

Oral History: Edwin Meese III

Interviewed by Lou Cannon
Journalist and Ronald Reagan Biographer

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Lou Cannon: I'm Lou Cannon with Open California, which video tapes oral histories of men and women who have played a significant role in California. Today we're with Edwin Meese III, who's remembered as a United States Attorney General and White House counselor to President Ronald Reagan. But before this happened, Mr. Meese served six years as the executive secretary, the chief of staff really, to Governor Ronald Reagan. Today we're going to explore the California side of Mr. Meese's career, and I should say that he and I've known each other for more than 50 years, and I covered as a reporter in both Sacramento and Washington. Before we get to the Sacramento part of this, Ed, tell us about your background. You were, I believe, an assistant district attorney in Alameda county for several years. How did you come to Ronald Reagan's attention?

Edwin Meese: I was a deputy district attorney in Alameda County, which was one of California's largest counties and I had been there since 1958, actually, after I graduated from law school at the University of California Boalt Hall. And it happened that the boss there, the district attorney, Frank Coakley, who was a very -- literally, a nationally famous district attorney, was one of the originators of the National District Attorneys Association. He was also the chairman, of what was called the Law and Legislative Committee of Law Enforcement, which represented the district attorneys, chiefs of police, and sheriffs of California before the state Legislature.

So it had been traditional that one of his deputies, each legislative session would come up to Sacramento and would represent essentially the law enforcement profession and the law enforcement officials in California before the Senate and the Assembly of California. So that had been my job in 1961. I say that by way of background, because in 1966, Ronald Reagan was elected governor, and in December of that year, I got a call out of the blue, asking if I would come up and meet the new governor-elect. He was assembling the staff, and they were looking for someone for the position, which at that time was known as extradition and executive clemency secretary. Essentially, a later, became ultimately, the legal affairs secretary to the governor, more or less the governor's staff lawyer. And someone when I had done this work back in 1961 remembered me five years later, one of the senators.

Cannon: Was that Donald Grunsky?

Meese: Don Grunsky, the senator from Santa Cruz and he recommended me to Ronald Reagan. So I came up, I had no idea that I wanted to, of changing jobs. I enjoyed what I was doing in the district attorney's office, but as a courtesy, I came to Sacramento, I met with some of the staff of the incoming governor, and then they asked me to come back and meet the governor himself and so I did that. We had about a half-hour conversation just the two of us, and I was very impressed with him. So much so, that when he surprised me by offering me the job at the end of that half hour, I surprised myself by accepting. And I remember driving home, 75 miles to Oakland, trying to figure out how I was going to explain to my wife that we were going to be moving.

Cannon: What did you talk about during that half hour?

Meese: We talked about the right... At that time, there were quite a few people, at least for that period, quite a few people on condemned row, awaiting execution, and of course the governor would be reviewing these cases. We talked about that process, how to improve the process, because it had become quite a major news event rather than a serious legal examination and how we could change that. And we talked about the whole pardons process. One of the things that I had always felt was that it didn't make a lot of sense to issue a bunch of pardons at Christmas time, as though this was a gift from the governor, but rather to have pardons being issued periodically during the course of a year. And also not to make a big public event out of it, because I felt that a person who had been in prison or been, completed their sentence and then were living... That person was living a constructive life, the last thing they wanted to be reminded or have their neighbors be reminded of the 10 years or 15 years before, they had actually served time in prison. So there were things that we both talked about were our respective ideas of how we could improve the criminal justice system in California.

Cannon: First, did he had any plan to offer you the job or was he...

Meese: I don't know whether he had planned or not. But he did and so, I thought I'd come up for a couple of years and then go back to the district attorney's office. And then what happened was two years later, and having been legal affairs secretary I'd gotten involved in a number of things relating to local government. I had took certain supervisory duties over local government and community relations, those kinds of things as well. And so the job of legal affairs secretary had expanded considerably from what the job had been when I initially took office. And then at the end of 1968, Bill Clark, who was at that time, the executive secretary and chief of staff, he was appointed as a judge, and so the governor asked me if I would take over at the beginning of the following year, 1967, as the executive assistant and chief of staff.

Cannon: Before, or you were deputy DA... Before all of this happened, you had some interaction with Pat Brown, who was Reagan's predecessor as governor, when the student demonstrators occupied Sproul Hall, I believe it was. Could you tell us about that?

Meese: Well, during 1964, there had been a major uprising at the University of California, at Berkeley. And Sproul Hall was the administration building, and on the 1st or 2nd of December of '64, a number of people, some of them students, some of them from outside the campus, but mostly students, had occupied the administration building, and when it was time for it to close, they wouldn't leave. And so there was a... It became kind of a major uproar, a lot of crowds gathered outside and so on. And so the local officials, the university officials, local police, felt that it was important to get those students to leave or if they didn't leave, they would have to be arrested for trespassing, and various other crimes that were being committed, disturbing the peace and so on. So it just happened that while the local officials were contemplating this, they were in communication with Governor Pat Brown. And Pat Brown asked if there was anyone there from the district attorney's office, and I had been assigned as one of a couple of deputy district attorneys to advise the police, as we had been in a number of those kinds of situations all over the county, over the past several months leading up to that. And so, Pat Brown asked if there was anyone from the district attorney's office, the sheriff said, "Yes," that I was there.

And so he let me talk to him. And so we talked about it. He said the sheriff had requested that the highway patrol be sent in to supplement the local police, local sheriff's department because this would be a major undertaking to take some 700 or more students into custody, if they did not leave. And once this started you couldn't break it off in the middle and try to find more police. So particularly, the Highway Patrol responsibility would be to provide order in the perimeter around the scene where this was all taking place. And also to keep crowds from gathering or getting too close to where the action was taking place. And so I was on the telephone with the governor and he had been at, I believe, at a dinner that night in Los Angeles, and he asked if I thought that we should go ahead with that. And I said, "Based on the circumstances and the fact that if this continued into the next day it was highly likely that this would get much worse, in terms of more people joining in and so on." And so, as I said, I agreed with the police executives and the people at the university and I said, "But we have one request. That is that you not tell anybody there, because otherwise the word will get out and they'll be even more people here, even before the police begin enacting."

Cannon: Whose request was that?

Meese: That was the, I believe the sheriff.

Cannon: Yeah, yeah, so he was asking...

Meese: Yeah, Frank Madigan.

Cannon: He was asking Brown through you not to publicize it.

Meese: Not to say anything. Unfortunately, unfortunately, the governor in speaking to this crowd told the crowd at this dinner, what had happened, and, of course, that got to the press, that got on the radio. So by the time the police were ready to move, I think about two or three o'clock in the morning, something like that. The crowd had grown, many times, so we had a much more serious situation than we would have had otherwise.

Cannon: You did take people into the custody though. Did he, Brown agreed with that?

Meese: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, sure.

Cannon: Yeah. Later, when you worked for Reagan, Reagan had run on this -- calling this student unrest was an important part of his campaign; he'd said at one rally that the students should obey the rules or get out... The demonstrations continued, and there was these particular demonstration on May 15th, 1969, at People's Park, which you'll remember, and it was, the National Guard was called out, and the police killed one demonstrator, and you and the governor were both praised and criticized for your roles in that. Can you describe what happened from your perspective?

Meese: Well, the People's Park was a square block of land that had been fenced by the university, and they were planning to put up some buildings there. And while, in the course of the period of time when they were preparing to do this, apparently the fences had come down, or there was access to this plot of land and some people had planted sort of gardens there, of some sort. And I don't know what exactly they were growing. There was some suspicion that it might have been marijuana, but I'm not sure that was actually true. But in any event, this group of students, some of whom had been participating, several years before, in these other disorders wanted to keep the

university, for some reason, from going ahead with their plans for that land. They called it "People's Park." Which of course it wasn't any park or... And it certainly, it belonged to the people of California, not any particular group of them.

And so, in the course of that, it became a very serious riot, and kind of riotous situation at least. And one of the things that happened was that some of the rioters had gotten on top of buildings, and they were throwing sharpened metal objects, sharpened pipe-type metal objects at the police. And that was why the police had to fire weapons to try to protect themselves against these projectiles that were being thrown at them. And that was how one of the persons happened to be killed there.

Cannon: And then the National Guard was called out. It took...

Meese: Well, the National Guard was called out primarily because a lot of the rioters had been going down off campus and going down University Avenue, breaking windows and crashing the various shops there, that sort of thing, breaking into cars, doing those kinds of things. And this was to restore order. One of the few times that Ronald Reagan as the governor really ever had to call out the National Guard for any kind of disorder.

Cannon: Was the order restored?

Meese: Order was restored very quickly. And the National Guard was on duty, probably for maybe a week at the most, or so.

Cannon: Yeah.

Meese: And that was at the recommendation of all the police authorities, the sheriff of Alameda County, the chief of police of Berkeley, the chief of the campus police at the University of California campus. So that this was kind of the uniform view of everybody that this was necessary to maintain order, and particularly to stop the violence and the property damage.

Cannon: As a reporter for The San Jose Mercury News, when you were the legal affairs secretary, I forgot, I think that was before it... It may have had its earlier name, but in any case, I attended the hearing where Aaron Mitchell, which you presided over, had sought clemency. Mitchell had killed a police officer.

Pat Brown had denied him clemency and then the case through some technicality came back to Reagan, and I don't think it surprised anybody. It was very emotional. It didn't surprise any of us that Governor Reagan did the same thing that Governor Brown did, and denied him clemency, and he was executed. But what did surprise many of us in this Sacramento press corps, I don't think I should put it on anybody else, it surprised me, was a second capital punishment case, which came to him where you recommended clemency and Governor Reagan agreed. And it was a man who had fire-bombed a house and killed both his girlfriend and a child. Now, this is a long time ago. And I do... And if you don't remember it... **(Editor's note: The girlfriend was not killed.)**

Meese: No, I remember it well.

Cannon: If you know case and why you made the recommendation you did?

Meese: I remember that case very well. There was a considerable question had been raised about the mental capacity and whether that person was really capable of forming the intent, that is necessary, and whether the mental condition that he had faced or was possessed of at the time, vitiated the idea of him being executed for the crime. And so I had talked with the prosecutor. I had talked with the others who investigated, as well as looking at all the factors involved, including the psychiatric reports. And it was the governor's opinion after looking at all this information, agreed with my recommendation that the sentence be commuted to life imprisonment.

Cannon: That he wasn't capable of forming the specific intent that was necessary to...

Meese: Well, the question was whether he had the mental capacity to form the necessary intent and the fact that there was a serious question. I've always taken the position that a person should not be executed for a crime for murder, unless it is absolute certainty that that person did it and that from a legal standpoint that person was guilty. And that that was the criteria that I used, in that case, which I've always used on that subject.

Cannon: Now, as I remember, because of the Supreme Court moratorium on the death penalty, those were the only two cases that came before you.

Meese: There was a third case and that was a case in which at the time of the clemency hearing more information was sought because some questions were raised and we continued that hearing. And the governor granted what's called a reprieve, and that is he held the execution in abeyance for getting additional information. So if you look at it, there are three things the governor can do. He can commute the sentence, he can carry out the sentence or he can grant a reprieve. And so we had three cases. Each of the possible decisions the governor could make were utilized in those three cases and before the next case came up, the Supreme Court of California had blocked the death penalty from being carried out.

Cannon: Did that block the death penalty for the person who the governor had given a reprieve?

Meese: Yes, it did.

Cannon: Both in Sacramento and Washington. You could take very complex issues and explain them to Reagan or other non-lawyers. But you could explain them to Reagan in words that he could understand. What... Can you discuss this side? How that worked?

Meese: Well, Ronald Reagan had very high intellect and he was very smart. But the whole idea was to... It wasn't just to explain things in terms that they were understandable, but it was to process and bring together a lot of information on a particular topic, so that it was presented to the governor and later to the president in an organized fashion so that it would be helpful to him in actually making a decision. And Ronald Reagan was extremely good at that, he could absorb information. My job was to make sure he got all the information, and that he got it into some sort of an organized fashion.

Cannon: And you started that when? When you were still in legal affairs? Because you continued that process when you were executive secretary.

Meese: Right, right. Yeah, I think that's kind of what lawyers are trained to do, and that is to make... To collate, organize, and then present information in an organized fashion.

Cannon: If you know, was that one of the reasons that Governor Reagan asked you to become the executive secretary?

Meese: I think probably it was, I don't know. In any event, I think he had had a lot of experience with me giving him information, and so I think that's probably true that that was an important part of the reason he wanted me to handle that job.

Cannon: Governor Reagan's first chief of staff had departed during the so-called homosexual scandal. We both know his name. I don't see any purpose to using it here. And he was succeeded by Bill Clark who was very capable, but Bill told me once that Reagan had withdrawn somewhat after that, after his first chief of staff left that he was sort of shocked by things and he did various things to engage him. And I wondered, when you became Executive Secretary, did you do anything special to engage him or was that thing far enough in the past that it wasn't affecting him?

Meese: Well, I never saw Ronald Reagan not being engaged, and I don't know, Bill may have seen something different. But there was no question that Ronald Reagan was engaged and actually Bill had set up some things that provided a funnel of information to the governor that was helpful to him, particularly the governor liked to use his cabinet and he met with the cabinet frequently, and that was kind of fostered by Bill as he kind of set things up during the first couple of years. And so we had, the cabinet was a very important part of the decision-making process and the governor liked that because he didn't like the idea of different people trying to buttonhole him in the corridors, or coming to his office, one by one. He liked to have all the people that were his advisors together at one time, so they could hear each other talk, they'd argue things back and forth, and he always said the more information I get, the better decisions I'm going to make.

And so it was this decision-making process, utilizing the cabinet, which made Ronald Reagan frankly so successful as a governor and then as he adapted that same process as president, he was probably one of the most effective decision-makers as a president that we've had.

Cannon: Bill also started those mini memos, which a lot of people made fun of them, but I've read a lot of them. And I know you probably read all of them, when you were in that job, but I thought they were useful because they gave... They outlined the issue and then they gave both sides of the issue. And I think that the point that Reagan made to me when I talked to him about it as governor, "Well, that wasn't all the information he had, it gave him a starting point." And then as you say he would get the cabinet people and then they'd argue it out in front of him.

Meese: Right. And of course, the idea of the mini memo was to make people organize the information, organize the material and not just present a lot of fluff or a lot of disorganized information without having in some sort of a plan, some sort of a basis, so that it could be organized in a way that was helpful to make a decision. For example, providing what are the options that the governor has and then what are the pros and cons of each of the options? So the mini memo was really a way of organizing information rather than limiting it because there was always plenty of backup material available.

Cannon: Many multiple-term governors are most successful in their first terms when there's a sort of a honeymoon period, and they haven't had the time of the inevitable build-up of political adversaries. But Reagan, although he had some success in his first term, was in my view, more

effective in his second, when you were executive secretary. He had the welfare reform and the education bills, and the tax bills. They were all products of the second term. Now, did Reagan get better with practice or was something else at work?

Meese: Well, I think there were a couple of things. Number one, in the first term, the first thing he had to deal with was a tremendous deficit that had been left him by the previous governor, the fact that the previous Governor had used an accounting trick and so he had 15 month's worth of income for 12 months of expenditures and those expenditures were tremendous, but he had essentially used some of the income that should have been carried over into the subsequent year.

Cannon: Well, for Reagan, it was a question of having nine months of revenues in a year, a year of income with nine months of revenue.

Meese: Exactly, right. And so, as a result, he had to do something that he really hated to do, which was to raise taxes because we could not have a deficit at the end of a year and so at the end of a fiscal year. And so what he did was, he did a couple of things. Number one, he had a major accounting firm, do an audit of the state government, to be sure that the figures that he was operating on were correct. And revealing the fact that the governor, the previous governor had left the deficit for him, which had to be corrected before the... In the next fiscal year budget.

And secondly, he got an opinion from the attorney general, who happened to be a Democrat but who was a very... A man of great integrity, and really very bipartisan in his approach. And Tom Lynch, the attorney general, did a great job of giving the accurate opinion, as to what the state constitution required and it was on that basis that he had to in this one year raise taxes. But he also said to the people, that he was planning a program of cut squeeze and trim so that we would reduce the overall expenditures of the state or at least keep them from increasing as they had each year before that, and that as a result, he said, if we're able to save some money, that then won't be needed, we will return that in a tax rebate. Which he also did, which, in fact, he did.

So the reason I mentioned this is in the first term, much of what he was doing was really repairing the mess that he had inherited and getting the state back on an even keel. Then in the second term, he was able to go forward with these new measures and the new way in which things would improve the finances, the education, the welfare situation as far as the state was concerned. So I think it was a matter of taking care of the immediate problems first, and then laying the ground work for what he was able to do in the second term.

Cannon: Well, in the second term, he notably reached out to the Democratic Assembly speaker, Bob Moretti who reached back and I interviewed both of them several times about that; they both, they didn't agree on many things, but they had a respect for each other. And I wonder why... I have two questions: why were they able to work so well together? Because what you got out of it was really quite good legislation. And did this, in your opinion, set the stage for his success in working together with Tip O'Neill and Social Security and other issues like that?

Meese: Well, I think it did, but it's interesting how that came about. Jesse Unruh, who had been the Speaker during the entire first term, and who ran against Ronald Reagan for governor in 1970, had been pretty obstructive and pretty much blocked any, as much as he could. Ronald Reagan, of course, went over his head to the people on a lot of these things, and was able to get quite a bit through in terms of correcting the fiscal situation. But in the second term, Moretti started out the

same way. For example, the governor in 1970 had put together a welfare task force to figure out how we could improve the welfare situation, because the welfare... The cost of welfare were rising every year explosively, and it was necessary... We realized that if we were going to stop the necessity for further tax increases, we'd have to get control of the welfare situation.

So we set out and established a welfare task force to... And the mandate given to the task force was, "If you were starting from scratch with a welfare program, how would you organize it and how would you do it to help people have welfare as an emergency kind of a partial help for people to get off of welfare, and to get jobs and to get into constructive citizenship?" And so that was... That welfare task force came in with their report the end of 1970. And so at the beginning of 1971, the start of the new term, Ronald Reagan asked Moretti, the Speaker, if he could present that to a joint session of the state Legislature, and Moretti said no. He knew that this would be a very powerful accomplishment for the other party, for the Republican Party, and so he said, "No" and he wouldn't let him have it.

So Ronald Reagan used that opportunity to give the speech in Los Angeles to another forum, and his title of it was, "The Speech They Wouldn't Let Me Give in Sacramento." And so he got much more popular attention to the welfare reform program than he would have ever gotten if it had been delivered to a joint situation. And then he went out and broadcast this all over the state; talked to people all over the state about the speech they wouldn't let me give, and the welfare program that he wanted to initiate.

And he said, "And in order to get this to the Legislature so they'll do something about it, I want you to write the Speaker of the Assembly and the other members of the Legislature telling them as people of California what you want them to do." Well, the mail came in, literally a deluge of mail came in to the Assembly and to the Senate, but particularly the Assembly and to Moretti. And so on this particular day, as this mail keeps coming in, Moretti comes in to the governor's office with his hands up and he says, "Stop those cards and letters coming." And he said, "I'll sit down and we'll negotiate this." And Moretti and Ronald Reagan sat down at a table like this, and for a full week, from 9 or 10 o'clock each morning, sometimes till 8 o'clock or 9 o'clock at night, literally negotiated the terms of the welfare reform program, which was the first successful major welfare reform in the country, and which paved the way for the national welfare reform program in 1996.

Cannon: I remember the Urban League gave it a very good review, which is not -- were not exactly fans of Ronald Reagan. And in addition to dealing with the welfare problem, it also raised the grants of the poorest recipients, which it was...

Meese: Right, yeah, it had two objectives. One, help people to get off welfare, and remove from the welfare rolls people who really didn't deserve it or didn't need it. And then, to increase the welfare grants for the truly needy.

Cannon: We were discussing whether Ronald Reagan's successful negotiations with Assembly Speaker Moretti in Sacramento set a kind of a paradigm for the later negotiations he had with House Speaker Tip O'Neill, who was also a liberal Democrat and they negotiated Social Security, and a number of other things. But I'd like you to address that question, but I'd like you also to address the larger question of how California... You once told me that he couldn't have done that job being President that he did without being governor first. And I would like you to talk about how California prepared him for the presidency?

Meese: OK. I think there's no question that the experience that he had for eight years as governor of California, which at that time was, and probably may be still today, was the... I think at that time was the 5th... Had it been a nation, if California had been a nation instead of a state, it would have been the 5th... Somewhere between the 5th and the 7th largest economic power in the world.

Cannon: Still true.

Meese: And so it was a large job, and there's no question that the things he learned there such as the negotiation with Moretti, of course, was an experience. The way in which he learned a good deal about the issues themselves from the standpoint of a governor, which often is different from how things look as president or on a national basis and many times the national government ignores how this is really going to affect the individual states. So he had that experience behind him.

In addition to that, the way in which he developed the organization of the Governor's office, the use of the Cabinet for example, the discipline that's necessary in decision making, the fact of how you deal with the Legislature, all of these were things that his experience in California was very vitally important to how he was able to succeed then when he became the president in Washington. The other thing that is important about the negotiations with Moretti, was it illustrated something that Ronald Reagan always believed and that was you can go much further if you always have respect for the people on the other side of the aisle or on the other side of the discussion or the negotiation.

I asked him about that one time and he said that that was something that he had learned particularly in his days as president of the Screen Actors Guild and in the negotiation, the union negotiations there, he always had great respect for the negotiators on the other side. And he knew then when they went back to their constituency, they had to have something that they can present to their constituents also. So that negotiations had something that was important for people to walk away on both sides with some success. And so, but it was particularly this idea that he treated other people with respect, even people who were his philosophical or political opponents.

Cannon: Well, I think having respect for the other side that you're talking about, and it would have been very difficult for Reagan to get anything done if he hadn't, because the Democrats controlled the Assembly apparently six of the eight years that he was Governor. They controlled the House of Representatives, the entire time that he was President.

Meese: Right.

Cannon: And so it was necessary for him to do that, but it seemed to me that in addition to having respect that he was willing to meet on a personal basis, like Tip O'Neill said, after 5 o'clock or 6 o'clock, I never forget whether it's 5 or 6 o'clock. And he said that he had that relationship with Republican House Leader Bob Michael and after the day was done, they could deal with each other on a friendly basis. And I remember, this is gets a little beyond what I'm asking, but he... Once he was... Tip called, I can't remember what the situation was, but there was some problem, and he called them in the middle of the day, and he said, "Mister President, is it after 5 o'clock?" and Reagan said, "For you Tip it's always after 5 o'clock." But I think he had a, not that he was lovey-dovey with this, but he had a personal human relationship with leaders on the other side, and rank and file members too.

Meese: Yeah, Ronald Reagan always was a friendly individual, and he was friendly, he had a friendly demeanor, he had a friendly attitude, and he certainly having a respect for people individually. And he did not have any sense of hostility to people, even though they were on the other side politically.

Cannon: I think, and it so happened that by the time that he was governor, you had a very closely divided contentious legislature between Democrats and Republicans, and the Senate was in various degrees of upheaval, as you remember at different times.

Meese: Yes.

Cannon: That was... That situation was somewhat replicated in Washington. That wasn't Reagan's doing, it just happened that his experience in California transferred to the situation that he found in Washington.

Meese: Yeah. And also, one of the things he tried to do was to explain things in a way that did not diminish or demean his opponents, but rather to give them reasons why they could come over to his side of the fence, and agree to some of the proposals that he was making. And it was this idea of trying to do things on the basis of people who had respect for each other, who have the same goals in mind, which was the good of the people of California, later the good of the people of the country. And so I think it was this attitude and the way in which he carried out his negotiations that did make him so successful.

Cannon: I'm going to back up a little now, this question is a little out of order, should have asked it to you earlier, but in... I want to go back to 1968, after Reagan became governor, and part of this was Goldwater in '64, so many conservatives had just lost, not just Barry Goldwater, and so his admirers in the conservatives were excited boosting him for president almost immediately. Now, Bill Clark was the chief of staff then, and Tom Reed, who was promoting Reagan for governor (president), he told us that you and Clark opposed this, that you didn't want him to run for president in '68, and you wanted him to complete his term as governor. Is that accurate and could you share your thinking about this?

Meese: It's absolutely accurate. And both Bill and I felt two things: Number one, that he would be a lot better president, if that was to come, with a much greater experience as governor of California, for one thing. But also that he had a lot of work yet to do in California that he had promised the people he would do. So, for both of those reasons, we felt that this was not a good time for him to run for the presidency and that 1968, that if... 1968, he had barely got started as governor. And if he had, at that time, run for president, it'd be questionable whether he would have won. But in any event, it would have meant that he would not have been able to do the things that he did accomplish at the end of the first term and throughout the second term.

Cannon: Did you and Bill convey that feeling to the governor?

Meese: Yes, we did.

Cannon: What did he say?

Meese: Basically, he never really thought he was running for president in 1968. Now, in some

ways, he was able to have, to be considering two opposite ideas in his mind, because he never was wholeheartedly running for governor. I mean, excuse me, he was never wholeheartedly running for president in his own mind and yet he was still doing things that would have been conducive to running for governor.

Cannon: For president.

Meese: He was still doing things that were conducive to his running for president, things that then Tom Reed and others were trying to promote. So, it was kind of a schizophrenic type of situation in some ways. But the one thing that he never did was allow running for the presidency or potentially running for the presidency in '68 detract from what he was doing as far as governor.

Cannon: Well, I think that having gone out on what Tom called, not so much the southern strategy as a southern solicitation, visiting these southern states, and although Reagan didn't know it at the time, Nixon had very well locked this up with deals. But he got such support from the rank and file in these states. I remember when he gave a speech and, if you let him do it on a secret ballot, he would have won it in a walk. But I think that stirred him up because he could see there was a demand for that and then he'd go back here in Sacramento and you and Bill were presenting him with the realities of the governorship. It was somewhat of a schizophrenic situation, as you said. Tell me a little bit... I can turn this page here. I should be able to do that. Tell me a little bit about the light side of Ronald Reagan, his sense of humor particularly. How did it help him politically? Just talk about that generally, if you can.

Meese: Well, Ronald Reagan, as people of the country found out and people in California knew, did have a great sense of humor. And also he was not, he never was promoting himself or trying to build himself in people's eyes. He did not have an ego in the sense that it kind of permeated all of his speaking and so on. He would talk about we doing things rather than I doing things.

Cannon: His humor was self-deprecating too.

Meese: He enjoyed self-deprecating humor. For example, if we would talk about something about... For example, his age was always an issue because he was fairly old as a candidate for governor. But certainly, old when he ran for the president compared to previous candidates. And he would make jokes about Thomas Jefferson or had some reference to Thomas Jefferson or the Declaration of Independence and he said that, "And I thought he had done a good job of writing that and things like that." To minimize. Of course, the big joke that he always had was when he ran in 1984 for re-election as president and he was against Mondale and Mondale had been making cracks about his age and so on. And one of the reporters asked him at a press conference and said, "Mr. President, how are you going to handle the age question?" And he cracked back immediately, he said, "I will not let my opponent's youth and inexperience become an issue in this campaign."

Cannon: He said that in the second debate. He'd done very poorly in the first debate, but he hadn't been well prepared for it. In the second debate in Louisville... I was sitting right there close to Senator Mondale. And he knew that Reagan had scored a point. You could see it in the way he expressed it.

Meese: Yeah. It's an interesting, by the way, about that second debate. And that was... The reason he did poorly was his staff at that time.

Cannon: In the first debate.

Meese: The first debate. The staff at the time filled him so full of information that as a result, he felt, if somebody gave him information, he felt compelled to use it. So, he was trying to remember all of these things. And in the second debate, essentially, he relaxed and was himself and he was a totally different type of a candidate at that time.

Cannon: I remember in the rehearsal for the, I think, on Carter, one of the briefers was trying to, foreign policy briefers, you know him but I'm not going to use his name, was presenting him with highly technical information on the throw-weight of missiles and stuff, which nobody... And Reagan was sort of musing, he had answered this question, and he said, I reported this in the book but nobody... He said, what I should have said is, "There you go again", And then on another issue, he did use that line with Carter. It was a very effective line.

But I have a feeling that the humor wasn't tactical, I think that was the way Reagan was. He'd often try to leave his staff... He'd leave you with one lines and that was part of him. It wasn't just...

Meese: No, no, this was not just put on or just not a trick of rhetoric. He definitely had a great sense of humor, he had learned to tell jokes, he had that experience from his days in the movies. Actually, the way he learned to tell jokes.

Ronald Reagan had a great sense of humor, he was very good at telling jokes, he had the ability to memorize jokes when he heard the, that were good. So he kind of had a repertoire in the back of his mind, but he had this spontaneous ability to drop out stories or jokes, that were apropos to whatever the topic happened to be at a particular point in time. And so he not only had a great sense of humor, but he also had the ability to have the right joke or the right comeback for a particular situation, it was just a part of his being and his light-hearted way of doing things. There's a saying in baseball, that the really great players are the ones that make the hard plays look easy. And Ronald Reagan in many ways, was the great... A politician who made the tough things in politics, look easy. And that was the way in which he spoke, the way in which he made decisions and the way in which he conducted his executive actions. So I think it was this... His sense of humor was just a part of his personality.

Cannon: Well, the public became convinced of it when he was shot and in all of those clips. I used to write a column and we had a "Reaganism of the week" at the end of it, and sometimes they were important statements Reagan made, or lots of times, they were a quip or a gaff. And Reagan told me he didn't always read the column, but he always read the Reaganism. And he sort of kept track of jokes and he liked the one... I think the one that I like best. He used at a Gridiron Dinner, he said, "I know nobody ever died of hard work, but I figured why take the chance?"

Meese: Right. Yeah, that was where the press was accusing him of taking it easy.

Cannon: If you remember Marlin Fitzwater, who was a very good, I thought, press secretary for him, and he'd... Marlin fell asleep on the plane. We were always taking pictures and Reagan autographed it for him. He said, "Marlin, we're only supposed to do this at Cabinet meetings."

Meese: Right. Actually, I have a similar situation. Later on when I became attorney general, and

Bill Smith, my predecessor, the two of us were riding back to California, he was going back to his law firm. I had just become attorney general, and it happened that the two of us were on Air Force One, with the president, who was coming to California for something. And so we were both sitting there and we were sitting in two chairs opposite each other, next to each other and we had both fallen asleep. Unbeknownst to us, Ronald Reagan had the photographer, the White House photographer, take a picture of the two of us. And about a week later, I get this nice framed photograph of the two of us sound asleep and Ronald Reagan had inscribed it, "Dear Ed. See, I told everyone you could do Bill's job. And here's the proof. Signed, Ron."

Cannon: That's wonderful. I'd like to ask you about another aspect of the governorship, which was the relationship that the governor's office had with local governments and the various regional governments. He had sort of a complex series of relationships and I think it produced some useful things. Can you talk about that?

Meese: Sure. One of the major problems in the 1960s, or the latter part of the 1960s, was particularly, with the assassination of Martin Luther King, was a series of racial problems in various cities, and also a number of riots and disorders that had followed on that particular incident and the fact that these disorders were breaking out. I'd say starting around 1967, the early part of 1968, there was a lot of tension in many of the large cities and the governor was understandably... And the mayors and city councils and so on, boards of supervisors, in the various counties were concerned. And so what Ronald Reagan did was prepare a state plan to support local government in preventing, and if necessary, dealing with these kinds of major protests or major disorders. And what he did was he organized an emergency council, Emergency Operations Council, which consisted of the head of the National Guard, the commissioner of the Highway Patrol, the director of the Office of Emergency Services, and the department of the... state Department of Justice which was actually under the attorney general.

And he had this group as a means of organizing and planning how the state would back up the local sheriff's departments or local police departments so that they would not feel that they had to keep a reserve that they could use all of their forces knowing that the state would provide a reserve for them if necessary, and as a result by having utilizing their full forces to prevent something that started small and keeping it small it would keep it from becoming a much larger problem and so it was this close cooperation.

And so what he did was that he had me as legal affairs secretary 1968 with these four top state officials go around and meet with each mayor and chief of police and sheriffs in the various major counties, major cities and the counties where this is most likely to happen, so about a dozen of them we picked in California to work out these plans so that we could stop any potential disorder at a very early stage by the local officials going all out and then having the state coming in and being available as a backup. And as a result, California was one of those that with the exception of that one situation at Berkeley that you mentioned earlier, we were able to go through that whole period of tension and major disorders throughout the country without any major situation, major riot or problem.

Cannon: There was an outbreak at... I don't remember the year, but at San Francisco State.

Meese: Yes, they were problems on the campus. And of course, again, the president... Excuse me, and again, the Governor was able to utilize state forces in support of the local police and this

happened in a couple of places. One was San Francisco State where there had been major disorders by the students there and those were controlled, and actually didn't have to have the National Guard. Another one was in Santa Barbara where student rioters burned down the bank.

Cannon: Bank of America.

Meese: Bank of America there, and again where the state forces helped coordinate the mutual aid from a variety of police departments to put down the riot and on then to keep it from igniting again.

Cannon: Is there any other aspect or anything about Reagan's performance, the governor or that you were involved in that hasn't been covered by my questions that you think it's important to highlight?

Meese: Well, one thing that he did, which was a very good thing for California, and later became a pattern for what he did as president was in... At the beginning of his term in 1967, in trying to reduce the cost, the size and scope and cost of government in California, he was able to convene what was called a Business Leaders Task Force where he got major companies in California to donate top executives for a period of about six months to go into the various departments of state government and find out where there were ways to economize and improve service to the people, but particularly to do so at a lesser cost if possible.

And as a result tremendous savings were made in telephone costs. There was one typical example. They found that the license, the automobile license bills were going to go out in 1968 at the beginning of the year, and what they did was they moved them to the November, December period of 1967 and as the Governor said at the time, he said, "Everybody thought we were nuts and didn't know what we were doing." The reason we did it was there was a major increase in postage in January of 1968, and in a big state like California, when you have a mailing of that size we saved literally millions of dollars.

One other major innovation of Ronald Reagan was a new system for appointing judges. There had been a considerable criticism of his predecessor as governor for some of the judges that he had appointed and Ronald Reagan felt it was important to get the best possible jurists on the bench in the state, and so he developed a system of small evaluation groups, committees, if you will, in each county who would look at potential candidates for judge, individually provide these evaluations and then the governor would have those on a spreadsheet and he would have two rules, number one, he would at looking at all the information that he had there which would come from the local evaluation committee plus the State Bar evaluation, and then he would be able to select the best candidates based upon these various evaluations.

The other was that he would at the same time be sure that even if the state bar found someone unqualified, that he would not do that, he would not appoint that person without going back to find out what the reasons for the lack of qualifications and have to be doubly satisfied that this person was the kind of judge who would act according to the constitution and the laws, and not substitute their own ideas of what the law ought to be.

Cannon: He did get considerable... He, Reagan got considerable criticism though for appointing Bill Clark to the... Particularly to the Supreme Court, I don't think, to the other... Not so much when he appointed him to the... Was he a Superior Court Judge and then appellate judge?

Meese: He was initially a Superior Court judge.

Cannon: And then an appellate judge.

Meese: Then he was an appellate judge and then he was on the Supreme Court. There were some that criticized him, but I think after a very few years on the court, they, I think, virtually everyone was convinced that he became one of the best justices that had served on the court, he was an excellent lawyer, he was a texturist in the sense that he interpreted the law as it actually read and didn't make it a... Didn't substitute his own ideas for what the law ought to be, and also he was a very fair judge. And even those other members of the court who had been appointed by other governors, respected him as one of the best judges.

Cannon: We're talking about Bill Clark now. How did Regan change during the time you knew him from the first time... Think of your first interview, to when he left office as President?

Meese: Well, in many ways, he didn't change in terms of personality or in terms of basic thinking, basic commitments, basic principles. What he did was he learned a great deal as he went along, both as governor, and then later on as president. He was always learning from his own experiences and he was always learning from more information that he received, so in that sense he grew in his capabilities to carry out his duties. But as far as the basic principles that he stood for and as far as the fundamental aspects of his personality, I don't think he changed much.

Cannon: Did you ever see any sign at all that he had dementia or Alzheimer's in any way while he was in office?

Meese: Absolutely not. Neither as governor obviously, and nor as president. As a matter of fact, he was very conscious that this could be a possibility only because of his age and so he was very adamant at his annual physical that the doctors do all of the necessary tests to check his cognitive and intellectual abilities and there was absolutely no sign whatsoever of any diminution whatsoever at all.

Cannon: You did so many things, which of the jobs was... I'm not talking about importance now, I'm talking about which of the jobs that you did, did you enjoy the most?

Meese: Well, I've got to say that I really enjoyed all of them. But of all of them, I would say probably being attorney general was the one I enjoyed the most in the sense that I liked the ability to lead a large organization. My background originally was military. I spent 30 some odd years in the Army Reserve. Had some time on active duty, received a commission at the time that I graduated from college. And ultimately became a colonel, before I retired. And so I learned a lot about leadership in the Army and being able to put that into action in a large department, which the Department of Justice was, some 78,000 people, a variety of agencies, ranging from the FBI and the Drug Enforcement Administration, to the prison system, to the Immigration and Naturalization system to the Border Patrol, as well as the largest law office in the world.

Cannon: Do you have any regrets about your time as attorney general? Is there anything you would do differently knowing what you know now?

Meese: Well, it's hard to say, because every situation is different, there are probably some things I would have... I would learn there. It might have been one or two situations, where I might have made different appointments of people because one of the things you learn is that sometimes people do not carry out their responsibilities as you thought, when they're appointed. But I would say that for the most part, I think I would probably do pretty much the same things. But as again, just like Ronald Reagan learned, I certainly learned on the job, so to speak, as you went along. Particularly, I would say I probably would have been more cognizant early on, of the ubiquitousness of the news media and also the hostility that there is in Washington, which was certainly much greater than there is politically I think than there had been in California.

Cannon: Do you feel that you made any... That you did anything that was... I don't think anybody feels in retrospect, that they might have appointed A rather than B, because nobody's got second sight.

Meese: Right.

Cannon: But on your own decisions. Did you feel that you had any conflicts or things that you felt didn't come out the way you wanted them to? As attorney general? Just in your own personal...

Meese: I think in the most... For the most part, I think the decisions that I made were sound decisions and came out... And the things came out well in what I decided, particularly in the innovations that we made, both in the Department of Justice and quite frankly, also in the legal aspects of the governor's office when I was in California.

Cannon: I want to just go on to something that is not... That is more minor than this, but in the long run maybe not as minor as people think. And that's -- Reagan was running for president, and I don't think anybody knew for sure that he was going to be liked until that debate with Carter, which sort of just clinched it.

Meese: Right.

Cannon: But before that, you took a role, if I'm not mistaken, did this without announcing anything, of preparing for the presidency by talking about cabinet officials and other things. Tell what you did that was sort of... You wanted Reagan to get it off, you wanted him to hit the ground running as president.

Meese: Yeah.

Cannon: And discuss that part.

Meese: OK. Well, I was one of the top leaders of the campaign starting in February of 1980. And one of the things that I had the advantage was to know people who had worked in the Nixon campaign and which got off to a pretty slow start in many ways. And there were stories about boxes of applications for jobs and all that sort of thing littering the halls of the campaign, of the transition headquarters. And so I recognized the fact that it was, is it... Two things: Number one, we didn't want anybody in the campaign even thinking about what was going to happen after election day because we wanted all of their energies to go into winning the election and not worrying where they would be and what kind of a job they would have. At the same time, we recognized the fact that

once the election is over, if you win, you have this deluge of people recommending themselves, recommending others, congressmen wanting to suggest people for appointments and that sort of thing. So the one thing that we did do was to have a secret group that people who had no particular political experience or political campaign experience but who were good in personnel matters to develop a plan for handling the transition immediately upon election if we had won.

And so, that small group was ready to go. We also had people in the campaign who would be available if we won, who had had experience in prior transitions. And so, as a result, when the resident won on the fourth of November in 1980, appointing me and appointed me director of the transition, we at least, had done a little bit of thinking so that we could start literally the next day and have one group get started on the personnel aspects of this. It was a small group of a half a dozen people, many of whom though, and they had some advisors who had been in prior transition so that we were able to not make the same mistakes that other campaigns or other presidents have made once they got elected. So we had a very... Then were able to develop in a very short time, based upon the experience of people who now had come off the campaign, who could work on the transition planning so that within a couple of weeks, we had a pretty good organizational structure, we had people starting to be assigned to transition activity and so indeed, we were able to hit the ground running.

Cannon: I have one more question and it's not a question I prepared to answer, but it occurred to me while you were talking about the transition. That was, those of us who lived through it will remember a dicey time because we still had all these Americans held hostage.

Meese: Right.

Cannon: Now Lloyd Cutler who was Carter's legal person, he told me he worked closely with you. And that the message that you were that both sides, that Carter was still president of the, Carter... And were sending to Iran was, "You're not going to get a better deal from Ronald Reagan."

Meese: Exactly, right. Yeah, I did work with Lloyd Cutler and there was two things we wanted to do. One was not to do anything that would in any way interfere with the ongoing negotiations that the Carter administration was having with the Iranians. And secondly, to make it clear that if they were holding out thinking they were going to get something better with Ronald Regan, that we would disabuse them of that idea.

Cannon: Reagan told me that he wanted the hostages to be released on Carter's time and they almost were.

Meese: They almost were.

Cannon: Yeah. And this has been great. I really enjoyed having this conversation with you and thank you for your many answers about Sacramento and other things.

Meese: Well, it was a great time. I enjoyed it, enjoyed dealing with you when you were there and have enjoyed reading your books...

Cannon: Thank you very much.

Meese: On what went on in Sacramento. Particularly, the last book on Sacramento, I thought was your best one. And the reason was you did something that most of the other biographers have not done. You went to the actual documents, you went to Bill Clark's barn and I think had got the actual paper so that when you were talking about the cabinet activities, you had the actual cabinet documents that you were dealing with.

Cannon: Yeah, thank you. People, they want to hear about the presidents, not the governor. And if you have a lot of children and grandchildren and great grandchildren as I do, there's always some that you feel get a little more attention than the others. I also liked that book but... And it's out of print. The one in the presidency remains steadily in print year after year and that's the way of the world.