didn't know. The president didn't know. John Ehrlichman didn't know. On the other hand, I'm certainly glad we signed it. I think the National Environmental Policy Act and the exercise of going through and writing environmental impact statements has been a very salutary worthwhile thing.

It is the one thing you can hang your hat on right now to deal with these tough issues like you're dealing with right now: Whether you should drill up in the Alaska wildlife range or whether we should drill the Rocky Mountain Front or down in Utah. With NEPA, you have to do a good EIS before you can even intelligently debate the issue whether you should go forward or not.

But yes, Charlie, there was a lot of griping. The Secretary of Commerce would call every couple of days and say the world is falling apart and this thing was just going to ruin the world. And we didn't know how to write an environmental impact statement very well. We got sued a lot and we lost a lot. The judge saying the facts we had unearthed in writing the environmental statement were not adequate to make a decision whether you should or should not go forward with a certain development project.

It was a good exercise for the whole government and incidentally, BuRec [Bureau of Reclamation] and the Army Corps of Engineers, kind of the bad guys, can probably write the best environmental statements in the federal government because they learned how to do it well.

PL: How did you get to know Richard Nixon in the first place?

Meeting Nixon

JW: I had nothing to do with politics. I was going to Ocean City to the beach with my wife and I'm not a big fan of the beach, sitting on the beach all weekend, so I brought a book about Richard Nixon along. I was kind of like St. Paul getting knocked off a horse. It really was.

I went to my boss of the aerial survey company I was working for. To make a long story short, he gave me a leave of absence for three months, paid my salary, which probably was illegal at the time or certainly is illegal now, to be on the staff of a campaign and be on a corporate payroll. I was making $12,000 a year and was doing pretty well.

Nixon spoke. Then I had to figure out how to meet him. I knew this gal who worked over at the White House for Eisenhower and I sent to see her. She and her boss introduced me — eventually I got introduced to a guy named Bob Haldeman who said, do you want to be an advance man? He took me out and taught me how to advance. All these friends of mine went to jail later, as you know. But they're still good friends.

When the trip was over, Nixon came out to the plane and we flew back and he gave me a perfunctory brief shake of hands. I was thinking to myself I was not that impressed with what the then-vice president of the United States had said. I it was the standard GOP fund-raiser, give them hell, give them some red meat kind of speech you do at fund-raisers.

He came up to the front of the plane and gave them an interview. It was just three guys, I'll never forget them. It was ABC, CBS and a guy from the New York Times. The subject was underground testing and seismology and how we could find out whether the Soviets were cheating on us on underground nuclear explosions.

I knew damn well with a Ph.D. in geology, and I didn't care that this guy was vice president of the United States, I knew I knew more about seismology than he did. And he never made a mistake. It would be like one of you were a doctor and I pretended I was a medical doctor and we got into an intense discussion on how to take an appendix out. I would make a mistake somewhere and you would figure out I really didn't know much about it. That was the beginning of the intellectual relationship that I had with Nixon that went on for many years. He sold me right there on the spot and that's how I got to know him, work for him, scheduling for him and all that.

PL: I think we have to ask you about your appraisal: How are we supposed to think about Richard Nixon
given his complexities?

**JW:** Well, I guess the public is — it's just like any president. Nixon: China, Watergate. Clinton: Monica Lewinsky. These are not fair things to say, I don't think, about any president. I think, for example, Clinton did a damn good job as president. He had some girlfriend problems that didn't work out so well there. But anyway, he did.

**The Personal Nixon**

Nixon was a brilliant person. He was a very kind person. You wouldn't think that. He had a good sense of humor, but his sense of humor always dealt with some public official he was making fun of so you couldn't use it. But he had a good sense of humor.

He was a very ungraceful conversationalist. He was the worst small-talker in the world. If you would talk about the relative throw rates of Russian versus American missiles, he would relax immediately and go into it in great detail. But if it was small talk, he was a disaster.

The classic small-talk story about Nixon where he had so much trouble, and he was really very compassionate. We were going down a street in Kansas City in the motorcade, and the policeman wipes out on the motorbike. He's smashed up in the middle of the street. He's bloody and under this motorcycle. The president says, "Stop the car." We all get out and we all get around this poor guy down there, with the press behind Nixon. Nixon looks down at this guy and says, "How do you like your job?" See what I mean? He had a terrible time with people and being a politician, that was something. Anyway, that gives you an idea.

**PL:** That's a very remarkable story. How about the bottle-return story?

**Federal Bottle Return Bill**

**JW:** The federal bottle return bill. Where you put another dime down on your Coke bottle and then you bring it back and it's recycled again. We did a long option bill on this and he'd read it because I got it back with his squiggles all over it with some more questions. The buzzer rings and he brings me in there with Ehrlichman to go over it and the conversation is about like this. There may be a tape recording so I hope I haven't embellished it too much.

He says, "John, how many jobs are lost on this thing?" I said, "Well, Mr. President, about 60,000 people lose their jobs because they'll be making a lot less bottles and cans. But 60,000 people get new jobs cleaning the bottles, cans, and taking them to the supermarket and all the things that are necessary to recycle."

[J] "John, the 60,000 who lose their job, am I going to tell them or are you going to tell them?" I then realized that I had been an inside-the-Beltway mega-economist talking about the mega-economy and not what life is all about. He said, "Do you think this thing will go?" I said, "Yes. You won't get the Democrats on it but you'll kind of get the garden club vote. You'll get some moderate Republicans you'll like, you'll pull over a few Democrats. This thing is very popular to get these bottles back here." He said, "Yes, you're probably right." I wanted him to go for the bill so I thought I was winning this conversation.

He said, "You know, these ladies who are driving their cars and picking up their kids from school and bringing them back with their bottles in their car. John, you know what I'm talking about. I'm talking about these girls with these anti-gravity hairdos." And I thought, "Anti-gravity hairdos? What the hell is he talking about?" I don't know if any of you ladies are young enough to remember the beehive hairdos of the '70s? Well, they were anti-gravity. The ladies had to go to the hairdressers because the gravity would pull their hair down all the time.

So I'm thinking, "Why are we talking about anti-gravity hairdos? He said, "Well, you know those girls are driving those cars and the mothers" — it was kind of the generation before the soccer moms — "you know, they're picking their kids up at school and they'll have those bottles in the back of the car, right? Because they're going back to the supermarket and they have to take them." He said, "Those bottles will be rattling around in the back of the car, won't they?" I said, "Yeah."

He said, "Do they clean those bottles or are there flies still in there?" He said, "Flies. Noisy bottles. Goddamn it, we're not going to do it." He nixes it. That's how the federal decision was made.

**PL:** Could you contrast what your role on environmental issues was while you were in the White House and then the move to Interior and the difference between the White House role and the Interior role.
From the White House to Interior

JW: Well, substantively it wasn't that much different for me because I had the job of coordinating what you would call the natural resources of the departments of the government, meaning everything at Interior. The civil branch of the Corps of Engineers, the Soil Conservation Service; over in Agriculture, the Forest Service and all that. I was pretty familiar with what the hot issues were and, of course, knew them because I had worked on these bills.

What was new going to Interior was first of all, working for Rog. Morton was a fabulous guy. He really was a wonderful person, who prided himself, and I think walked a fine line between the preservationists and the developers built into the Department of the Interior.

It was a scientific department store over there, a little bit of everything. And walking that line is important in keeping your credibility with both sides of this argument and Rog was very good at that.

Incidentally, he had a wonderful partner in his wife Anne. Anne was into wolves in a big way. I can remember Rog talking about Anne was somewhere up in the tundra of the Yukon, the Auyuittuq Valley. He said, "Anne's chasing some wolf and the terrain is so bad both of them have to pack a lunch to get across the terrain."

Anne was a very good partner and Rog was a very good guy to work with. He got sick. He had cancer later, so he was gone for a long time. We did all the decision-making pretty much over the phone. He was good. Sometimes he wouldn't agree with me and we would do it his way and not my way. That was his job and he was good.

The other big difference, frankly, was what was thought to be the hated bureaucracy. You all hear about the fossilized, intangible bureaucracy. The intractable bureaucracy. I found the leadership of the top level civil servants to be admirable. Really good. Really hard-working people over at Interior.

While I'm mentioning it, another agency that's practically never mentioned by the public, is the OMB, the Office of Management and Budget. That is one sterling group of people over there. Because they are really the only people in town who don't have a constituency pushing them. Their only constituency is the president. They have a constituency when it comes to budget. But they're wonderful people, too.

But I just wanted to remark how the stereotype of the lazy bureaucrat and all is just not the way it is.

One more thing, while we're on low-ranking people. Nixon would say, "Well a cabinet officer doesn't know about this issue, get me a GS-14 who knows what he's talking about in here." And we'd get some GS-14 and some of them were great and other ones just fell apart. They'd never met a real live president of the United States before and it was too much for them.

But he had a way of bringing in specialists when he became convinced that the people on his own White House staff hadn't already asked the right questions and time was running out. He'd call up some GS-14 out of the middle of nowhere and drag him into the Oval Office and it was quite a thing to see.

'Striking a Balance'

PL: The title of the book you wrote about these experiences was "Striking a Balance." Why that title and how does that title characterize what you and Rogers Morton were doing at Interior?

JW: Well, "Striking a Balance" was the comfortable balance between the preservationists and the developers in the Department of the Interior and I think we did that quite well.

Sometimes it was almost a comic opera. For example, when we were building the Alaska Pipeline, there was no question we were going to build it. I remember being in a meeting with Nixon and Wally Hickel and Nixon sent Wally back to – he had been governor of Alaska – to give a speech on Earth Day to say that we were going to build the Alaska Pipeline, which was very popular in Alaska and not popular at all in the lower 48. Which, as Secretary of Interior put him in a middle kind of ground.

Alaska Pipeline

Let me go back to the Alaska Pipeline and why striking a balance can be a comic opera. The way we ran the pipeline, we bypassed all of the departments because we knew they would fight with each other and Alaska, and the decision-making would get slowed down.

Every morning there was a phone call from Gen. Andy Rawlins, who ran the pipeline, to my assistant, Jared Carter, and sometimes I'd get on the phone and we would make decisions on things right and left.
It kind of got to the point where we'd make some deliberately on the environment side and some deliberately on the development side, just so we would look like we were fair arbitrator to the people out there in this environment. I'll never forget I made Charlie Bahr of Standard Oil of California move the pipeline over to get around a peregrine falcon's nest and it cost about $400,000. Charlie never forgave me for that.

That's the kind of striking the balance thing that we did. And as I said earlier, I think doing things in an incredible environmental way but not a way where you screw up the economy is Nixon's legacy of doing. That's a fairly common practice now.

Nixon made us convene meetings so the developers were in the room, the conservationists were in the room, and a pattern developed when we were looking at the cost of regulations. Almost all the time EPA underestimated or came in with a low-ball figure about the financial implications of the regulation they were proposing. Almost all the time the Commerce Department would come in with a high number and it was just like throwing at a dartboard.

We really didn't know any better. We'd pick a number in between and we'd say that's it. That's how we governed then. Things are a lot better now. EPA has built in to it now a lot better understanding of how to figure out what things are going to cost. We struck a balance that way, the best we could do at the time.

**Arab Oil**

**PL:** Could you tell us a little about the Arab oil boycott and the sense of urgency around energy that you saw coming out of that?

**JW:** As I said in the introductory remarks, the Arab oil boycott was the other seminal event in my time. I can't tell you how I have relived the urgency of that thing. There was a period when there was only 90 days of oil left in this country, and 60 days of that oil were still at sea, coming in from Venezuela or the Middle East.

Things were really desperate. We kind of played god and we had this allocation program forced on us by Congress. The public thought allocation meant there was going to be enough for everybody and allocation meant that we had to play god and figure out the scarcity and allocate to each state the amount of fuel they would have.

It was crazy. Colorado was going to get a certain amount of fuel because they have a certain number of tourists in the ski season and such, and everything is going to be fine so we'd give Colorado much oil and gas that year. Well, Colorado has a bad ski season. Sun's out, there's not much snow. The tourists stop coming. Colorado's got more oil and gas than they know what to do with. Some other state's in trouble. That was the kind of problem we had.

We really had to work hard to get that energy crisis over. That's when all the impact came, in Rog Morton and my time, to modernize the leasing programs for oil and gas, the offshore oil. The coal laws. All that. We can get into more detail if you want.

Frankly, at the Department of Interior until the energy crisis came, if you wanted a coal lease you just pretty well had to apply for it and pro forma, you got it.

As a result, there was all kinds of coal leases on public lands that were there for speculation and the companies were just sitting on it with very minimal work levels waiting for the price to go up so they could do something about it. We had to design a whole new leasing program. We did a whole kind of advance things. Secretary Udall probably talked about the oil shale. We did an oil shale leasing program, and that didn't work out.

We did a geothermal thing, kind of a Buck Rogers new energy, and then we tried to modernize -- we did modernize -- all our leasing pretty well, with the exception of the mining act, which is still, to my knowledge, still the old 1872 act.

Nixon tried to build in competitive bids for mining claims and royalties for mining claims. The tradition of the West, and factually is pretty well true, that most of the discoveries of minerals have been made by a small-time prospector who then sold out to the bigger company. We didn't want to take that incentive away from the prospector. That's been a sacred thing. In my view, a sacred cow, but anyway that's been a sacred thing in the West. For that reason, and to my knowledge, the mining law has never
really been modernized. I may be out of date on that.

**CW:** No, that's basically right.

**PL:** I have just one question. The story that you told about predators and your meeting with the shepherders over what you were going to change in predator control. Could you tell that story?

**Predator Control Policy**

**JW:** I don't know if you remember; it may still be a big deal out here. The question of coyotes and lambs, the coyotes killing the lambs. Nixon put out a message that basically said the day of the only good predator is a dead predator is over.

We had an Endangered Species Act at the same time. The shepherders were really alarmed because we banned the use of certain poisons on public lands which were being eaten by the coyotes. Then coyotes would die, and then other predators were feeding on the coyotes and they were messing up the food chain. We stopped that. Wally Hickel stopped that. He had the right to do that under his – he didn't have to go to Congress to do that. I think Patty brought it up as an example.

I'll never forget sitting around the table and seeing the gnarled hands of these Basque sheepherders who were coming in from Utah, Colorado, Idaho and all, and how unhappy and bitter [they were.] They felt we were ruining their world. We were killing their sheep. We'd give them statistics "Only these many of your sheep are dying, it's not really that big of a deal." I only bring that part of it up to say that your job at Interior was to spend a lot of time in meetings with people like that. Here I am 30 years later and I remember those men's gnarled hands. That didn't mean that I changed my position, but it was a kind of feeling that it was good democracy to make sure you saw all of these people. The shepherders thing was tough. I don't know if any of you lived through that one.

**Native American Issues**

**CW:** Another area where policy was changing quite rapidly during this time was Indian affairs.

**JW:** Yes.

**CW:** The Udall administration had done some work in self-determination. Then President Nixon had his major address in 1970 announcing as a presidential statement, the policy of self-determination.

While you were there, and I think you had fairly significant contact with these events, there were a number of activist actions taken by Indian people. The first one was at Alcatraz, which received quite a bit of public sympathy. Some opposition, but it seemed to be – the majority of the people took it sympathetically.

But then two much more difficult events: the takeover of the BIA building and a lot of destruction done by the occupiers in 1972, and then the next year, the Wounded Knee standoff. Talk about how the administration and maybe, recognizing you have both Interior and the White House and the Justice Department and a few other agencies working on this, how that was handled and what it was like, and whether you feel that it might have poisoned the well of some goodwill that was developing for Indian people or did it help them or did it end up being neutral?

**JW:** Well, first of all, Nixon's Indian message did give self-determination and reversed a policy that had gone on from the Eisenhower years of terminating the reservations, trying to mainstream Native Americans into the larger American culture, which wasn't working.

He devised something that did become law, which basically took a lot of federal decisions out of the BIA and from thence on, they were made by the tribes. That was very good. It was positive and going well, and he'd done a lot to help certain tribes get their lands back. Some for religious reasons and things like that and all was going well.

In the middle of all this came this, I can only use the term radical militant – AIMS – American Indian Movement. That was kind of political theater when they took over at Alcatraz. They took over the old prison there. Prisoners were no longer at Alcatraz there. But they took over the place and had a sit-in there that went on for several months. The law-and-order pieces of the White House and the Justice Department were saying, "Come on, Mr. President, you have to kick these people out of here. They're not law-abiding and all that, etc." Well, then it got worse. They came down and they trashed the Bureau of Indian Affairs building and that was really a dangerous ...

**CW:** In Washington, right? The central headquarters?
JW: Yes. The central headquarters of the BIA.

**Wounded Knee**

JW: Then came Wounded Knee. I was involved in that last phase quite a bit. Wounded Knee was the Oglala Sioux reservation in – was that North or South Dakota?

CW: South.

JW: South Dakota. It's a pretty sad place if you've been there. The white folks over the couple of centuries haven't done a very good job for the Native Americans. They stuck them on reservations in places where the natural resources weren't very good for the most part. There are exceptions, but certainly the Pine Ridge Indians had a place with virtually nothing in the way of natural resources. It was ripe. It had high unemployment, high alcoholic rates. It was really a tough situation.

The AIMs Indians came in there and they took hostages at a trading post called Wounded Knee. As Charlie and I were discussing here earlier, I was – one of the dumbest things I did in that time. We were sitting there looking at a map in my office. The BIA police were in my office and were saying they were going to attack the Pine Ridge Reservation where Chief Wilson is. That movement was not just the white man versus Indians, it was Indians versus Indians, that whole thing that went on there.

We're all sitting there looking at the map and we're talking about them attacking Pine Ridge. Just a few inches over from my eye, is this little town called Wounded Knee. Well, it would only take a weak-minded public relations man to know that's where they were going to go, but I missed it and everybody else missed it and that's where they went. In a matter of days, were looked into a hostage situation with the U.S. Army surrounding these radical Indians and it went on for seventy-some days.

CW: Just to mention explicitly, although I think most people know, that's where a massacre occurred back in the 19th Century.

JW: Sure. That's why they – the Wounded Knee symbolism. Excuse me. I should have said that. There was a stand-off that went on for 70-some days. Every one of those 70 days, I had a meeting over in the Justice Department with my counterpart the deputy attorney general dealing with this issue. Our strategy in the end was no better – and it worked – than to take the heat of the law-and-order people who were telling the president to go in there and take these radical people doing this, and to bore the media and have them leave.

They finally folded their cameras and went away. That left the Indians no audience and they then started to negotiate with us in a way that you could negotiate something and kind of solve the problem.

Of course, what they wanted was South Dakota back and we couldn't give them that. It wasn't possible. And they wanted to see U Thant, the head of the United Nations. They really didn't want to see the Secretary of the Interior. Just bring us U Thant or the President of the United States. Kind of unreal theater. But it was dangerous. One Indian was killed, one federal marshal was paralyzed for life.

CW: Talk a bit about the amount of military equipment that was in there.

JW: They had half-tracks. It was overkill. I remember one time being in a meeting over in Justice, and they had a general in there from the 82nd Airborne who's briefing us on, not how we can do a parachute drop, but we can bring all these troops in here. Hey, get out of here. This is crazy. Leave this thing alone. Somebody is going to get killed. Our policy really wasn't much different than to take the heat from law and order and do our best not to kill anybody and it finally went away.

PL: Can we take a moment to talk about the role of religion in all this? With our other secretaries, we've had interesting conversations about how growing up in a Mormon community gave Secretary Udall a sense of how people lived with nature. Actually, it's sort of more personal background than just religion. Walter Hickel is a very religious person, and his background as the child of a tenant farmer has been important. Could you talk a little bit about your personal background?

JW: I was born in Victoria, B.C., in this beautiful and very pristine environment of Vancouver Island. I am sure many of you have been there. My mother and father were divorced and when I was 8 years old, I moved to Baltimore. That was the first time I had ever seen the grime. I had never seen a muddy stream in my life. All of the things that were going wrong with the environment. I can't say that I decided I was going to do something about it when I was that young but I do remember having the notion that I certainly hoped I could grow up and wouldn't have to explain to my children how come there was an automobile tire in the stream down the road.
That kind of gave me an environmental bent. I loved the outdoors and I'm a geologist. My main motivation to become a geologist was to be outdoors. That's the kind of ethic I brought to the table when I got involved. I wouldn't exactly call it religious, but that was the tilt of my own background when I got into all of this stuff.

PL: Your optimism is really remarkable. Your capacity to go through the practicalities of real-life politics and to continue to pursue your goal and then to watch the changes in Interior and national politics since then and to remain so optimistic. Why are you so cheery?

Energy Policy

JW: I feel there are a lot of good institutions in place to fight out these decisions we have to make. I have real concerns about energy. We don't have a lot of time left. I believe, for example, that we should have nuclear power, which won't be very popular with many people in this audience. The Japanese and the French, for example, went down that road a long time ago. The French, under Charles DeGaulle, because they realized there was all this unrest in North Africa and they realized they were going to be cut off and the Japanese because they were getting their oil out of Sumatra and they had just been through World War II. They recognized their vulnerability even though OPEC didn't exist at those times. We should go, we need to go nuclear.

I remember being with Rog after the – while the oil embargo was on. We had a meeting with Zaki Yamani. Zaki invented OPEC. Zaki was the Minister of Petroleum for Saudi Arabia. We were trying to get out from under this oil embargo. We would say to him, "Let us up. If you don't, we're going to find alternate sources. We're going to go nuclear." Zaki would smile at us and say, "No, you're not. The environmentalists will never let you." Of course, he was absolutely right and Rog and I knew it, but we were all playing bluff games with each other trying to get the Arabs to back off.

Patty's question was about optimism. We have in place a lot of wonderful institutions: EPA is a perfect example of that. To move forward and solve some of these tough problems and to just keep going, I have a lot of optimism. I worry about energy, that we'll make it. We're not doing nearly enough on conservation and energy. We need to increase those, I think they call them café standards for mileage on cars, for the fleet mileage, that's a big thing. We're not doing a good job on doing electrical efficiency on appliances and things like that.

Opening the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and the Rocky Mountain Front

I'm not one of those who believes we can drill our way out of this problem but I do believe that we have to keep drilling to give us time to solve it. Specifically I think there is good possibility, given good EIS's, that we can do some drilling in the sensitive, ecologically sensitive overthrust belt of the Northern Rockies. I do believe that the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge should be drilled.

Many in this audience won't agree with that. You can say it's only a 40- or 50-day supply of oil, but that's the way it works. Worldwide. When you're trying to find oil. We would have been in trouble if the Alaska Pipeline had not been built when the Iranians took the Americans hostage in Teheran. That was about the same year, 1979, the same year the first million barrels a day came out of the Alaska Pipeline. If we hadn't have had that to replace what we were losing in Iran that very day, we would have been in trouble.

My experience has been very much seared by this energy crisis I went through and I see it looming up again and we still have a long way to go. This energy bill, I haven't seen it yet, but I hope it helps. For the first time, they're talking about subsidizing nuclear power. Never done that before. I think that's going to pass. I know people will think Chernobyl and Three Mile Island, but I think it's a way we have to go.

Hopefully, hydrogen will come on one of these days soon. There's a lot of push on that now. The windmills have kind have been a disappointment as far as I can tell. Maybe, I'm not up to speed on that but they're not a significant – it doesn't look like they're ever going to be a significant piece of the energy problem.

Questions and Answers:

Establishing EPA

Q: Undersecretary Whitaker, why wasn't the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency established within the U.S. Department of the Interior rather than as an independent agency?

JW: If I had had my way, it probably would have been. I was there at the birth of EPA. The president, when he came into office, had a study done by the –
it was called the Ash Commission, named after a fellow named Roy Ash, who was president of Litton Industry. All kinds of environmental options were put on the table. One was pretty much what is now the EPA. Another one was the Department of Energy and Natural Resources. Another one was the Department of Environment and Natural Resources. These were all exercises in moving the boxes around between the departments.

To answer your question, I think in the end that Nixon decided for EPA – first of all, Ash recommended it. I personally had recommended the Department of Environment and Natural Resources because I really thought the best way to solve these problems, the best way to strike a balance, was to keep it under one cabinet officer. If you wanted to call it still Interior Department, Interior would still have a lot of the EPA pieces in it and more environmental advocacy but it would still have the development pieces in there so the Secretary would be forced to make the kind of decisions, instead of sending all these problems over to the White House to be made.

Anyway, he (Nixon) decided on EPA and I think the reason was Ash recommended it, plus Congress was going to pass something that didn't look a lot different than the EPA that we now have. We had big fights for the cabinet office. You should see a cabinet officer when he's told you're going to take a piece of his department away. He's not a happy camper. We had a lot of problems that way.

Another reason we did it was we took advantage of something called a reorganization act which existed at that time. It allowed the president not to propose a new department, which my Department of Environment and Natural Resources would have been, but it allowed you to propose something smaller called an agency or an administration and you could do that and send that plan to Congress. Here was the hooker: If in 90 days Congress didn't object to it, it became law. That's how we got EPA and how we got NOAA. The two of them. Bang. Bang. Right in a row. That law is now gone. The president doesn't have that right any more. So that's how we got EPA.

Present balance

**Q:** Undersecretary Whitaker, you wrote a book called "Striking a Balance." Can you comment on your views on present governmental policy towards balance?

**JW:** I hear that question. You're saying Republicans aren't strong enough on the environment. That's what I'm hearing the question says, right?

**PL:** That's a possibility. That might be.

**JW:** Well, I think it will – it will almost always be that way. You'll find that Republicans in general are going to be more pro-business and the Democrats are going to be more pro-environment. I think the Nixon years were probably an anomaly in that extent because of the timing of all the convergence of forces that took place at that time. But there will be good initiatives and lots of good things done and good institutions in place and I'm an optimist that we can go forward.

One last comment on the political clout of the environment: I'm not sure that it determines in the end how many people — I suspect not a lot of people vote for a president because of their environmental record. There may be many other reasons they vote, certainly foreign policy and jobs are rated much higher.

People will say, "The environmental movement has lost its clout. It's nothing like it was on Earth Day." The polls show that that's pretty well true, that it doesn't. But here's the hooker, I think: I think the environment is so embedded and institutionalized that it's kind of like Social Security. You don't hear people talking about Social Security in a poll but if you ask them, if you want to reduce it or mess around with it, it shoots right to the top of the poll. I think the same is true of the environment. If you want to do something that maligns the environment, people will flare up right away. That's good. That's institutionalizing something, I think. That's my politics of the environment.

**Q:** Mr. Undersecretary, what do you see as the greatest accomplishment of the Nixon administration?

**JW:** I guess you'd have to go along with China as being big. I can't name one. I think his record in doing things, fairly liberal things that surprise people, is quite good. He was very good on civil rights. He got the Southern schools, the segregated Southern schools, unsegregated without bloodshed. He did it by being very quiet, having committees, not rubbing the Southerners' noses in it. He did things like that.

He created a program for minority business. I think that was a big thing forward. The draft. There would be a draft going on right now if there was not a
volunteer armed services. That was a big thing. Quite different. He did quite a few liberal things like that. Another thing, he found a lot of young people that were in his administration in one form or another that you may have heard of lately: Dick Cheney, Colin Powell, four or five Secretaries of State. He came up with a talent bank of people that was enormous. It really was.

He had a very credible record, for the time, on women in government. Most presidents, one after the other, have done better. But he worked hard at it. There was a lady named Barbara Hackman, she later became George Bush's Secretary of Commerce. She was in the White House and her job was to get women in government. She went around and annoyed everybody and all these chauvinistic old cats like us and got some things done.

Q. Undersecretary Whitaker, can you name a few corporations that are doing a good job for the environment today, and what can we do to pressure certain corporations to do more?

JW: You can use things like boycotts and things like that. We were talking about that at lunch. I'm not sure I'm up to speed enough on corporations to say that. For example, I have a sense in the oil industry that Shell and BP have been maybe a little better citizens than some of the other ones. I can't back that up. I know it's in their advertising program and all that so I'm not sure it's as real as it sounds. That's about the best I can do. I'm not that current on what corporations are doing what.

Q. Speaking of Shell and BP, can you give an estimate regarding the amount of oil we have on the planet and what we can do for our future energy use?

Future Energy Policy

JW: I get the impression we're running out and we've better get something done in the 15 or 20 years. I think hydrogen, nuclear or alternatives, and keep doing a lot of drilling and doing it in an environmentally sound way. Hopefully, we can muddle out of this problem.

I'm scared of water, too. I heard somebody say that we're in pretty good shape on water in Colorado, but I have the feeling that our conservation record on water is not very good and not very good on energy either. We have a long way to go to solve those problems.

I don't see desalination coming in. The Israelis, I think, are pretty much ahead of the world on that. Water is the price of a bottle of scotch in Israel. But they're willing to pay for it and do it to support the biggest civilization in a desert climate. We've got a long way to go. Two big problems out there, I think.

PL: I wonder if I might ask you as we close about your sense about what it was like to hold those offices, to be in a position where you could do things. Where you could have hopes and ideas and act on them. Your feelings about having played the role that you did play in federal office.

JW: It was an accident. All I can say about it was that it's a privilege. Don't ever be cynical about government. You've heard me talk about how good the civil servants are. I don't think there's a president that I've ever seen, Monica Lewinsky or Watergate aside, that didn't think they were doing the damnedest job and working as hard as they could for their country.

I've very proud of our system. It was a privilege to be part of it. It was just an accident in my life that it happened in my life. Don't be cynical about Washington. And remember those sheepherders' gnarled hands when you're talking to them.