

Denis R. O'Neill '70
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
The Dartmouth Vietnam Project
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[DAVID J.]

MANNES: It is August 20th, 2015. My name is David [J.] Mannes, and I'm here with Mr. Denis [pronounced DEN-iss] [R.] O'Neill, on a phone interview for the Dartmouth Vietnam Project.

Hello—hello, Mr. O'Neill.

O'NEILL: Hey, nice to meet you, David. I look forward to—

MANNES: Nice to meet you, too.

O'NEILL: —catching up on some great old memories.

MANNES: Yeah. So I want to start this interview actually a little bit before your beginning. I wanted to start by talking a little bit about your parents. Let's start with their names and where they're from?

O'NEILL: Yeah. My dad was Charles [K.] O'Neill, from Bridgeport, Connecticut, Class of '31 at Dartmouth. My Mom, Cornelia Rockwell [O'Neill], was a Minnesota girl, ten years younger. And she went to Smith College and the University of Minnesota. Do you want me to go on about their brief history or not?

MANNES: Yeah, just a brief history, yeah.

O'NEILL: Well, they met—they—they have a very romantic and colorful past. They—after graduating from Dartmouth in '31, Pop was a writer, and he wrote newspaper—did newspaper work, and he wrote the radio drama and wrote for *The New Yorker* and spent a year in a writers' colony in Majorca [Spain] after Dartmouth, which I recommend [chuckles] for all Dartmouth graduates. Among others he met was Carlos [H.] Baker [Class of 1932], the great Ernest [M.] Hemingway biographer.

But when the war came, he ended up—he was actually working before the war, in the early part, for Nelson [A.] Rockefeller, another Dartmouth graduate [Class of 1930]. He was working in Central America, and then he switched over

to the OSS [Office of Strategic Services], the country's first spy organization, and he trained in Virginia.

And that's where he met my mother, who was also—who was a young girl, 23 or '4 years old. She'd also volunteered for the OSS, and they kind of fell in love in Virginia, and then off they went to war. And just by dint of haiku, they kept—Pop went to North Africa and eventually made his way across the Mediterranean [Sea] into southern France and up to Paris, and my mother took a ship from—from New York over to Glasgow [Scotland] and then ended up down in London and over in Paris at the end of the war.

But they had a way of—because of—for security reasons, you couldn't—in your correspondence, you couldn't tell where you were located, so my parents concocted a way of letting the other person know where they were by poetry. They'd come up with a scheme where they would use excerpts from poems that tell the other person where they were, so they stayed in touch during the war and ended up in Paris in the spring of 1945 and then actually ended up being married in August, on August 10th, at the American Cathedral there, on the banks of River Seine. And my mother was given away by [John E.] "Jack" Sawyer, who went on to be president of Williams College just down the road.

So that's who my parents were. They passed away, oh, I think ten and five years ago. But they had a very colorful life, and Pop certainly came to Dartmouth. Had a great—had a great time with it before the war. And then actually after the war, just—this is probably pertinent, both he was great friends with [Theodor S.] "Ted" Geisel, Dr. Seuss.

MANNES: Right.

O'NEILL: They were both editors of *The [Dartmouth] Jack-O-Lantern*. Actually five years apart, so they didn't know each other in Hanover, but they met afterwards and became close friends. And also after the war, had a great—he came out to Hollywood to continue his writing career, and he had a great rat pack of Elia Kazan and Jean Renoir and Robert [B.] Ryan, who was a Dartmouth Class of '32, the great actor, Robert Ryan, who coincidentally was the undefeated NCAA [National Collegiate Athletic Association] boxing champion at Dartmouth, which is interesting.

So Pop was working out here, and he stayed out here until he had my older brother. Then he moved back East, to Connecticut, where he and my mother settled, in Westport, Connecticut, and started having the rest of their brood. And they ended up with four boys. I was number two of four. And that's where I grew up, and that's where I would go to the Dartmouth-Yale football and hockey game up in New Haven and returned to Hanover for the summer vacations—for reunions for my dad, and fell in love with the place and decided it would be a—a great place to shoot for down the road, if I could manage it, which I did.

But—so that's where they were when I was at Dartmouth. They were based in Westport, Connecticut.

MANNES: Okay.

O'NEILL: And so that's their story, pretty much.

MANNES: Okay.

So you said you were born in Westport. That's correct?

O'NEILL: I actually was born in Bridgeport, Connecticut, but I grew up in Westport. Mm-hm.

MANNES: And what year was that?

O'NEILL: Born on December 13, 1948.

MANNES: Nineteen forty-eight, okay. So you—so you were born in Bridgeport, grew up in Westport.

O'NEILL: Yup.

MANNES: Can you tell me about your—a little bit about the neighborhood you grew up in, your childhood?

O'NEILL: Yeah. It was a—I mean, it's funny: All these years down the road, I feel guilty about describing my childhood as a happy blur, but it was this two-acre, you know, rolling hills zoning on the edge of Long Island Sound. And I grew up with three brothers, four of us within five years, and so we didn't have—when I describe my childhood, it was this blur or this tumbleweed that went between the refrigerator and

Thanksgiving and Christmas and school and the hockey rinks and Long Island Sound in the summer and fishing and crabbing. It was really a lovely, sort of idyllic way to grow up.

It was the '50s, of course, Blair-Eisenhower's era. It was kind of a golden era in the country. There were no cell phones or computers. You rode your bike without a helmet. There were no seat belts in the cars. It was—it was a fun time to be a kid. You'd just ride your bike around the neighborhood and pedal away and drop your bike on the lawn and run in to someone's house and then come back.

As a boy growing up, we had a 100-acre wood behind our house, where there were fish to be caught in the summer, and in the winter there was a pond that I learned how to skate on, where I started my hockey playing, which I ended up taking to Dartmouth.

But I remember telling my kids—I have three boys—and we would visit my parents when they were alive, when my boys were younger. I would show them the woods that we'd go into and explain that after school I'd get my dog, and head into the woods, get a snack—I had a Cocker Spaniel, and then hack around and built forts and catch fish and look at birds and just observe nature, and then about two hours later my mother's voice would come through the woods, somehow. She'd stay on the back porch and give this "kee-ah-kee" call.

MANNES: [Laughs.]

O'NEILL: We'd come in, literally, for dinner, and that's what life was, you know? Pretty simple. But looking back, very—very heartfelt and self-reliant, you know, and independent, and you kind of have to invent your own amusement, although I had my brothers, too, and friends.

I was playing sports along the way. I was a good athlete growing up and played sports all the way through school, up into—to Hanover, as well. It was a great place to grow up, Westport [unintelligible].

MANNES: Which sports—which sports did you play?

O'NEILL: I'm sorry?

MANNES: I'm sorry. You said you played sports all the way up through your school, so which sports specifically?

O'NEILL: Yeah. Well, I ended up playing—it was soccer, hockey and baseball through high school, and then when I came to Dartmouth, I actually ended up my freshman year—I played soccer, hockey and then switched over to lacrosse, and I actually played three sports. In my sophomore year, I was on three varsity Division 1 teams: soccer, hockey and lacrosse, [unintelligible], the only athlete in college who was playing three sports then. There were some runners who might have been doing, you know, fall cross-country and indoor track and spring track, but I was the only athlete playing three different sports at Dartmouth when I got there. But I grew up playing—it was—it was baseball, soccer and—and hockey.

MANNES: Okay. And you mentioned that this was such, like, an idyllic, I think was your word, childhood, living in this neighborhood. And you also mentioned that it's the time, the end of Eisenhower, which you said was, like, the golden time for America. But this is also one of the most intense periods of the Cold War that you grew up in. This is McCarthyism [named after Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy]. There's the Korean War. Did that affect you at all?

O'NEILL: It's funny you should mention that. We did—the answer is no, it didn't. But right over by the high school—and I went to the public schools up through the tenth grade, and then I went away to a private school for two years, but speaking of the Cold War, they actually put in a Nike missile silo by my high school on North Avenue in Westport, Connecticut, sometime in the '50s. And you're actually right: It was—it was the standoff with Korea and then the building of the Cold War with Russia.

So we had a Nike [unintelligible] in Westport, Connecticut—how 'bout that?—at that time. But it seemed—it all seemed pretty distant, you know? And at that point, because our were troops involved in—American troops in Korea, but I didn't—my dad and mom of course had been in World War II, and then my generation wasn't going to get going till the next war, in Vietnam.

So I didn't really have too much connection, I wouldn't say, to the—to the war in Korea in terms of awareness as a kid. It certainly didn't feel in any way in the stage of growing up—I

mean, as you would have felt it during World War II or during the Vietnam era, where there was much more awareness of it and much more media coverage and much more involvement by the population. You know, it was kind of a war that was “over there” and seemed pretty distant as a kid, to me, really, in Westport.

MANNES: Okay. And is that because politics wasn't big in your home or it's just because you were young, or it was just—just in general?

O'NEILL: Oh, politics was huge. My dad was a big Adlai [E.] Stevenson [II] supporter, and, of course, he lost to Eisenhower in both elections. My dad was a big, vociferous Democrat, as was Ted Geisel and his other buddies. So, yeah, no, he was—politics were always discussed.

But I don't think—it's funny, I don't—in that war, maybe because I was younger, of course—in the '50s I would have been, you know, three through, you know, twelve or something. I think I wasn't as aware of—of—of talk about wars, or maybe there wasn't as much talk about it. I'm not sure about that. Later on, of course, my dad was very actively against the Vietnam War and was a big letter writer to *The New York Times* and organized and protested against the war and so forth. But I must say in the '50s. I don't recall much conversation about it, but I the '60s it definitely heated up and was then—it was an ongoing conversation.

MANNES: Okay. And, again—then that's when we're reaching Vietnam, because Vietnam started, of course, back, I don't know, at the end of World War II, pretty much. So when did you first hear about Vietnam? Because it really built up after World War II, even before you were born.

O'NEILL: Well, it did, of course. I mean, the French were in there, in Điện Biên Phủ in '54, when they fell. And then we started sending in, you know, “advisers,” quote-unquote. I'm trying to think when I would have—so then we ended—I think probably when John [F.] Kennedy was president in the early '60s was the first time that we started getting awareness of Vietnam and when we started committing more troops there. I think there was a creeping awareness that—that America was getting drawn into that war. And after, you know, the French had been thrown out, we were kind of the next ones up.

Of course, it was part of the international scheme that we had to contain communism, and so that was, you know, set down in various White House advisers that the best way to stop the Soviets was to—and the Chinese, for that matter—was to contain the communism in Vietnam — an obstacle.

So, yeah, there was a creeping awareness then, I would say, in the early '60s and through—of course, when John Kennedy ended up sending advisers over, a lot of people, when they've talked about whether he would have made a good president if he'd lived long—part of that decision would have hinged on whether or not he had seen the folly of Vietnam early enough to get us out of there or not, which nobody ever knows.

But, yeah, for sure in the early '60s it began to creep into our—to our consciousness.

MANNES: Right.

O'NEILL: There was more news coverage, yep, mm-hm.

MANNES: So, yeah. So that was—that would have been when you were just entering high school. Is that correct?

O'NEILL: Yeah, that I remember was in—.

MANNES: Let's see, that—

O'NEILL: Yep, I was just—I was—back then the high school in town, Staples High School, had three grades, and I was a tenth grader when John Kennedy was killed. It's when the "Where were you when he was assassinated?" and I was at Staples High School, I remember that.

Yeah, and then, of course, [Lyndon B. Johnson] "LBJ" took over, and then we know what happened there, culminating in events in Hanover, in New Hampshire in 1968, about five years later—was reflective of what—the path, of course, LBJ took us on in—in Vietnam and what happened there. But so, yeah, I would say—I think the more the troops we began to send, obviously, the more there was coverage and the more the body bags came back, the more there was public awareness of what was going on.

So it grew—I don't say exponentially after Kennedy's death, with Johnson as president, just the public's awareness of what was going on and so forth.

MANNES: And so, again, you said politics was big in your home, so when JFK was assassinated, that must have been—that must have been quite a—

O'NEILL: Yeah, that was startling, you know? It really was. Pop was—he was a very political—he was a big Democrat. Bridgeport, my hometown, had the first socialist mayor, Jasper McLevy, and Pop had some friends who had fought against [Francisco] Franco in the Spanish Civil War, and so he was attuned to politics, my father was, and he was very interested in it. I saw a lot of his letters were printed in *The New York Times*, with various points of view about the war and what was going on or who was lying or what was happening.

So, yeah, I would say it was—it was always a red-hot discussion in our house. A lot of Pop's friends were thoughtful about the war, too, and were concerned about it, certainly Ted Geisel, being foremost in my mind. And later on, they teamed up with some letter writing to try to end the war, to try to get Nixon out.

So it was—definitely in my house, more so than in most other houses, I would say. I think Westport, you know, was *Mad Men* country. It was where the advertising guys would get on the train and go 50 miles to New York and have their martinis on the way out and get off the train. I think it was more Republican back then than Democrat.

I think Pop was probably more in the minority, I would say, at the time in terms of, you know, sort of being concerned about the war and being against the war, having the war be a major topic. I think our house was kind of a—a—more of a hotbed for discussion and conversations because of my father's interest in that.

MANNES: So would you say—so you said that in your house, your father's friends were very against the war, at least very nervous about it. Were other people not?

O'NEILL: You know, I think until the body count went up, you know, and we got up to the 500,000 there, I just don't think they

were as aware of it and what was going on and what the—
what the toll of the war was.

Yeah, I think my dad was definitely more astute about that. He was a writer, don't forget, so, you know, writers love to avoid writing, and so one way to do that is to read up on national and international events, and so this was a topic that was of great interest to him, so he would devour any, you know, radio or newspaper or magazine article on the war and be eager and willing to talk about it.

So I think part of it was his—the nature of his profession as a freelance writer, if he had time to think about these things and time to write letters to various newspapers and had time to get agitated about the war and try to do something about it.

MANNES: Okay. So how about yourself? Because you are—you are in high school. Vietnam is gradually creeping up. It's building up. And you're getting to the age where you would be—you would be old enough to be in the [U.S.] Army. You're getting towards—you're getting towards the age of 18. So did that concern you at all? Like, you getting older and the war still getting bigger?

O'NEILL: It didn't at that point, I have to say. It really didn't hit until we got to Dartmouth and we saw the—you know, then all hell broke out in '68 with the various assassinations and the Gate. You know, that's when the whole thing really blew up in terms of a major, major story with a major impact on everybody.

But I would say—you know, again, I was playing three sports and trying to get good grades to get into Dartmouth. I wasn't—I have to say, I don't think I was that concerned about the war before I got to Dartmouth.

MANNES: Okay.

O'NEILL: [unintelligible] sure about that.

MANNES: Okay. So let's—I guess let's get into Dartmouth, then. So you said your father was Class of '31 at Dartmouth. Your father has friends that went to Dartmouth with him, Ted Geisel being maybe one of the foremost of them. So what really went into your decision to go there?

O'NEILL: Well, it's mostly—you know, I had—I visited it a lot. I had gone up on reunions. Every five years, we'd driven up the Connecticut River from Westport, up—up into Hanover, so I always—I just enjoyed it, you know? And I have to say Dartmouth always had a certain—for me—and I love the outdoors. But part of it was because I was an outdoors person when I grew up: fishing and—and enjoying myself being outdoors. I liked the—the rural setting of Hanover, for sure.

I liked my father's friends that I met who were from Dartmouth, who were smart and well spoken and funny and provocative, I think, so that was a good sign for me.

And then, of course, we would go to some sporting game. I was athlete, and it was fun to go to the Yale Bowl and see Dartmouth come down and play. And I remember standing outside the Bowl once and seeing the football team gather before it went in, and that sort of excited me. I said, *Boy, that's a good tribe there.*

And then I went to St. George's School for two years in Newport, Rhode Island, in my last years of my high school, and so it's smack-dab in the middle of New England—had been in Connecticut, too, but playing hockey with the captain of the hockey team, playing a lot of high schools in Rhode Island and Boston and Massachusetts. That was—and I was playing soccer as well.

But just there was an awareness of Dartmouth if you lived in—if you lived in New England, Dartmouth had, you know, a cachet. It had coverage. It had a lot of alums who were active, especially in the Boston area. So there was a lot of coverage about it, you know, and there were firm opinions about it. You know, either loved it or you hated it, but most people loved it.

So I had a combination of sort of historic exposure to it through the reunions and then, growing up, exposure to my father's friends that I admired, who had been Dartmouth guys, and then just, you know, the college's rural setting appealed to me. So there were a bunch of reasons why it was a school that appealed to me. At the end of the day, I applied there and to Bowdoin [College], and I applied to some schools that had similar ingredients: small, liberal arts

settings, but I wanted to go to Dartmouth, so—for all those reasons.

MANNES: And were you recruited as well to play hockey, or was that something—

O'NEILL: No, I wasn't.

MANNES: —you decided to—

O'NEILL: I mean, that was a walk-up. It's funny. My school was tiny. It was 220 kids. My graduating class was 55. And actually, ironically, we ended up—when I was at St. George's, my senior year we beat La Salle Academy in hockey, which was a Providence high school that was a New England hockey champ. We knocked them off. So we were—you know, we had a good team. But I was definitely under the radar.

I think back then there was very little—I think there's much more, quote-unquote, "athletic recruiting" now, even though they don't, quote-unquote "recruit athletes." But they're much more aware of them now. And also, don't forget, these days you could never do what I did, which was play three Division 1 [D1] sports.

MANNES: Mm-hm.

O'NEILL: Kids just focus earlier on one sport, and they're much better trained and play it year round. And the training is much more rigorous, so—but yeah, no, I was not recruited, although it was fun to get up there and to step in. Really, I started on three freshman sports. So it was, you know, I was a good all-around athlete. And it was fun. It was a routine that I had grown up with as a kid. You know, you played soccer in the fall, and you turn in your cleats when the pond freezes and you put on your skates to play hockey, and then when the pond melts you take off your skates and—as a kid, I played baseball, but then, as—at Dartmouth I decided to switch over to lacrosse, which was basically the same game as soccer and hockey, I knew in terms of principles. And I actually, as never having played it, I was the third highest scorer [chuckles] on the freshman team. I tell people that the first guy had 35 points, the number two had 28 points and I had seven points, but I was the third highest scorer.

So—and that was—that was my freshman year. And it was also a great way, of course, to—to meet kids and to—and the group of guys you want to hang out with at the school. You know, it's all about finding your tribe in college, whether it's—you know, whether it's the newspaper or the *Jack-O-Lantern* or a fraternity or sports team or, you know, acting or whatever, you want to find your group, and that's pretty much who you sail—you know, whether it's the Outing Club at Dartmouth [sic: Dartmouth Outing Club]. You find your group, and you sail through. But I was lucky to—to have been a good athlete, so I ended up with a bunch of good friends right off the bat that began—you know, friends for the whole journey.

MANNES: And so once you got to Dartmouth, was it everything—in your freshman year, this is, was it everything you expected? Like, what were your first—

O'NEILL: Well—

MANNES: —impress- —it was? Okay.

O'NEILL: It's funny. My—my—younger son Michael [O'Neill] just went off—he's in Indiana, starting as a freshman there, and he's got a roommate, and I send him—you know, my first year at Dartmouth, I had a roommate, a boy who was a nice kid but, you know, fairly innocuous to me, and we had a great, you know, easy-going freshman year. And I never saw him again for—for the other, you know, three years at Dartmouth.

So then—so I would say, yeah. I mean, I think that's what happens. They may have changed the system now, but historically you got to find a roommate, and it was the luck of a draw, and it worked out, you know, good enough for me. I had—I was preoccupied with doing what I was doing, and he was doing what he was doing, and we were agreeable to each other and civil, and it was—everything was fine. But then, you know, we had other interests that took us in other directions.

But, yeah, I would say—don't forget—you know, I had been Dartmouth, so I knew the lay of the land and knew what it looked like, and I'd grown up in New England, so I was used to cold weather.

- MANNES: So it wasn't much of an adjustment, is what you're saying.
- O'NEILL: No, it wasn't. Don't forget also, I'd come from two years at a prep school, which was all boys, and it was pretty rigorous, too, so—I think the Dartmouth adjustment for me was much easier than it was for kids from other states. I have friends now from California, and a lot of them had trouble adjusting. They'd come from [unintelligible]—
- MANNES: The first winter.
- O'NEILL: —[unintelligible] high schools. That first winter and no girls and all that, which was an adjustment for them. But it wasn't so much for me. It just seemed like a natural fit, I have to say.
- MANNES: Okay. So can you talk to me a bit about academics your freshman year? What did you decide to study, or what did you think you wanted to study when you came in?
- O'NEILL: Yeah. I didn't really know. I mean, my dad was a writer, so I had an interest in—in English, I would say. And then I was just thinking of—you know, I was really after that general liberal arts degree, and so I wanted to have it as broad as possible. And I ended up being a government major and then an art history minor. But I have to say—you know, you come in—I forget what the requisites were, but you take some language, and you take some history and science and so forth.
- And—but I didn't know what I wanted to do or what wanted to be, so I just took sort of a general dose of—of liberal arts classes. But then I started to focus a little bit on art history, and one of the things that I'm proud of at Dartmouth and really helped make an enjoyable experience is I ended up becoming friends with an art history professor, who became a friend for life, when I took several classes from him, a guy named John Wilmerding, who was teaching American art history at Dartmouth when I was there.
- And he was young. He was only ten years older than we were, and another friend and I—[James A.] "Jimmy" Nachtwey [Class of 1970], the photographer, and I became really good friends with—with John. And Jim ended up doing a major in art history; I ended up doing a minor.

So I got a little bit of a focus that way, and then I do remember, though,—and there were some terrific professors Starr, the journalist, was the government professor who was really interesting. And it was getting Robert [E.] Huke, who taught geology, and he was interesting. And a guy named Starzinger, who taught a class on logic that I thought really interesting.

So logic was—you ended up being surprised. I must say, it think it was—sort of fit the prescription for a math—something within the math or science realm, so I took a class in logic.

I'll never forget, Starzinger, on the first—the survey classes—I don't know, 100 or 200 kids; I forget how big it was—but he said, "How many of you think you have the same birthday in this room?" [Chuckles.] No hands shot up. And Starzinger said, "I can guarantee you that there are at least six kids who share a birthday in this room right now." And [chuckles] it was one of those jarring moment[s], and he proved it [chuckles], where you were exposed to something for the first time that really was—opened your eyes and made you think differently about something.

So that was a—you know, that was an example of a class that—as was true with art history—that kind of took me by surprise and got me interesting in—in—in learning I think, so—

I think it's always been the case. You know, you—you start out with some vague idea of what you want, and then you match it up with what the college requires you to have at a certain point, and then I think you hope you get lucky, you know, with a good professor or a really interesting class, and that gives you some direction and—and starts you thinking that you—learning how to learn is what your assignment is at the college, which I think is true.

So, yeah, so freshman year was, you know, the general exposure to those things. And then I started to—as I say, focused a little bit on art history and ended up with a great friendship with a professor that lasted all of four years there and way after as well. He's still alive and still fine.

But I didn't know—you know, I didn't know, going in, I wanted to be pre-med; I didn't know I wanted to be an

architect or anything like that. In fact, when I got out four years later, I left with the distinguished title of an ordinary seaman on aboard the S.S. *Mobil Fuel* [a tanker] for three months, making enough money to go to Europe with Jimmy Nachtwey for six months, and came back from that as a folksinger in Boston for three years, so—

I was not the poster boy for knowing what I wanted to do, going to college, but I think I was able to take advantage of—of the curriculum and some really good professors at the school that opened my eyes in a way that ended up being I think very enjoyable for me.

MANNES: Okay. And so as a—or I'll say in general, what was the campus climate like in relation to Vietnam your first year? You took—you said you were a government major. I don't know how many government classes you took, maybe, that year, but did you discuss that in your government classes?

O'NEILL: No.

MANNES: Were people vocal on campus?

O'NEILL: Not so much in the classes, I wouldn't say. I'm trying to think. I mean, it's funny—so I was there, maybe you know, from prime time vis-à-vis the war—I was there from '66 to '70, when it all—all went to hell in a hand basket, basically. And it just escalated every year. So I would say my freshman year was, you know, as I describe in the memoir, *WHIPLASH*: *When the Vietnam War Rolled a Hand Grenade into the Animal House*, it's the awareness of the war, the opposition to the war just grew every year. And then in '68, of course, it really exploded.

MANNES: Right.

O'NEILL: I would say freshman year there was less—I mean, as I describe in the book, you know, that when the ROTC [pronounced it ROT-cee; Reserve Officers' Training Corps], ROTC [spelling it out] was on campus, both the [U.S.] Navy and Army, and so those guys would go on—and some of them were my friends, of course, but they would do their routines, maneuvers on the [Dartmouth] Green, and nobody would pay any attention to them. But literally, you know, two years later they were being mocked by SDS [Students for a Democratic Society]—

MANNES: Right.

O'NEILL: —and four years later they were being—you know, trying to be hounded off campus, so that really [unintelligible]. So I would say freshman year, not so much. And for me in particular, you know, there's a story about—there was a Dartmouth kid who was senior in my freshman year, named [William S.] "Billy" Smoyer [[Class of 1967], who was—and I got to know him because we played two of the same sports—we played soccer and hockey together, and so back then, freshman and varsity were two different sports; they didn't combine them—two different teams, rather.

And so we would travel with the varsity, and Billy Smoyer became a good friend of mine, and I knew other friends from Theta Delt[a Chi fraternity]. And he was—he as a Marine ROTC at Dartmouth. And then he would end up going to Vietnam that summer of '67, when he graduated, and then he was [unintelligible] Vietnam.

And so when I came back for my sophomore year and word of Billy Smoyer's death percolated on the campus, that was when, for me in particular and for a lot of kids—that was—the subtitle of—my book is called *WHIPLASH*, and the subtitle is *When the Vietnam War Rolled a Hand Grenade into the Animal House*.

MANNES: Right.

O'NEILL: The hand grenade was Billy Smoyer's death, and when—Billy Smoyer was a golden boy from Princeton, New Jersey, who just was a lovely, involved human being, great athlete, played soccer and hockey. Was just a good, good kid. And when he ended up being killed three weeks into his tour, it was his death that really set off the alarm at Hanover.

So I would say things changed dramatically from my freshman year to my sophomore year. So the fall of '67 was when it really sunk in— Billy Smoyer's death was—Everyone really—

MANNES: Right.

O'NEILL: —liked Billy. That was the—and then, of course, things started to escalate in Vietnam at the same time, so they kind

of dovetailed to reinforce the power of the war and the danger of the war, the awareness of the war, I would say. So for me, in the fall of '67—

That's also, you know, when you start—for my time at—Dartmouth pledges fraternities in sophomore year, to make it a better system, by the way, [unintelligible],—

MANNES: Right.

O'NEILL: —[unintelligible] freshman, and you don't know—have any idea who these kids are or what the houses are like and so forth, but—so it dovetailed with the pledging of fraternity, Chi Phi Heorot [pronounced like carrot] back then (now Chi Heorot), for me, the fall of '67. So that's when—

And—and—and then I think—I think in terms of the—you know, the war having an impact on campus, it really wasn't so much in the classrooms, but it was more outside and protests and so forth. And then one I was in a fraternity then—and we had several ROTC kids in my fraternity. So, you know, we liked them, and for most of them it was a way to pay their way through Dartmouth and so forth. That was the way it was. And they were good guys.

But their participation in ROTC became more and more challenged by—you know, by other kids on campus as the war escalated thereafter, but—I'd say the fall of '67 was when it really—the awareness of the war really took a—took a major jump, in my life, and I think in the life of Dartmouth too. I think there was Smoyer's death and—he was a prominent kid, you know, on campus. He died so quickly over there, that was really—that was the alarm.

MANNES: And so Billy was, it sounds like, was really that wake-up call for you. Was—were there multiple cases of this throughout the rest of the year? Did—were there more so-to-speak?

O'NEILL: Yeah, a guy named [J. Robert] "Robby" Peacock was another I think Theta Delt [member of Theta Delta Chi]. He was missing in action and presumed dead over there. Those were the two I knew.

And then in the meantime—let's see, that would be a little bit later. I mean, I had—in my sophomore year, a senior in the house, a guy who became my big brother, was a guy

[Jonathan] "Jon" Newcomb [Class of 1968]. And he became an Army Ranger, and he went over to Vietnam and came back. But that would have been a little bit later than the sophomore year.

Yeah, I can think of Billy Smoyer and Robby Peacock. Those were the two men from —Dartmouth students who died in Vietnam. There may—there certainly probably were others; I just didn't know them. I knew those guys specifically because we had played sports.

MANNES: Okay. And so did the protests, themselves, people standing around, like, the Green or Parkhurst [Hall]—did that protest presence start in your sophomore year?

O'NEILL: Well,—

MANNES: After these people started—

O'NEILL: —it's a little hazy. For sure it started to—we had one guy in SDS in our house. They were the most active, Students for a Democratic Society. And by senior year, they were extremely vocal and had a large presence. Sophomore year? I just—to tell you the truth, I can't remember—

MANNES: Yeah.

O'NEILL: —when that might have been. I think they started—you know, again, one visual was that they would start paralleling and mocking the ROTC exercises on the Green. And I was aware that that organization was getting more prominent on campus, but I didn't—I didn't know too many kids in it. You know, it's just one of those, you know, Dartmouth has these overlapping tribes and groups, and I just—I just wasn't too familiar with very many of them in it, but all of a sudden, visually—it was clear the numbers were growing and that the vocal opposition was also growing.

But I would say sophomore year—I don't remember specifically an incident or an episode, as there would be, of course, later with Parkhurst and others. I think really—and I wonder if you hear this from everybody else—'68, of course, was—you know, coming out of the Democratic National Convention and then [Richard M.] Nixon getting into the White House or going into the election in the fall, and then McCarthy and the assassinations of JFK and [the Rev.]

Martin Luther King [Jr.], and it just—that's when the agitation really took itself for sure, so it was—

The other thing for me was my junior year, jumping ahead, was the year, by the way—it was interestingly—that Dartmouth had the first seven [sic] women [on] campus, so there were 3,000 men and seven [sic] women.

MANNES: Right.

O'NEILL: We [unintelligible] seven. They were all in the theater department. They were just there for one year. But one of them ended up pledging my fraternity and being the first woman to pledge a fraternity at Dartmouth, and was very active against the war. And she—in *my* life, she was important, and were romantically involved for a while. We remain friends to this day. She lives nearby out here.

She was definitely tied in more to the SDS kids and was much more vocal about her opposition to the war. She was a very colorful member of Heorot House—as I said, the only girl on campus who pledged a fraternity. So that would have been—she came from '68 to '69. So that would have been my junior year. And that was the year when—you know, when everything busted out, for sure.

MANNES: Right.

O'NEILL: My Lai and—you know, [CBS broadcast journalist] Walter [L.] Cronkite [Jr.] reported we were in a quagmire and couldn't get out. Yeah. You know, and LBJ resigned—or decided not to run and then Nixon become [sic] free. So that was—and then—then the U.S. presence escalated.

And after Bill Smoyer's death, of course, as I say, in sophomore year, we were then much more attuned to it, and there were Dartmouth kids going over there. In fact, again, Jon Newcomb, who was in my house, would have gone over that—my junior year, '68. He would have been serving in Vietnam. He served as a Ranger for a couple of tours of duty and made it out okay.

But, so, yeah. So that's when I—I had more involvement with awareness of the war and that the war was hitting close to home and that I knew kids who were serving there. I knew kids who had died there. I knew more and more that the

campus was agitating. There were protests. It just—it just grew exponentially, I would say, in 1968.

MANNES: Okay. And so—I'm actually going to take just a step back to the year before, but can you tell me a little bit about Dartmouth, your experience at Heorot? Starting maybe in pledge term. You don't have to tell me what exactly you did then. I'm sure [chuckles] you don't want to. But just a little bit about the culture.

O'NEILL: It was—well, just—again, another reason I ended up at Heorot—probably is was Chi Phi, and it was a national fraternity, and we were there—we didn't think we were getting enough money for—a bang for our buck, so we went local and became Heorot. I forget when we did that, probably in my—either my sophomore or junior year.

But my dad had also been in Heorot. He had been in Chi Phi, so that was another reason I knew—I knew I was a legacy there, and I was going to look in there]. And as it turned out, Heorot back then, as it is now—it was a pretty good hockey? house.

But, yeah, I had—I had friends, because of the sports. I mean, I had friends probably in four or five fraternities that were sort of—I think Beta [That Pi, now Beta Alpha Omega] was presumably the big jock house, but Theta Delt had a lot of athletes, Phi Delt had athletes, Psi U [Psi Upsilon] and SAE [Sigma Alpha Epsilon], Heorot.

So those—those were the kids I knew best because I was playing sports with them, but—so rush was an interesting time for me, and it had also given me a year or two of—to meet kids. And—and—and a lot of us—and meet some—you know, the upper grads, who were in the house. And so—and, again, because my dad had gone there—and then three years later I ended up in Casque and Gauntlet because he'd gone there as well. It wasn't for that reason. I actually preferred it over the other two senior societies, myself, but I had been steered there because he had been there and being part of that legacy was important to me

But rush was—you know, it was fun. It was interesting. The thing about Heorot that I ended up liking a lot—my senior year, just to jump forward—it was a really interesting batch of kids. We had four sports captains, and we also had four

senior fellows, and there were only 12 in the whole college, and four of them were in Heorot. So we had a really great mix of kids who were smart, who were athletic. Some were politically driven. There were some good writers. It was a wonderful batch, I think, of—a wonderful, diverse batch of kids.

We had a couple of black kids. There weren't many on campus, but we had some really cool black kids. Larry Stephens was in our class, and he was really intriguing. And [James C.] "Jimmy" Johnson [Class of 1968] was a year older, a black student, and he was involved and terrific and really a wonderful kid.

So it was—Heorot for me was a really—I knew two—I knew a bunch of hockey players, but I also just liked the other kids that I met there who—who were doing other things on campus, so for me it was a very appealing sort of melting pot. And a good reflection, I think, of sort of the breadth of kids that were on campus.

MANNES: Right. And so—and then this—one of the so-called "Magnificent Seven"—I can't remember if you said her name. She—

O'NEILL: Her name is Lynn Lobban [Class of 1969], L-y-n-n L-o-b-b-a-n. She actually had a piece in the alumni magazine last year about her year there. She came—let's see, in '68, so I guess I had already been there a year. And she knew—she had gone to Elmira College—excuse me one second—and she'd had a classmate at Elmira who knew one of the member of my fraternity, Allen [C.] McLean [pronounced mick-LANE], and so she came by to say hello to Allen McLean, and then she kind of liked the house and liked the brothers, and we all got the mischievous idea: Let's pledge her. [Chuckles.] So we—

MANNES: [Chuckles.]

O'NEILL: So we did. And sure enough, she's in the house composite, the only woman in a house composite at Dartmouth that year, the first woman ever—you know, right beside the dog, Tuka. All houses had dogs. Tuka was my roommate, Thorne Butler's dog, but he's in the photo as well. So she decided—she was in for an adventure that year, you know, being one of seven [sic] women and 3,000 men, she was off to a good

start. And she thought adding a fraternity layer would be another good way to [chuckles] expand her Dartmouth experience.

MANNES: Yeah.

O'NEILL: And it turned out it was. She was a pistol. She was very colorful. She was involved in the theater department. And she actually did—heroically [chuckles] took the Dartmouth – took Heorot out to the Robert Frost Inter-Fraternity Play Contest. And against all odds and against Foley House, which was the big theatrical house at the time, which had all these guys—I think it included Jerry [J.] Zaks [Class of 1967], who went on to a big career on Broadway. Foley House was the house that had all the actors.

But Lynn somehow, you know, whipped this sorry band of Heorot actors—and we had one guy, John [O.] Myers [Class of 1969], who was actually—he was president of the Dartmouth Players. But other than that, we had nobody else, and so she recruited a bunch of miscreants and put them into a [Eugène] Ionesco play called *The Future Is in Eggs*. And I'll be damned if she didn't win the Robert Frost Inter-Fraternity Play Contest, much to the consternation of Foley House.

We lost every other award that night. It took place over Winter Carnival. [Laughs.] But she ended up directing the Players that won the Inter-Fraternity Play Contest, so that was a great feather in her cap and a lot of fun for us. And, you know, I think also reflective, David, again, of the breadth of—of Heorot. It just really some—

And I think it's one of the things I like about Dartmouth, is that when we came in, the dean then, [Thaddeus] Seymour, said, "We don't want 800 well-rounded individual students; we want 800 individuals that make a well-rounded class." And I think that was reflected in some of the kids I knew in Heorot. And all the Dartmouth kids I knew I think were colorful, were strong flavors. You know, they added up to a pretty good—and if you thought of it as a pointillist painting, there are all these colorful dots around the campus, and when you step back it made for a pretty interesting final portrait of a class.

MANNES: Okay. And so this brings up to '68, when all the—so to speak all hell breaks loose and there's a lot of stuff going on. RFK is assassinated, Martin Luther King [Jr.] is assassinated, the Democrat [sic Democratic] National Convention happens I think in the beginning of the year.

O'NEILL: Yeah, the Tet Offensive in January and My Lai [massacre] in March.

MANNES: The Tet Offensive.

O'NEILL: Yeah.

MANNES: So what is the campus climate like now in regards to the stuff that's happening domestically and towards Vietnam? We can start with domestically maybe.

O'NEILL: Well, I would say—I mean, the colleges ended up, you know, leading the way. All of a sudden, now—you asked me earlier if I was worried about the war. In high school I wasn't, but now, all of a sudden, halfway through Dartmouth—and we're escalating the troops over there being deployed, and we now know that people are dying in major numbers and that the escalation doesn't seem like it's going to stop and that I'm about to be draft eligible. And, again, they don't pull the trigger on the draft lottery till the next—till my senior year.

But—so the awareness of probably having to go there and knowing the repercussions, from Billy Smoyer and others, of—for some who did go there and didn't come back, it all of a sudden became, you know, a pressing concern, I would say. It was—

And opposition to the war had grown in leaps and bounds. I mean, again, the kids just took the measure—you know, the opposition to the war, the kids mimicking or making fun of the ROTC kids. They now outnumbered them by a lot.

There were a lot more meetings at the Top of the Hop [a venue in the Hopkins Center for the Arts]. SDS would do meetings. Some of the professors who were more liberal or progressive—Jonathan Mirsky being one—would start giving classes in conscientious objectorship and how to avoid the war and so forth. So it—so all of a sudden it was vibrating much more than it ever had before. All of a sudden it was really a part of the fabric of living on campus.

The war was the—was the gorilla in the room, for sure, and everybody was aware of it. I mean, if you'd see—there's a—there's sort of a well-known photograph of a Winter Carnival ice sculpture from 1968. I forget which fraternity it was outside of, but it's an ice sculpture of a mother, you know, with her arms outstretched and anguished and at her feet is a dead baby. And a sign, handwritten, says, "Somewhere in My Lai [Vietnam], 1968."

So even in the—you know, even in the midst of the most sacred of all Dartmouth traditions, Winter Carnival, the war had found its way, and it was—and you were much more aware, too, of things going on at [University of] Chicago and [University of California,] Berkley had Harvard [University] and all the other campuses. There started to be reports, you know, of street protesting.

I forget how early this started taking over campus buildings elsewhere. I know at Columbia [University] there was that—what was it called? They took over that building. I forget the year on that. And, of course, we were one year away from [the] Parkhurst [takeover] in the spring of '69, when the administration building was taken over. But I think these things were starting to happen at other colleges around—around the country.

And, again, the Walter Cronkite thing that so many people always pointed out—but he was, you know, Father Walter, and he was the beloved—the believable news figure who gave, you know—that was back when there were three network newscasts, ABC [American Broadcasting Company], NBC [National Broadcasting Company] and CBS [Columbia Broadcasting Company]. And Walter was CBS.

And he'd gone over to Vietnam, and he was—he was told by one of the generals, you know, "We can't win this war." So when he pronounced that we were basically in a quagmire and that we could not win the war. It just gave more ammunition, I think, David, too, to the kids on campus to protest even more if they didn't have incentive enough—

MANNES: Right.

O'NEILL: —with their friends being killed.

And the other thing was, of course, then—it's interesting—we were getting more coverage from the war. The photographers and the reporters—they just—they—Vietnam had some terrific, sharp reporting, you know, from the war, about the war, and the photographers, whether it's [Edward T.] "Eddie" Adams or Nick Ut or Larry Burrows. They were sending back photographs from the war that were telling a different story than what the government was telling us.

And I remember—I called this friend, James Nachtwey, who's now affiliated with Dartmouth and teaches there and is probably the world's foremost combat photographer. He decided—he was my classmate in 1970 and my Heorot fraternity mate. He said to me once, "You know, I decided to become a war photographer when I realized that the politicians were lying and the photographers were telling the truth."

And I think that's—that's what happened back then. It was the awareness that the politicians were lying, you know, about the Tonkin Gulf [sic; Gulf of Tonkin] Resolution and whether it was about secret bombing in Cambodia. We were getting information that the government was definitely lying to us.

And when Cronkite—you know, Nixon would say, "We're winning the hearts and minds," and, of course, Cronkite came back and said, "Well, guess what: We're not." It was really the time when—I think really that was the big disconnect between authority and—and college kids, when all of a sudden we—we felt empowered and almost required to stand up to authority because they were lying to us. The government definitely had another purpose in mind, and it wasn't in our best interests. And it certainly was a life-threatening circumstance.

So I think all those things combined, David, to really make for a fraught time, a time of indecision and protest and anxiety. I know the campus was just—you know, you'd gone to school at a very peaceful—well, we'd had our foreign wars, but nobody from Dartmouth's fighting, basically.

So it was a time when the war really permeated the fabric of day-to-day living. And that was the difference then. It's funny: Now when they talk about the problems of fighting these wars that we have is that only 2 or 3 percent of the

American population has anything to do with the military or knows anybody in it. But back then, it was just much more integrated, the dangers of war, the people fighting the war and the people at home who knew about the war and who were related to those people or fighting against it.

So it was—it was rich. You know, the air was rich was the sense of anxiety and fear and it got carried out where you're seeing news photographs on Vietnam but in really sharp reporting coming back from there.

And then the protests started happening, and then the guards, the state guards would come out, and the dogs would come out, and so you ended up—you know, you think now about Ferguson[, MO: the site of many BlackLivesMatter protests] in these other places, where you know, they're using this kind of military response to the civilian problems. That was the first time, you know, that all of a sudden the country had to mobilize internally to sort of keep a lid on the protests, what was going on.

So it was—it was definitely a fraught time, you know? And people—the war had sunk into them, into the fabric of college life in a very pronounced way, and into everybody else's life, but we started it like—you know, myself, I'm thinking, *Jeez, I've only got two more years and I'm gonna not have a college deferment. What am I gonna do?*

So it became much more perilous, a much more active part of our lives, for sure, and it was reflected in a million different ways: by, you know, the music; by the way we were having [unintelligible]. But the music was important.

MANNES: Right.

O'NEILL: It was going against the war, and then Woodstock [Music & Art Fair] was another year away, but—so it's—it was colorful, it was anxious, it was rich, it was, you know, fraught with—and at the end of the—the knot in your stomach was that we were being lied to by the government and that there was a need for civil disobedience that was sort of creeping into us all.

Those of us who had, you know, sort of grown up in the Eisenhower years and behaved in "Uncle Sam knows the

best" way. All of a sudden we're thinking that Uncle Sam might be lying to us, that it was [unintelligible].

MANNES: Right. So you brought up a lot of points that I want to actually go back and touch on a lot of them. I also found it interesting, first of all, that you brought up Nixon and then the politicians lying, because Nixon came into office with the—with the platform that we were getting out of Vietnam, and then, under Nixon, we had the highest troop deployment in the Vietnam era. And it's stuff like that, where it sounds like it upset a lot of Dartmouth students. So I was wondering: How did—how did you guys get your information? If they are lying to you and the reporters—or the photographers are the ones bringing back the—the—truth, so to speak, how did you guys get your information about Vietnam, and then how do you disseminate it on campus?

O'NEILL: Well, I think it was—you know, it was clearly the Third Estate doing its job—you know, the good newspapermen from *The New York Times* and *The Boston Globe* and others were—were—they had some brave reporters over there, who were telling the truth. So I think we would get it, and there were—you know, radio broadcasts and so forth, so—

And then, again, after Cronkite kind of turned against the war, I think the evening—even the evening news channels, which were—they weren't toeing the government line, but I think they were leery of—of—of going against the government, I would say, back then. But even then, all of a sudden they felt more freedom to—to give more specifics. So I think—so I think from the normal news channels, David, we were just getting much more information, whether it was the evening news or whether it was daily newspapers.

And so I also think—you know, and then on campus—you know, college kids historically have time on their hands to think about world [chuckles] and wanting to change the world and what's wrong with the world.

MANNES: Yeah.

O'NEILL: So it's—it's a natural disposition for college kids to take a look at the world and decide that they know how to fix it or they know what they want to do with it. So when all this bad information came in about the world and how it was run, I think it really kind of redlined all these natural, you know,

hormone-percolating, you know, instances. And it was a natural draw for a college kid, you know, just making his way forward in the world and getting educated and learning things about history and being exposed to I think interesting professors.

To add in all—all of a sudden this tidal wave of—of national and international events was kind of overwhelming. So, you know—and it was—part of the miraculousness I think of that era was that, you know, on top of all the normal stuff you do as a college student—you leave home, you try to figure out who you are, you wrestle with romance, you have your hormones on high surge—you're looking around the world, trying to figure out who you are and what your voice is, what you're going to make of yourself.

When you take that normal, anxious passage and then all of a sudden layer on these life-and-death events and all this chaos and the institutional lying by the government, it just made it really—God, just chock-a-block. And it was just—you know, it was just not a—there was no comfort to be found anywhere, you know? There was no—I know, in the odd, fraternity, beer. But even then, you'd drink a beer and you'd talk about the war.

So, you know, unlike other times, when there are fallback positions and the safe harbors in a normal collegiate career, here there just wasn't. So it just put everything on—on a boil. You know, everything was on a boil all the time, I would say, was what was going on this campus. It was really interesting.

Again, it's already—we know traditionally a passage that is fraught with challenge and intrigue and wonder and anxiety, and then you add on all these life-and-death things. It made for—maybe it's a little too exciting. There was—definitely it was a thrilling time to be alive, to be young and, again, to be in college. You know, it was such a natural disposition to wonder about the world and your place in it and how the world could be better.

So all of a sudden we were given all this ammunition, which was more—more than we probably could handle—

MANNES:

Yeah.

O'NEILL: —at the time, about thinking about the world and what was wrong with it.

MANNES: Okay. And you briefly—you briefly mentioned that there was the whole antiwar music movement happening. Woodstock is, of course, the next year, but can you elaborate on that a little bit?

O'NEILL: Well, you know—you know, it was Country Joe and the Fish. And I actually ended up—[Joseph A. “Country Joe”] “Joe” MacDonald was his name, who sang antiwar rag, became a sort of anthem a year later. But he was playing that certainly in Berkeley at that time. I ended up talking to Joe MacDonald because I wanted to use his song in a blurb about my book. He was interesting, because he had served, it turns out, in the Navy for two years, in the early '60s. And he'd gone to Vietnam—he'd gotten home safely. So when he was protesting the war, he actually was somebody who had also served in the military, which gave him kind of a believability and authenticity that some of the others didn't have.

But, sure, I mean, you know, the [James M.] “Jimi” Hendrixes, Bob Dylans' songs—everything all of a sudden—[Richard P.] “Richie” Havens, all these guys—and most of the musicians, of course, were against the war and were singing about it. And so it started to permeate the music more and more, I think, as the protests grew. I think the music, you know, fed off of that cultural reality, as music does, and then reflected it in, you know, the lyrics of songs that were then being done.

So it was a great—a great time to be in a fraternity basement with a jukebox in those days. They don't play that anymore—

MANNES: [Chuckles.]

O'NEILL: But, you know, the quality of music was [chuckles]—was sensational across the board, but all of a sudden a lot of—you, Janis [L.] Joplins and Richie Havens—oh, God, who was the other guy? There were just a ton of them were protesting the war and making good music about it, so—so it was—it was a nice component.

I mean, the soundtrack, as you know, from the late '60s is rich with talent and diversity, and everybody from the—you know, all the great English groups, the Beatles, the Stones,

the Who—all the great American folksingers, Dylan and James Taylor, Simon and Garfunkel, through all the great Motown artists.

It was—it was a wonderful soundtrack. I mean, if we had to live in a time when—it was—I don't know how it would work today. I don't think it would be as interesting musically, but American music—because I don't like the music, at least the music today.

It was definitely a component that we were aware of, you know? And we listened to music differently back then, too. We would actually listen to a whole album or a side of an album and play Side B of [Timothy C.] "Tim" Buckley's album. So it was—it made for—the quality of the music and the nature of the songs, a lot of them protest songs—made for a really good soundtrack for—for the Dartmouth years, I have to say.

MANNES: So I'm just going to give a quick recap. So there's the antiwar music going around campus. There's the National Guard, the police coming in to break up things, like protests that might be happening. There's the politicians lying. There's this sort of life-or-death, like, thought going on campus about Vietnam. What did you guys do for fun during this time? [Chuckles.]

O'NEILL: Well, you know, "sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll" was the old, historic fallback which was always there. It's really one of the reasons why, you know, fraternities were a useful component back then, and I think they still are now, although they need retooling, obviously, and I guess the college is doing that. But, yeah, we were a band of brothers, frankly. We were all dealing with—you know, fraternities historically have—have played that role, of being the social hub for a group of like-minded people.

So, you know, we needed the release. And I would say more probably than now, when, you know—when things were—*were* perilous and fraught and anxious. The release that came from some, you know, Winter Carnival or Green Key [Weekend] or just having girls up, whatever college was going to come up. I dated a lot of girls from Smith [College].

You know, I think the release of enjoying yourself and cutting loose—you know, drinking probably a little too much,

dancing, carrying on, having fun was a safety valve for what was happening, frankly, with the greatest proportion of our days, with what was going on with the war. I think the release was—was really a crucial component.

And for me, playing sports—I ended up with this knee injury, and I ended up—I started out playing three sports, myself, and I ended up just playing hockey, but—so I had sport as an outlet, which was great for—you know, for pouring your heart and passion and energy into that. That was a good outlet for me.

And then, of course, the fraternity, again, was—was a great gathering spot, you know, just to talk about things. And I think the fraternity system in particular back in those days really played a good role in—in helping us sort of galvanize thoughts about the war and how to go forward and what we all should do. It was a big—you know, it was a sounding board, it was a social central circuit, it was a gathering place, it was, you know, the town hall. It was the court, you know, it was the dance hall and everything all at once.

I don't think we ever did any less drinking or partying back than we did before or after, but I think it became a more necessary component, given what we were going through, the stress that was going on in the campus, day-to-day. So—

MANNES: That's interesting that you say the fraternity is kind of your escape from what's happening, but it's also the area where you sit down and talk *about* the war that's happening.

O'NEILL: Yeah, that's right. It was kind of a two-edged sword. That's exactly right, David. It was that. It's just useful. I think it really served a good purpose, and there were thoughtful kids and—because, again, as I say, we had some kids who were in ROTC and they were really dead-set against communism, and they wanted to do their part and fight against it, you know? We disagreed with them but wished them well.

And then, you know,—you asked where you get information. So different kids would have different sources of—or would say, “Did you read the article in *Atlantic Monthly*?” or “Did you see that piece on NPR [National Public Radio]?” They would bring to your attention something about the war, an

element that we hadn't heard or a politician doing or saying something.

So they—they did serve a very good purpose, and you're right: It was—it was a gumbo of relief and also a place where you could sort of talk through some of these things and see if you could figure out what to do. And everybody was wrestling, you know, with their own consciences and with their own ideas about what they were going to do. And yet there was comfort, you know, in numbers, and there was comfort in knowing everybody else was going through the same thing. And so fraternities really were a pretty good shelter in that time, I would say. A good help, to help us figure it out—you know, to shepherd our way forward.

MANNES: And then in—so moving on, later that year, so towards the end of your junior year, '69 is Parkhurst. That's correct?

O'NEILL: Sixty-nine is Parkhurst.

MANNES: The takeover.

O'NEILL: Yep.

MANNES: And so could you—what—what were you doing around this time? Were you involved or—

O'NEILL: Well, that was—you know, I was playing, again—playing hockey at the time, and the fraternity life was going on, but there was definitely more and more—we had by that time a guy—I'd mentioned Jon Newcomb had gone over there, and he had barely made it back.

MANNES: Mmm.

O'NEILL: And he had come back and told me that he was walking through—he was in his Marine outfit—this the Dartmouth probably Class of—what would he have been?—'68, I guess. He came back to an airport in Houston, and he was spit on as he was walking through the airport in his—in his military outfit, and—and he ended up going to a men's room and took off the—took off the uniform and put it in a garbage bag and walked out and never put it on again. So we were getting reports like that, you know, from fraternity guys that I knew, who had had experiences with the war.

Yeah, the SDS had grown a lot more, you know, vociferous and vocal, and they were confronting the administration. The main thing was they wanted to get ROTC off campus. They thought that that the biggest trespass the college was doing was supporting the war by—by being a breeding ground for officers that would go fight the war. And so their big beef and their main issue was to try to get ROTC off campus.

And so now I would say, yeah, there was much more—there were—you know, outside of classrooms there were informal gatherings, and—and history professors would, you know, say, “Come by my house and we’ll talk about it.” And everybody was caught up in it more and more. And, again, you couldn’t avoid it because this was what was going.

And don’t forget—well, the year before, of course, was the—the primary, when [Eugene J.] “Gene” McCarthy was campaigning in Hanover. So politics was in our face. So now we’re coming to the spring of 1969, leading up to Parkhurst. You know, you get the secret bombing, Cambodia, and Nixon’s in office. It just—again, the temperature was just ratcheting up and up and up.

And so I imagine in the book—there was—SDS was desperate—or it was eager, let’s say, to—to do more, whatever they could do to try to get the college to throw ROTC off campus. They confronted the—there was a Board of Trustees [of Dartmouth College] meeting, and they confronted them, and the trustees said, “Look it, not all of us agree with supporting ROTC, but we’re—you know, we’re a bureaucracy, we’re an institution, so we will, you know, bring it up at the meetings. It’ll take time to get it done.” And they said, “We’ll get back to you in six or twelve months,” whatever it was, a timetable. And, of course, it was too long for the kids who were eager to have things happen faster.

So there was a sense, David, that—that now all of a sudden the protesters were moving faster than the college could move to accommodate them. That was the sense, and there was a gap that was broadening. I think everybody felt that something was going to happen; they didn’t know exactly what it was, but there was kind of an ominousness to the activities, I think.

And, again, it was reinforced by the coverage of the war. You know, the 500,000 men over there now. You’re just

seeing all the—the daily massacres and photographs and the bad stories and the American troops being overrun and so forth. So, again, the movie—the soundtrack is louder. There are more pictures. And now all of a sudden there's more disappointment between the undergraduates—or at least the radical component of the undergraduates, and the college, and the college trying to accommodate them but really not being able to move fast enough.

And so there was a sense that we had that something was going to ha- —we didn't know what it was, but it ended up being the takeover at Parkhurst, which is well documented by the college and others, so I won't get into that other than there was a funny episode / had with—my involvement with it was—was poignant because it turned out after they took over the building and—and they marched out, Dean Seymour and the freshman dean—I can't think of his name, a friend of my dad's—anyway, took over the building, basically, in the morning.

Word got out to the various captains of sports, and I was the captain-elect of the hockey team, and Seaver Peters [Class of 1954], who was the athletic director, called all the incoming captains and existing captains into his office and—and said, "This is a disgrace. These students don't represent Dartmouth." You know, "We need to fight back against this and show the world that—you know, that Dartmouth students are—are—are not necessarily against the war," and on and on and on, kind of reading the company line.

And he had taken liberties—had taken the liberty of writing a pamphlet saying that the Dartmouth captains and sports teams protest this takeover of the building by SDS. "And I want you to go up to the Parkhurst and distribute them." [Laughs.] I'm sitting there, and I know that Lynn Lobban, the girl I mentioned—she's up there. She was part of the SDS thing, and I've heard that she was involved with the takeover. And I'm thinking of Billy Smoyer and how before he had gone to Vietnam, he had had second thoughts about it and really wasn't sure that was the right thing to do.

And my dad, of course, was a voice in my ear, and he had been protesting the war by standing in silent protest in front of the flagpole at the town hall in Westport, Connecticut, every Sunday morning for years. All these voices were in my

head when the old Athletic Director has this stack of pamphlets he wants us to hand out.

So I remember leaving the—the AD's [athletic director's] office there, across from Heorot. I forget what it's called. It's that gym building. And I just didn't know what I was going to do. This was the crossroads for me because I was against the war, but I hadn't been vociferously against it. I hadn't—you know, I knew it was wrong. I knew I didn't want to be part of it.

And I remember going over to Heorot, and I just went down to the basement and actually poured myself a beer. And I had that stack of pamphlets on the bar top and was looking at them and looking at the beer, and reluctantly got up and walked out toward Parkhurst. And by then, of course, word was out that it had been taken over. Students had gathered. There were hundreds, if not thousands of students around the building. There was policemen. The state police didn't come till later that night. It was a big scene, you know, as Hanover had never seen before, as you know.

They had strung banners out of the windows, the SDS had, about getting ROTC off campus. And I remember as I approached with this stack of pamphlets under my arm and an extremely heavy heart and a conflicted brain, I walked up, and there was Lynn, my girlfriend. She had been a member of Heorot and was a member of Heorot [chuckles], who was standing on the porch of Parkhurst Hall, handing, you know, cases of water up through the windows to people.

And she looked out across the crowd, and there were, you know, hundreds of people, and I just moved slowly in moving toward Parkhurst. And she looked over and saw me, and she waved to me, and threw two thumbs up into the air and said, "Come join us." And under my arm I had this pamphlet that had been given to me by the athletic director, saying that we protested the protesters.

And as I walked toward her—I never forget it, it was a movie moment—she was waving, and she was exuberant. She looked like *Les Miserables* or something, the people on the barricades.

MANNES: [Chuckles.]

O'NEILL: And as I walked toward her and walked toward her—and she said, “Come, come, come.” And I just [chuckles] walked by a—there was a trash receptacle, and I decided to veer off slightly in my course, and I stopped at the trash receptacle and lifted my arm up and deposited the pamphlets in the trash receptacle and then moved on to say hello to her and then moved back into the crowd. But that was my [chuckles]—in terms of my—my personal protest against the war, that was the moment when, you know, I did something that I probably wouldn't have done before. I hadn't even thought about. But it just welled up in me, and I realized that I think the protesters were right. Maybe the message wasn't exactly right, but certainly their cause was right and that I had to do something, and so that was my moment.

And then, as you know, that just briefly, you know, as the day turned into night, the college, unlike other colleges—they decided to treat it as a case of trespass, and so they turned it over to the state police, and the state police around midnight came in with busloads of troopers and a couple of empty buses, and basically was spotlighting, you know, cleared the street in front of Parkhurst. Very dramatic. I mean, the whole college was fanned out behind it, watching. And the SDS kids were up in the windows. Lynn Lobban, my girlfriend, was there.

And she later realized, when they were told that they would have one hour to get out of the building or they'd be arrested, she realized that she couldn't afford to be arrested. She didn't want to go to jail, and she ended up crawling out a window at the back of Parkhurst and—and escaping that way. But there were a couple of kids from Heorot who were in there, one kid kind of inadvertently, Frank Reynolds, who joined in the protest and was part of it.

And there were Heorot cars, and we had cars parked along the edge of the Green, and we're standing on the rooftops, watching this unfold. And state police came in with the loudspeakers. And it was—it was very dramatic, and there was news coverage and flashes going off. It was ground zero for Hanover, New Hampshire, on that day.

And finally around midnight, I think, or a little after midnight, the state police came in and broke down the doors and pulled the kids out one by one and put them on the buses, and they drove off into the night. Most of them went to jail,

and it was—it became a big national story because some of the kids ended up serving 30 days in jail, in the Grafton County Jail, for trespass.

And the college had made the decision to turn it over to the state because they wanted their building back. And other colleges—Harvard and [University of] Chicago and others—had dealt with takeovers differently, and the kids didn't end up with that kind of a harsh penalty. But the kids who were—who were taken out of Parkhurst that night ended up with 30-day sentences, and for a lot of them, that really changed their lives and not for the better.

After that, of course, the college took a break. I think it was just a really profound moment in Dartmouth history, the Parkhurst takeover. Put it that way. And it was kind of the culmination of all of the protests and the buildup of the war and the politicking by Gene McCarthy and others, and the SDS protests. It was the night that, you know, the college boiled over in a way that ended up with sort of national notoriety, and it was an explosive instance. It really made for an indelible memory for me and for all of us who—who observed it or lived through it, were part of it.

MANNES: So you said—I'm going to go back and discuss kind of a different being, because you discussed it a lot in there. You started out by saying there were all these students that took over Parkhurst. Did they represent the general Dartmouth atmosphere? Were these students representative of Dartmouth students?

O'NEILL: I don't think so. Truthfully, I think they were mostly S- — S- —SDS kids who were more extreme, I would say, for sure, than the general Dartmouth student or population. But as time had gone on, you know, and as the war had gotten worse, I think they got more and more sympathy from the Dartmouth kids. They may—may not have recruited too many more people to radical behavior, but they certainly convinced more students that the war was wrong and that we need to protest it.

And then it was really up to each student to decide, you know, how—how far he wanted—how far he or she wanted to go—it was mostly 'he' back then—wanted to go in protesting it. But I would say I believe that Parkhurst was mostly an SDS-run thing, although I know personally two

people from Heorot, Lynn, the girl, and then Frank Reynolds, who was not SDS, who ended up in the building.

MANNES: Right.

O'NEILL: So other people did gravitate to it because I think that they saw that the cause was right. You know, they wouldn't necessarily go along with the—with the—what SDS was doing, you know, physically and such.

MANNES: Did you ever consider—did you ever consider joining SDS or one of these movements like that?

O'NEILL: No, did not. No, I didn't. No, it was more—I was more—the word "timid" or more neutral politically. I felt—I felt—you know, again, my dad, who was protesting the war against Vietnam in Westport was unafraid to stand in front of the Westport town hall in silent protest. But of course—and I said to him, and we had a conversation. He had fought in World War II and was—he wasn't a war hero, but, you know, he had done his duty, certainly. I thought that it gave him more credibility to do that. And I felt a little embarrassed to be doing that, myself. Even when the thrust of the war—it became clear that it was so misguided and so wrong and so immoral—I listened more, and I paid more attention. It wasn't—you know, I didn't have it in me to be a political radical. Let's put it that way. So it wasn't my college calling to do that.

MANNES: Okay. And what was the reaction to this after, let's say, by students, alumni, the faculty, the administration?

O'NEILL: There was a very mixed fallout, David, as you might imagine. A lot of the older faculty, or let's just talk about alumni. They were pissed off that these kids had taken over the building by force, and they'd walked out—Dean [Albert I.] Dickerson [Class of 1930] was the freshman dean I had forgotten earlier. He wouldn't leave his chair, and so they carried him out by his chair.

And there was some truth to that, you know? It's funny. You know, when you think about protests today—and you think [about] Black Lives Matter, for instance, and they start doing these things that seem really radical and uncivil, I think when you get to a frustration point with a cause, that those who

are really the deep-down rebels will do anything to try to promote their own version of ending the cause.

And I think that's what happened with the SDS kids. I think they had—it was the method that—that probably wasn't as quite as favorably received as the message, which was to try to get ROTC off campus and try to end the war. I think clearly, as was expressed, you know, in the athletic director's pamphlet that he gave me to take out, one of the Dartmouth students, a lot of people thought it was a bad way for—for Dartmouth to be represented, to be, you know, storming the administration building and carrying out the various academics and then, particularly, demanding something.

It was—I don't think it had ever happened in Hanover. You know, it was—it was sort of a breach of behavior that was—that was new. It was different, and it was radical, and so I think it was—you know, you'll have to look at other reports, but my guess is that it was really a mixed reaction, and there was a lot of outcry that was on the side of the college to what they'd done, and there was a lot of outcry that the college had acted too severely.

And, in fact, again, Dartmouth made a decision to make it a state matter and there was trespass—you know, property. And so once—once they turned it over to the state, the state was free to then take the kids into their own jurisdiction. So I think there were—there were those who thought that the college maybe could have handled it differently. I think I did, thought they probably should have handled it differently. But, you know, the college was pissed off.

But, again, this was kind of, you know, the volcanic explosion, David that was coming. I was mentioning it was building up over the course.

MANNES: Right.

O'NEILL: But we just didn't know where it would take place or where it would blow, but it turned out to be Parkhurst, so—

So just a short form: There was definitely a mixed reaction to the takeover. Some of the more radical faculty members were thrilled by it, and others were appalled by it. You know,

I think it was probably a predictable mix of—of points of view. [Door bell rings in the distance.]

Hang on. I have to go get the door for a second here.

MANNES: [Chuckles.]

O'NEILL: Somebody's coming to the door here. One second. [Pause as he goes to the door.] That's my senior, David. He's going to—hang on. While we keep talking, he's going to put on my compression socks. I've got blood clots in these knees.

So, okay, where were we? Parkhurst. Yeah, so it was definitely, I would say, a mixed reaction. And I'm sure you'll hear that from everybody.

MANNES: Yeah. And the students that were standing outside—what was their—what were the students' reactions?

O'NEILL: I think they were kind of—

MANNES: Were they—

O'NEILL: —drop-jawed. We couldn't believe this had happened at Dartmouth College. [Laughs.] Yeah, to see, all of a sudden—see state police and riot gear coming in. It's like looking at the Ferguson [Missouri] things [referencing the shooting of Michael Brown], where you see these guys in these tanks and, you know, AK-47s and RPG [rocket-propelled grenades] aimed at the student population. It was like that. We went, "Holy shit! Dartmouth College? This is what's going on here?"

So we were—we were kind of stunned, I have to say. It was—it was a severe reaction to something that—that happened unexpectedly and suddenly. And our reaction was—I mean, back at the fraternity, the discussion, needless to say, was—was—was—was all over the place. And we had two kids—or one kid ended up getting carted away to jail. Then the girl left the building before she went to jail, but—

It was an eye opener. Let's put it that way. And then it really brought into focus, you know, to what degree of—of protest was appropriate, you know, against the war. It was—you know, it was a radical step, and I think kids were mixed

about whether it was right or wrong, to tell you the truth. It certainly got attention that nothing before that or after it ever did. So it served that purpose.

But it was—it was shocking, I have to say. You know, you're at this bastion of Ivy League, you know, rural idyllity [sic], and then all of a sudden the state police come in with batons and, you know, dogs and helmets and, you know, carry—drag the kids, kicking and screaming, out. This was not your normal college experience.

MANNES: No.

O'NEILL: It was—it was startling. [Laughs.] Let's put it that way. It was startling. In retrospect, maybe not surprising, given the way the level of intensity of—written up and so forth, but, again, it was definitely a stronger reaction from Dartmouth than other colleges had exhibited towards protesting students. So part of it, too, was the shock of these kids, you know, getting hauled away to jail. It was—it was pretty—pretty radical and pretty startling, yeah.

MANNES: And you guys weren't—you weren't concerned at all that—you said that they showed up in, like, the full gear and everything, with the dogs and riot police. You weren't concerned that this would actually turn to violence at any point, were you?

O'NEILL: No, I wasn't. You know, I mean, the truth of the matter is—I mean, the kids were walking. It was—it was a spectacle, you know? And nobody knew how it was going to turn out. I don't think—I mean, it wasn't violent other than the kids who refused to walk out were carried out. But just seeing, you know, the state—and there must have been 200—there must have been every state trooper in the state of New Hampshire and Vermont they probably brought them in from—, be there in full riot gear. It was just—you know, it's a startling sight. It's a police state sight. I don't think Dartmouth had ever seen anything like it in terms of here was a police state, you know, action going on.

But none of us feared it was going to turn on us, no. We felt like we were spectators at an event and we were watching. And in our case, we had some kids involved with it, so it hit a little closer to home. But I don't think anybody really thought they were going to turn on the crowd. And the crowd was—

and, again, the crowd was half and half, I would say. Half of them were yelling at the police and calling them pigs, and the other half were supporting the police and saying, "Get these kids outta there. [unintelligible]."

So it was a big mixed bag, for sure.

MANNES: Right. Because, yeah, the Kent State shootings would happen the next—the following year, but it sounds like Dartmouth wasn't—

O'NEILL: That was more one sided. See, this wasn't that one sided. Kent State definitely turned out to be—excuse me now [unintelligible] four kids were killed—it turned out to be more dangerous for them, but comparing to the Parkhurst thing, one, we didn't feel any danger, number one, and number two, nobody was killed. I remember three—I think by the time Kent State happened, when those killings happened, the sympathy was entirely with the students.

I think at Parkhurst the sympathy was definitely split. I don't know what a poll would show. With who represented what.

MANNES: Right.

O'NEILL: It was a—it was a split opinion about that, for sure.

MANNES: So you—before Parkhurst, you said, it was kind of like a balloon or a volcano, you know, steadily building up, building up, and then it exploded at Parkhurst.

O'NEILL: Yeah. Yes it [unintelligible].

MANNES: And then after, what was—what was left? Did it—did it deflate? Did it calm down, or did it just start to build up again?

O'NEILL: Well, it did deflate, you know? And then I think it was the meeting afterwards that—I can't remember the order. There was that meeting at the Top of the Hop where the trustees were—and I can't remember if it was [unintelligible], David, just was before or after Parkhurst.

MANNES: I believe it was the end of April.

O'NEILL: Parkhurst was the end of April? Yeah. Maybe then, it was—you can double check this, but there was a meeting where the board of trustees came, and they met with students to try to calm—I think—it must have been after Parkhurst. Maybe they met as a response to Parkhurst, to try to answer questions. And that's when they were at the Top of the Hop. And they were—the board of trustees were asked questions about why Dartmouth couldn't disassociate itself from ROTC and why they couldn't disinvest in—in, you know, companies that provided the arms for war. So that was very heated.

It was then that it literally came out, when the dean said, "Look it, you know, a lot of us agree with you, but the school can't move as quickly as you guys can move, so we'll do our best." And, again, it wasn't enough, I would say.

So don't forget—so Parkhurst, then, as you say—school got out whenever it was, six weeks later, and then into the summer of '69, which was Woodstock, of course, which only heated things up again. And then it really was, again—it probably cooled down a little bit, David, but then it went for, you know, again a full gallop coming out of—coming out of Woodstock into the fall and then leading up to Kent State the following May.

And, again—and then for us, the inciting event was on December 1st, 1969, when—

MANNES: Right.

O'NEILL: —[unintelligible] reinstated the lottery. So, yeah, I would say it's kind of—it was so surprising. Everybody stepped back to take a breath, is what I would say, you know, after Parkhurst. And, again, we were kind of shocked that the kids got 30 days in jail.

MANNES: Yeah.

O'NEILL: And everybody sort of stepped back to reassess what was going on. So I think—I would say probably there was a—again, this is where you need to ask a lot of different people. My sense is there was probably a cooling down after that, and then we broke for summer, but then we came back in '69, and then it started building up again I think in '69. There were more Cambodia secret bombings. And then of course, the draft lottery was the thing that set the campus, you know,

as a tale of two cities: Those with a low draft number had to figure out how to get [unintelligible—

MANNES: Right.

O'NEILL: —after the draft so that reignited the following year. But I think after Parkhurst, my guess is that it calmed down a bit.

MANNES: Okay. So I guess the lottery is where I want to go next, because you're going into your senior year. This is the end of your four-year Dartmouth experience when you kind of are leaning to be who you want to be and deciding what you want to do later in life. And then here comes the draft, which is pretty much the opposite. It's having other people telling you what to do. So can you talk to me about the beginning of the draft and the lottery? When did this first come into your head, let's start, that this might actually happen?

O'NEILL: I for- —you know, I forget, David, when it was announced that they were going to do a draft. But obviously, coming into our senior year, we knew that—we knew the date of the lottery was going to be December 1st, 1969. So we knew the date of it. And, again, I forget when it was announced, so I can't address that.

But, yeah, all of a sudden your life became a lottery. As you say, it was going to be controlled by somebody pulling a ball out of a fish bowl in Selective Service [System] headquarters in Washington, D.C.

So that fall was my senior year fall, so you're looking down a gun barrel of graduation in June. You've just come out of Woodstock, which was the cultural event of the decade, with free love and antiwar and Joe MacDonald and all the other protest singers doing their thing.

So you come back for senior year, and it is—you know, for me, I'm going to be—I was going to be in Casque and Gauntlet my senior year. I was going to be the hockey captain. So I had a lot on my plate. And then to add the—the additional weight of the lottery was something. And the truth of the matter is, with the lottery upcoming, the campus really got more actively involved in thinking about ways of avoiding the war as possible.

And I know—I think I've told you or you read in the book—it was a very [chuckles]—the night of the lottery, for me was [chuckles] particularly memorable because Dartmouth played a hockey game that night against Norwich Military Academy [Norwich University — The Military College of Vermont] at Davis Rink, right across from Heorot. And the lottery, itself, was being broadcast from Washington, D.C. General [Lewis B.] Hershey was the head of the Selective Service.

It was being broadcast by radio, on television as it was being filmed. But at the hockey game, the fraternity brothers, who would always come to the games, came with transistor radios, and as the game went on—it was the most bizarre thing: As the game went on and the numbers were called out, the fraternity brothers would shout out, June 14, number 7.

And the game would kind of stop. [Chuckles.] Everybody would look up into the stands and say, "What number was that?" Because the more important game that night was not being played on the ice but up in the stands.

MANNES: Right.

O'NEILL: And that's how the game went on. And I found out—oh, I forget what period it was in, my number was 163, and that wasn't good. It was right—probably in no-man's-land, so it was a number that was going to do me much good as far as getting out of the war.

I'll never forget. At the end of that night, David, it was—I mean, this is what Dartmouth turned into for the rest of the year. In the basement of Heorot—this dank, you know, horrifying, beer-smeared places and puke and cigarette smoke and beer, a rancid beer smell. On the bar top was this kid—I forget his name. But he had drawn number 365. He was not going to war. He bought the keg for the house. He drank it until he passed out. He passed out on the bar top with this pile of vomit on his chest. His legs were crossed. His arms were outspread, Christ-like, and he had a smile on his face that would have to be surgically removed. He was not going to war. He was 365.

And in the opposite corner of Heorot, this guy was weeping. He'd drawn number 14, and he was being consoled by Ben

[unintelligible] and by his girlfriend, and they talked about ways out. But he'd drawn a short straw. And unless he figured a way out of it, he was definitely going to war.

So the campus, you know, which had been torn in half after Parkhurst, was now completely torn in half after the lottery, because for the last two semesters, winter and spring, those with a low draft number had to figure out how to get out of the war, and those with a high draft number were basically on an extended road trip. They were home free. So—and this was across the country as well, of course. Every college had the same effect.

But at Dartmouth it was just stunning how that happened. I'll never forget that night. The whole game was sort of in slow motion. We were actually—happened to be playing Norwich Military Academy, so these kids were going to war no matter what; they were already signed up.

And, of course, my Dartmouth team—the Canadians weren't going to war, so they were having fun playing, but the American kids who were seniors, who were in jeopardy, were not paying much attention to the game. I actually wrote an article about it which the [*Dartmouth*] *Alumni Magazine* ran, since it was such a bizarre night.

But from that night forward, then, David, that day forward, December 1st, it was a changed campus. And then all of a sudden the fraternities went into the bunker mentality about how to get out of the draft and it became sort of dens of draft evasion techniques. I mention in the book one guy started smoking four packs of cigarettes a day. Another guy, [unintelligible] Super-Glued—we came in January after Christmas break—he Super-Glued his knots on his hiking boots to his feet, and he didn't take them off for four months, until he went down to the draft physical in Manchester, New Hampshire, in April of that year.

Other guys who had other medical problems started exacerbating those problems. It turns there was a nurse affiliated with [Dartmouth-]Hitchcock [Medical Center] who was a Quaker. She was against the war, so she would help kids get their blood pressure taken, and they would go out and run, you know. And then they would go—before the blood pressure appointment with her, they'd get out of the

car and a friend would drive the car up, and they would run, and instead—

MANNES: [Chuckles.]

O'NEILL: —of waiting for them to sit down, she took the blood pressure after they'd been running, and it would be off the charts, so they had—they started to arm themselves on how to get out of the war. And, of course, there was discussion about going to Canada. There was a conscientious objector option, which was very hard to prove. And so these frater- — every fraternity was the same way, and most dormitories by this point had seniors. Kids were just desperate to get out of this war and figure how to get out of it.

And there was a choice that was made. You could either decide to go get your physical, David, at the draft board nearest your college or in your hometown, and I had grown up, as I mentioned, in—near Bridgeport, Connecticut, which was kind of a hard-luck, industrial town. And my father, who was dead-set against the war and didn't want me to go—he said, “I think you should take your chances in Bridgeport, because I think even with your number 163, Bridgeport has tough economic times, has [unintelligible].” He said, “They have a lot of, you know, blue-collar kids who weren't going to school or working, and they may get drafted first, and maybe you should take the chance there.”

So I decided to do that. So the winter of 1970, if you can imagine, you marched with your new draft number toward graduation. And don't forget, my Class of 1970, then, becomes the first to graduate with a diploma and a draft number, the first class—

MANNES: Right.

O'NEILL: —since '42. So, again, it was just—it was—it was bizarre, David, because those who had the high numbers were just unalert. They were just—they were in a different world. And those who didn't were just desperate to get out and were taking these measures. So every fraternity had these kids—oh, another kid—obesity was a way out, so he—he went down to the big-box stores in Lebanon and bought, you know, 15-pound chunks of Cheddar cheese and noodles [unintelligible].

MANNES: [Chuckles.]

O'NEILL: So every house had [chuckles]—had this amazing, you know, sort of base of draft resistance going on. And I decided—I had had some hockey injuries, knee injuries, but I decided I was going to take my chance at my local draft board and also maybe my knee injury would get me out, even though it didn't keep me from playing hockey, but it was on paper, and it was—it was a bad injury.

So at the winter marched along, then, towards—or Kent State in the spring and towards graduation, fraternity activity just grew more and more fervent about getting out. Kids were just [unintelligible] to figure out. And some kids thought about cutting off a trigger finger. They I don't know if they did that.

So it all led up to the first Earth Day in April of 1970, was the day that all the Dartmouth kids were required to go down to the draft board in Manchester, New Hampshire, and take the physical, those who had decided to do it in the college area.

And so literally we—we had a caravan from Heorot. Went over the hill, five miles to Lebanon. We met the bus, the stage provided by Manchester, but the Heorot kids all went over. We decided to turn on the lights as if it were a funeral. So those of us who weren't going to the physical shepherded the kids who were being driven to the bus, over the hill, in a big caravan, like a funeral cortege. And with the lights on. And they were delivered to the buses, and the buses then drove down to Manchester.

Again, it became a famous event. Of all the Dartmouth kids that went down, something like 49 out of 50 got deferments that day in Manchester, and it turns out that the Dartmouth kids were resourceful, and they'd done some research, and it turns out the chief medical officer in Manchester was a guy who had been stationed in—north of San Diego, he was a surfer. And he got—he got sent to Manchester, New Hampshire, in the middle of winter with all the snow and crud and hard rock, on the bank of the Merrimack River, where there wasn't a good surf break. And this guy was against the war to start with, and now he had been transferred from La Jolla—the surf break at La Jolla and the surf break on the Merrimack River, the frozen Merrimack River.

MANNES: [Chuckles.]

O'NEILL: And he just was in no mood [chuckles]—so he ended up literally giving deferments to kids who had high blood pressure and so forth, provided their paperwork and...

Hi, [unintelligible].

Can we hold for 30 seconds here? I just need to talk to—

MANNES: Yeah.

O'NEILL: Can we hold on for 30 seconds? Hang on one second.

So anyway, that was—in fact, it was such a notorious outing—it was either—there was a big article in *The New York Times* or *TIME* magazine about how these Ivy League kids had all gone down to the draft board, and all of them got exemptions. But it was another of those events in that year that was so eventful.

MANNES: Yeah.

O'NEILL: And so that was a relief to them. And I, for myself—Kent State happened on May 4th, as you know, and the college decided that they better shut down the campus, which they ended up doing. They thought it would explode again, so the college gave the students the opportunity to take a pass-fail. And so everybody basically opted—and did that.

And it turned out to be the most glorious weather ever in the history of Hanover. It was, you know, 80 degrees and sunny for the month of May that year. So that was the lead-up to graduation in June. And I was taking some [unintelligible].

Excuse me. One second.

George [S.] McGovern, I'll never forget, was speaking at a peace symposium, and he was getting an honorary degree from Dartmouth that year, 1970. And at that peace symposium, he said rather famously—you know, he was about to run for president, of course—he said, "I'm not so worried about America becoming a welfare state as it becoming a warfare state."

And so I graduated, and took my medical file and my chances down to Connecticut and got on the train in New Haven—I mean Bridgeport and went to New Haven, where the physical was, and ended up getting a 4-F deferment [Selective Service System classification for not acceptable for military service] because of my knee. On paper it was a terrible ligament and, you know, cartilage disaster in there. And I was able to strap the leg together and play hockey, but it definitely was giving me some trouble, not enough to keep me out of playing a sport but luckily enough to get me out of the war, so I was grateful for that.

MANNES: Yes.

O'NEILL: So I got over few things from that—

MANNES: So with—with your draft—your lottery number, can you go through your thoughts from, like, when you first got it until after you got exempt from the draft?

O'NEILL: Well, you know, I went over to Heorot. I was the hockey captain. I went over to have the beers after the game. And, again, it started out with that surreal scene, where it became so clear that it two different campuses. And I was—I sat down there with my friends, and 163 was definitely terrible. It would depend on your draft board, but basically they said over 190 you were safe; under 190 you were in trouble. So my head was reeling. You know, I was thinking, *Jeez, my parents just fought World War II and yet they're completely opposed to this war. We know it's an immoral war. We knew they were lying to us. Billy Smoyer had died. We knew it's a bad war that we're not going to win.*

So I started wondering, you know, thinking about going to Canada and playing hockey, for instance, thinking about other things I could do. Again, I decided at that point, from the draft lottery—I decided I would take—the one decision I made was, like, I'd take my chances at the local draft board in Connecticut, so I made that decision right off the bat.

So I bought some time away from having to deal specifically with, you know, trying to figure out what I was going to do.

MANNES: Mmm.

O'NEILL: But, so—all that winter, that hockey season, you know, of 1970, this was weighing over my head. I just didn't—there was a great big dark cloud on the horizon, graduation. There was 163, and I didn't know how it was going to turn out, to tell you the truth. So it was a very—you know, it should have been a joyful time, senior year and hockey captain and a different girlfriend and all that, and it turned out to be just a—a really anxious, scary, fraught senior year for me, as it was for anybody else who had, you know, the high draft number—I'm sorry, excuse me, the low draft number. So it didn't make for a fun senior year. Let's put it that way.

MANNES: Especially—especially—you didn't have a very, very low number, and you didn't have a very, very high number—

O'NEILL: Right. I couldn't— didn't know in advance.

MANNES: —so you were kind of caught in the middle.

O'NEILL: That's right. I was in limbo, David. I truly didn't know how it was going to go. I didn't know if the medical record would get me out or not, and I thought I had a shot based on it because—I ended up not being able to play cleated sports. I couldn't play lacrosse and soccer after that, but I could play hockey, where there was no cleats but it was just a blade on the ice, and it seemed my knee could handle that. But my knee was balky. Other than that, you know, I was able to wrap it up and play hockey okay, but

But, you know, I just didn't know. it was the big unknown. It was approaching the end of the world, you know? Are you going to go off the end of the world or what? It's like—it was like—exactly like those ninth-century drawings of the world, where it ends, and the ships sail over the edge of it. All of a sudden, graduation was that end of the world for me, and it was a big unknown. I did not know what the hell was going to happen, to tell you the truth.

MANNES: Yeah. I mean, you said in the beginning of your senior year you were staring down the barrel of, like, the end of your Dartmouth experience, and in the future—

O'NEILL: Yeah.

MANNES: —you literally could be staring down the barrel of a—of a gun, so to speak. I thought that was an interesting irony—

O'NEILL: [unintelligible].

MANNES: —and other symbolism.

O'NEILL: Yeah, I'm in exposure to death and the photograph. I mean, it was—it was overwhelming, you know? And for a college kid—again, to circle back on—you know, David—you know, since you've gone through it or will be going through it here—it's—you know, it's an intriguing time in your life, for all reasons: physiological, you know, a leave-taking from home, figuring out who you are, figuring out what you want to be, figuring out your voice.

And when you take that normal set of challenges, as any college offers anybody in that four-year passage, it's a—it's a coming-of-age passage. And then you add on this degree of difficulty: life and death. It just made it almost surreal, I've got to say. And that's I think why kids my age, my classmates and I, those of us who made it—and most of us did, by the way—you know, feel very close to one another because we went through a time that was just extraordinary with the bonding that went on, and trying to help each other out and figure out how to move on and stay alive, really, you know? So I think it's a very close-knit class, the Class of '70. I know that, and my friends and I—because we went through this together. It made us even I think closer knit than—that it would have been otherwise.

MANNES: So graduation. You're graduating, and you find out either later that day or in the next few days that you're not going to be going to Vietnam. What kind of feeling does that give you? Like, what's your outlook on life now that this isn't hanging over your head, that you have a future that you can control?

O'NEILL: Well, part of the future I can control. You know, it was a massive relief, and my parents were thrilled, and I was certainly relieved. I just did not want to go there. I was afraid of it. I thought it was a bad war. I had known Billy Smoyer had been killed, I just, you know, for all reasons to be afraid of it, I didn't feel any need to prove myself, my mettle as a soldier. I didn't have any of that in me. So I was—massive relief [chuckles], which is the good news.

The bad news is, then what are you going to do with the rest of your life?

MANNES: [Laughs.]

O'NEILL: You know, I wasn't [unintelligible] what I wanted to do. And as it turned out, there was another Dartmouth connection, [that helped me. My dad was friends with a guy named Baxter [F.] Ball [Class of 1931], who was a local executive, and he ended up getting me this job on board the SS *Mobil Fuel* as a—as an ordinary seaman, a deck hand.

So I decided—Jimmy Nachtwey, my friend, my Heorot friend of mine, decided we would travel to Europe together and figure out who we were. We postponed figuring out who we are till—we didn't do it at Dartmouth but figured out—in the next phase, we'll try to figure it out.

And so I went off for three months as an ordinary seaman and picked up crude oil in the Gulf of Mexico and [unintelligible] Beaumont [Texas] and took it up north to places as far south as Philly [Philadelphia] and as far north as Belfast, Maine. And I made three thousand bucks [\$3,000], which was a lot of money back then, and then I went to Europe with Jimmy for five months, and I came back and then decided, *What am I going to do to [sic] myself?*

And then I became a folksinger for three years, you know, as one does, of course, after leaving Dartmouth with a Dartmouth degree.

MANNES: [Chuckles.]

O'NEILL: And hanging out with Bonnie [L.] Raitt and James Taylor and Cat Stevens and all the great singer-songwriters, and so I did that in Boston and then decided that—I'd been writing. I started writing on board the tanker. I took a journal, and I started writing. I was writing songs for the group, but then I was writing some magazine pieces. I decided I wanted to be a writer, so I applied and got into BU [Boston University] School of Journalism. And so between '75 and '76 I went and got a master's degree in journalism from the School of—College of Communications at BU, and after that I got a job—

MANNES: At where? I'm sorry.

O'NEILL: At BU's School of Special [unintelligible] at BU.

MANNES: Oh, Boston University. Okay.

O'NEILL: And then out of that, I got a job at WGBH-TV, which the year that began my professional writing career. It's a good station down there. You know, at the time, all the great shows—FRONTLINE, *Mystery*, *Masterpiece Theatre*—and [unintelligible]. So it was nice. Park out of Dartmouth. [Chuckles.] Ordinary seaman, folksinger and then into writing, so—

MANNES: And so what—

O'NEILL: [unintelligible]. [Laughs.]

MANNES: [Laughs.] Exactly. And so with your writing career—how did that develop? Because I know you—I know you did writing, you did some screenplay.

O'NEILL: Yeah. I would say it started out in my—in my—I had three brothers who all turned out to be lawyers, but, yeah, I grew up in a house—my dad was a writer, and so there was always the tap-tap-tap of the typewriter. He wrote at home. And so that was a soundtrack, an acoustic in my head growing up. It seemed natural to me.

And then he would have a lot of his writer friends come over for meals, and I just always found them interesting and witty and provocative, and I started to like the sound of words and how they sounded when they were spoken by smart people and put in the right order. And so I think subconsciously the desire to write started back then.

But I didn't do anything at Dartmouth, and it was really after Dartmouth when I was on board that tanker that I kept a journal. I started writing what it was like being on a tanker, and I brought a guitar with me and taught myself how to play the guitar and started writing songs.

And so I think that's where it started. And then, of course, it had kind grown out of the fact that my dad had been a writer, and so I think it was always lurking. It was always an ember that just needed to be blown out, and I think that the—the adventure, the sort of romantic adventure (small r) of being

at sea and on board a tanker kind of triggered that desire to write, so I started writing then.

And then—and then I started writing some magazine articles and, again, was writing songs, of course. Sold some articles to various magazines and then got the master's degree and went over to GBH and started writing television programs, and then was there for about five years and then wrote a screenplay, and then I think—at the time, you know—I think it still is true: Film is probably the sexiest of the writing mediums, and so I knew that if I could, I wanted to—to get into screenwriting.

And so it led me out to Los Angeles, a script that I had written, and I just kind of dug in and made my way ahead, and just getting a couple of movies made. And now, 25 years later, I'm circling more back on print writing, which I'm enjoying. I wrote the Dartmouth memoir. And I just novelized my screenplay for *The River Wild*, which I wrote for Meryl Streep. I just made a novel out of that.

MANNES: Right.

O'NEILL: I also just adapted, turned into a fable, an animated screenplay—I had done it for [Robert Edward] “Ted” Turner [III]—about the reintroduction of the wolves in Yellowstone National Park in 1995. I was sent there on assignment to do that, and that never got made. But now I just turned that into a fable. So I'm circling more back on print writing.

But I think the seed was planted as a kid, just in the house, the trappings, and then took root, I would say, on the tanker and then flourished in Boston, when I got on the treadmill and started being a folksinger.

MANNES: I see. And so you graduated at Dartmouth. You left on this—this experience on the—the—I'm sorry, the name of the ship was the *Mobil*?

O'NEILL: It was actually the SS *Mobil Fuel*. You know, it was a baby supertanker.

MANNES: SS *Mobil Fuel*. I'm sorry. And you went off to Europe. Were you still following Vietnam during this time?

O'NEILL: You know, I was, of course, because I had friends who were over there, and it went up to '74, when we finally left. And then, of course, there was the whole Nixon election in '72. So yeah, I mean, politically it was still—even though I had sort of dodged a bullet and being involved in the music scene in Boston, which was very anti war—so very much so. The war was still very much part of my life, I would say. And my friend Jimmy Nachtwey, who became a combat photographer—he started training himself as a photographer in Boston then, and then—and he would show me pictures that Vietnam photographers were taking that were remarkable. So yeah, mm-hm, for sure it stayed—it definitely stayed in the forefront after I was—as I was free and clear from serving militarily, I was—I was just aware that the war was ongoing and I had friends who were in jeopardy, that it was wrong, and it was still a battle we had to fight.

MANNES: All right. Okay.

And I guess this brings us to the—the memoir—your memoir, *WHIPLASH*. What made you decide to write this—to write this book and to publish it?

O'NEILL: What it was, it was—I think it was, like, my 40th reunion, David, in Hanover, drinking beer under one of those farmer tents that they set out there. And talking to our friends about just what we spent the last two hours talking about, what it was like to go to school, and then I realized how special it was, and we started talking about how kids before and after us never had to live through it or had no idea what it was like.

And so as a writer, I realized, *You know what? I'm sitting on a gold mine of storytelling here that really hasn't been told.* People have told the Vietnam story over in Vietnam, and then there was the what was the one [unintelligible]. There was—*The Strawberry Statement[: Notes of a College Revolutionary]* was about the takeover at Columbia. Nobody had really talked about what it was like to be on campus that year. So as a storyteller, I knew, one, I had good material; I had a unique story to tell.

And also I had three boys at that time who were—who were younger but would be heading off to school, and I had been spending most of my time as a screenwriter and had some success but had frustration, too, and there was a certain

format you've got to—you know, marks you have to get when you're writing a screenplay, and you have much more freedom to write a memoir or a novel.

So I just decided at that tent in Hanover, you know, sort of fueled by the scene of the crime—I said, *You know what? I'm gonna go write that story.* And so I just had to figure out how to organize it, you know, because it was—it was such a scattered event, and trying to figure out how to put it in a way that would—would reflect the times but also be a good, you know, piece of entertainment, something that had, you know, dramatic arcs and had some suspense and had the elements that would make for a good story for anybody, whether you lived through it or not.

So that was the moment—

MANNES: Right.

O'NEILL: the 40th reunion at Dartmouth.

MANNES: And so is this is a story that you have—did you think about this story a lot over the years, or was this something that you really had to come back to and think about and meet up with people to, as you said in the beginning, to kind of triangulate what actually happened?

O'NEILL: I think we always kept up with it, you know, because I had a lot of great friends from Dartmouth, and so whether it was at the reunions, David, or whether I'd see my friends fishing or whatever, we would keep those stories alive, just in the retelling of them, as friends do when they gather and talk about the old times. So they were never fully out of the picture, and they were always somehow under the surface.

But once I decided to write it, then I realized that I had to start tapping into other memories beside mine to—to sort of build the case and remember what really had happened. So then I more actively would go back to friends and say, "What about this? What about the great beer train robbery? What about the night of the lottery? What do you remember about Parkhurst?" And the—so I would start to get information from them and do it more—you know, with more research and more back story that it required.

And it was fun. And it was also proof that your [chuckles]—your memory is oftentimes sieve-like and selective.

MANNES: [Chuckles.]

O'NEILL: But once you start getting the same take on episodes and four or five or six points of view, I think you end up finding a way to tell it in a reasonable way. So, yeah, I think it was never—it was always part of me, but never actively until I decided to—because I had had Dartmouth friends and along the journey we had always talked about the stories. We remembered the old days, as you will down the road.

But then when I decided to write it, then I actively, you know, with the right people and got on the phone and picked their brains, and when I knew that I went on to talk about—and I set it up in a way, three acts, fall '69, winter '70, spring '71, sort of like a three-act screenplay.

I knew what the main events—

MANNES: Right.

O'NEILL: —were in each one, so then I wanted to go back and talk to kids about that Winter Carnival of the year, about the draft lottery, about Parkhurst. I had actually ended up taking the dramatic license of putting Parkhurst at the end of my senior year because it was the most dramatic event. It was typical of what was going on, but it made for—for a better, and I explained in the preface of my book. It happened; it just happened in a different year. But it was culmination, really, of Parkhurst was, of all the anxiety in Dartmouth, I think, pretty much, so it was why I put that in the end of the story.

So that was—that was the one chronological concession that I really made in the book. But basically everything in the book was either experienced by me or told to me, and I would say probably, you know, 95 percent of the book is true, in one fashion. With literary license, it happened.

It was fun when I ended up—the *Alumni Magazine* ended up running a couple of pieces, when they did the night of the draft lottery, and they did another one about the beer train robbery of '68. And Sean Plottner, who's the editor of the *Alumni Magazine*, would say to me, "Denis, you're makin'

this up, right?" [Chuckles.] "No, Sean! It happened. I'm not kidding."

MANNES: [Chuckles.]

O'NEILL: He said, "Well, let me get some researchers on it." So, of course, he did, and in both cases [chuckles] exactly—it had happened. It seemed too preposterous, but it was part of the times, you know, David, that these things that my kids and college kids today look back on and say, "Really?" "That really happened?". They did. You know, I was lucky enough—what's the old Chinese proverb? "May you live in memorable times." I and my classmates were able to live through and survive a pretty memorable time. And for a writer, it turned out to be something that was irresistible. It took me four years to get around to it, but it was kind of something that drew me back there, and I was really happy to write about it.

MANNES: Yeah. Well, thank you. It was—it was a great story. It was a great memoir, and it's been a great experience. If you don't have anything to add, I—

O'NEILL: I'm all set.

MANNES: —think I'd like to conclude it.

O'NEILL: [unintelligible] let you guys know about—the ghosts on the campus [chuckles] people walking around. And then you go by certain buildings and places, you know what happened there years earlier, in another era. It must be—it's fun. It gives a sense of continuity to Dartmouth. And it's—you're a sophomore. Is that right?

MANNES: That's correct.

O'NEILL: It's a great—I don't know how you feel about it, but it's a great place. It was a memorable place for me. I just—I made some great, great friends. We lived through a memorable time, and it ended up being a passage that really I'm proud to have survived and proud to have gone through. I think it's a great institution. We all need some fine tuning along the way, as Dartmouth's going through now, but I think there is an essence to it that is really remarkable and good, and it's—it's something that's shared, really, by all my Dartmouth classmates, so you're part of a good tradition.

And I think—I think keeping alive this story, David, this Vietnam era project, is a really nice idea, because probably a lot of people down the road might want to read about it and what it was like to be at Dartmouth at that time, as it would have, you know, to read about what it was like to be at Dartmouth during World War II or, you know, during the [U.S.] Civil War or whatever. I think it's important that we can write down that history while we can, so—

[End of interview.]