Interview with Brigadier General Robert F. McDermott, USAF, Ret.

Dean of the Faculty, August 1, 1956–July 31, 1968

Interview dates: March 19–20, 2002

Interviewer: Colonel James C. Gaston, USAF, Ret.

General McDermott was dean of faculty at the United States Air Force Academy from August 1956 through July 1968. Born in Boston July 13, 1920, he graduated from the Boston Latin School and attended Norwich University before entering the U. S. Military Academy at West Point from which he graduated in 1943. He flew P-38's in Europe in World War II. In 1950 he received an M.B.A. from Harvard then taught at West Point until his assignment to the Air Force Academy in 1954. Under his leadership, the academy's academic program received accreditation before its first class graduated. He was responsible for an enrichment program that encouraged cadets to pursue interests beyond the core curriculum, a majors-for-all program enabling all cadets to earn academic majors, and a cooperative master's degree program with six universities that accepted Academy coursework toward requirements for graduate degrees. After retirement in 1968 he became chairman and chief executive officer of USAA, an insurance and financial services company.

Q: General McDermott, you achieved both military and academic distinction before coming to the Air Force Academy. You graduated from West Point in 1943 and served in Europe during World War II. After the war you had a Pentagon assignment and then went to Harvard for an M.B.A. You taught at West Point from 1950 to 1954, publishing books on insurance and finance, and you were among the initial cadre at the Air Force Academy. I'd like to begin by learning how those early experiences influenced your thinking.

Early Experiences (1939–1954)

Initial Schooling

Before receiving your appointment to the Military Academy in 1939, you graduated from the Boston Latin School and attended Norwich University for two years. How did your initial schooling prepare you for the military and academic environment you encountered as a cadet at West Point?

McDermott: I was born in a little crossroads area called Wolcott Square, a suburb of an unincorporated town called Readville. Readville appears on the city maps of Boston; Wolcott Square does not. Readville is divided by the New York, New Haven, and Hartford Railroad that runs through there. Living in Wolcott Square put me in a neighborhood of about 200 families and a two-room schoolhouse. In that two-room schoolhouse, my mother had gone to school. One room, when I went there, was taught by

a classmate of hers who taught the first three grades. A teacher who had taught my mother, Mrs. Hastings, taught the fourth through sixth grades. I went there. My two sisters went there. Other people in that little crossroads went across the railroad tracks into the other part of Readville and went to a parochial school. I went to the local public school. That isolation from bigger and better (or bigger and worse) things obviously had some effect on my life.

> My father was a musician. There were two aspects to his life as a professional musician. One, he played classical music in symphonies. Two, he sang as an Irish tenor. The Irish tenor capability brought him into a lot of situations where he was in downtown Boston frequently singing at various social events. He sang at a lot of funerals and a lot of weddings. The symphony, during the Depression, was pretty much shut down, but there was music. Music continued. There were WPA-sponsored concerts. So he left Readville every day and went one place or another. He left at different times during the day. It wasn't an 8:00-to-5:00 job.

So I had less opportunity than most kids, I guess, to have a scheduled time, quality time, with my father, but it worked out in another way. My brother died as a baby. He was born five years after me. From that point on, my father attached himself to me. Whenever possible, my father brought me with him. If he was going to play a concert on Boston Common, he would take me with him. I would go into the city of Boston and sit there behind the bandstand and be present for that event, no matter where it was in Boston, whether he was playing in a theater or at a social event.

One of those social events, by the way, was where I met Charles Lindbergh. When I was seven years old, in 1927, Charles Lindbergh was honored in Boston. It was almost the equivalent of a tickertape parade. Then there was a social event where he met the city fathers, and they had music present. Of course all music was live at that time, not canned. My father brought me along, and I got a chance to meet him. That set a goal for me in life. I wanted to be a pilot. I wanted to be like Charles Lindbergh. That was a departure from what I had wanted to be up to that time. In Readville we had a two-engine fire station, and I wanted to be a fire fighter, as the other boys in my class did.

Just think of a two-room schoolhouse with three grades in one classroom of six rows—two rows were first grade, two were second grade, and two were third grade. You were lucky if you had enough classmates who were boys to form a team. You might have five boys and seven girls; it might be six boys and six girls. So we didn't have much of an opportunity for any kind of athletic life in Readville. We didn't have enough to have a baseball team; we played scrub ball. We didn't have enough for a football team. So we climbed trees, and ran, and wrestled, and things like that. But there was no athletic activity organized in any way.

Going into Boston Latin School was quite a departure. You entered Boston Latin School by competition from all the schools in and around Boston. You entered by examination. When I went in there, it was quite a departure from the two-room schoolhouse. The school held about 2,400 students covering six grades, junior high school through high school. I had to ride a bus, followed by a trolley car, followed by a subway, an elevated train, and then another trolley car to get to school. So it took an hour and a half to get into town every morning, and an hour and a half to get home every afternoon. That in itself

was enough to deter any after-school activities on a steady basis like, say, going out for a team. On the other hand, I didn't have any background. I didn't know how to play football. I knew very little about baseball.

But what I did have an opportunity to do at Boston Latin School was play my trombone, which I had learned from my father. My father was a graduate of the New England Conservatory of Music, so I learned to be a classical musician from the start. When I got into the Boston Latin School, I went with the band. I wound up in music activities there in the concert orchestra, the concert band, the marching band, and in competitions for the best trombone player in Boston, playing in Jordan Hall in the competition, and winning the music prize at graduation. I won that two years after Leonard Bernstein had won it. I knew Leonard Bernstein way back then as a musician because he was an upper classman, two classes ahead of me. I liked to joke about the fact that I didn't know how he ever won a music prize because he didn't play the trombone. All he could play was the piano. But there were pretty fine musicians there, and I was pleased to get that award because that was the only extracurricular activity I had a background in or an opportunity for.

I went to Norwich University in 1937 primarily because I wanted to pursue a military career. I wanted to go to West Point, and I wanted to go into flying. I couldn't get an appointment to West Point at the time. A congressman was only allowed to have four cadets in the academy at any one time. Congressman McCormack, who happened to be the Speaker of the House, didn't have any vacancies coming up for two years. So I went to Norwich with the thought that I would leave there in two years and go to West Point. When I got to Norwich, at the end of one year, Congressman McCormack came up with an Annapolis appointment, and I decided, no, that's not what I wanted to do. I didn't

identify the Navy in any way with air power or flying airplanes. I was going to wait my turn and go to West Point. So I waited a year and did that.

Norwich University was a nice stepping stone for me in that, as I recall the figure, there were 354 students in the school—pretty small, smaller than my high school. I liked that small environment, having come from a little bit of a crossroads town. There were very good social relationships with the small group of people who were your peers there. It was a military college with cavalry ROTC. It was then, and is still today, the only pure, private military college in the United States. It's one of the top four in performance in the number of officers it produces for the regular services, the others being VMI, Texas A & M, and the Citadel. Norwich is the only one that doesn't get state aid. It was a good school, and I enjoyed the preparation there. It kind of prepared me for going from 350 to 1,800 students when I went to West Point. By today's standards, of course, you can go to colleges where there are 40,000 or 50,000 students. At service academies, the largest we got was around 4,500. But for me that was a big step, going from 350 to 1,800. On the other hand, the military environment is such that you are scheduled for classes and other activities by military unit, a cavalry squadron at Norwich, or a company at West Point. And in that kind of environment, you were with a small group of people with whom you socialized and who became your close friends. That was a part of character development, and developing discipline and loyalty in a military environment. So Norwich was a good preparation.

The other side of it is it was founded by Alden Partridge, who was an early superintendent at West Point, and it was like West Point in that the curriculum was pretty much identical for the first two years. When I did go to West Point two years later, I

found that every course was the same, and there was only one textbook different. In English literature there was a different textbook. That's one of the things that led to my desire to make some changes later when I went from West Point as a teacher to the Air Force Academy as a teacher and dean.

> Norwich had high standards, both for entering and for advancement within the corps, and for meeting academic standards. It was good preparation for me. When I went to West Point, however, I found I was a little frog in a big puddle. Whereas at Norwich I was class vice president and I had the highest military rank my two years there, when I went to West Point I was lost in an environment where those who dominated as students were what we called "Army brats" or "service brats." But I liked the environment in that, here I came from a small town background and pretty closed into New England as the boundaries for whatever activities I was going to have. I never had gone west of the Hudson, and I finally went out West and I'm on the Hudson River at West Point.
>
> In contrast to my background there were people there who were Army brats who had lived in China and Hawaii and Europe. Their advantage over all the rest of us was that they could be the storytellers and tell us what the world was really like out there, what we were going to face when we got out in the service. I appreciated that. Also, the competition to get in was very keen, so no matter what you wanted to do at West Point—whether it was in academics or extracurricular activities—

there was stiffer competition. Outside of academics, I competed mainly in the music area. I was the leader of the cadet orchestra. I appreciated those opportunities very much. My disappointment at West Point was that the academic program for two years was just a complete repeat of what I had had at Norwich.

Q: West Point Cadet

As a West Point cadet during World War II, you went through an accelerated program that offered few choices beyond the core curriculum and provided flying training as well as academic studies. How did your experiences as a cadet influence your later thinking about issues such as the demands on a cadet's time, academic choices, and combining flight training with academic studies?

McDermott: There were differences at West Point from Norwich University in the academic programs offered. The first two years were pretty basic—perhaps all colleges and universities required you to take the basic sciences, to study English, literature, and history, and a few other courses in the social sciences and humanities. Beyond those first two years at Norwich, you were allowed to major. That went all the way back, historically, to Alden Partridge's differences with Slyvanus Thayer. Slyvanus Thayer insisted on what was often referred to as the "seminary academy model" with a prescribed curriculum. Everybody goes lockstep through a program. Much of that is tied to the fact that, when you graduated from the Military or Naval Academy in those days,

your academic rank at the end of the four years determined your order of merit on the promotion list, and there were very few temporary promotions in the period from World War I to World War II. There was some kind of motivation there to go to college before you went to West Point so you could rank higher in the academic standing at the end of four years by repeating subjects. I was shocked later to find out that even in the order of battle, in the Navy, the ships at sea sailed in the order of class rank at the Naval Academy. That just floored me.

I didn't have that opportunity to major. If I hadn't had an appointment to West Point, I would have had the opportunity. But I got to West Point, and not only was I going to repeat what I had already had at Norwich, but I would have no choice in the curriculum except in a foreign language. I could take French or German, but I couldn't take both. That kind of option was all that was available to you. But my real disappointment came about in the fact that I had to repeat. I came to West Point with another cadet from Norwich named Dutch Holland. Dutch Holland left early in the first academic year because he just didn't want to repeat everything he had had before. He went back to Norwich and became an officer through an ROTC appointment.

I thought about leaving West Point because of the boredom of repeating, but then I met a girl who was to become my wife. I never dated another girl from that day forward. I spent most of my time writing letters and poetry to her, instead of going through the boredom of trying to rank high because I was repeating courses. So that was something early on that I didn't know was going to have any influence on anything in later life, but I just thought what a silly thing it was to have people repeat something they have already done

when there are opportunities to grow. Your growth was stunted, depending on the number of years you had out in a civilian college before you got there.

The other thing, the teaching methods were quite different, following the very rigid instructional programs that Sylvanus Thayer had initiated at the Military Academy where everybody recited every day and was graded every day. You were rewarded on that daily participation and daily test. Norwich was more like what I had experienced in high school and then experienced later when I went back to graduate school. There was more discussion in the classrooms. Even though the classrooms were larger, with more than sixteen students per classroom, there was more participation so you learned from each other. That was not as easy to do under the Sylvanus Thayer system. That did have some influence on me later.

Q: Pilot in World War II

During World War II you served with the 9th Air Force in Europe. You were a group operations officer and flew P-38's in combat. Did your World War II experience give you any insights into what a service academy education should do for military leaders?

McDermott: Let me say first that during World War II, in combat, it's closer to your experience in company life or squadron life in a service academy than what you would experience in a civilian school. You're dependent on each other—there's very close

bonding within a squadron in combat, just as there's a close bonding in a squadron or company in a service academy.

> As far as the academic preparation was concerned, it's hard to put any kind of a judgment on that—would you have been a better person in combat, in fulfilling that mission, if you had had a different curriculum? Probably not, but where it influenced me later was that what was going on in that war was a progression in the science and technology area that we had no idea was going to happen when we were preparing for that war in the service academy environment. For example, at West Point we had riding. As a former ROTC cavalry student who rode a horse every day, I thought that was wonderful. But there were no horses out there once the war started. The Germans took care of that when they invaded Poland. So the changes in weapons—the tank, the anti-tank, the aircraft, the anti-aircraft—all of those changes made you realize that we had been preparing for a repeat of World War I, and we had a totally different military environment to win or lose in. It began to get to me as we came along toward the end of the war. I started seeing missiles, and we attacked missile sites; and then there were the V-2's going all the way from Germany to England, and the jet fighters, where the Germans were ahead of us. I saw a few of those before the war ended. It made me realize that we had to have some changes in the way we prepared for war. We couldn't coast along with a fixed curriculum. The curriculum had to be

easily adaptable to change. That was definitely an influence on my later thinking.

Q: West Point Instructor

After earning your M.B.A at Harvard in 1950, you joined the department of social sciences at West Point. Many members of the all-military faculty had only undergraduate degrees. Teaching was highly standardized with quizzes almost every day, but department heads often taught no classes at all. How did your experiences as a West Point faculty member influence your thinking about faculty qualifications, curriculum, and teaching methods?

McDermott: Perhaps I should go back and say this about my World War II experiences. Right after the war ended, my unit was the last P-38 unit left in Europe. We went down the coast to Nice, and were preparing to go over to Japan. The war ended, and all regular officers were frozen in the theater. They were not allowed to go home. I was picked on a personnel screening for my foreign language capability. I had won the foreign language prize at West Point in French and German. So I was assigned directly from being an operations officer of a fighter group to go to headquarters, European theater of operations, to use my language skills in helping the adjustments following World War II. Out of that I got the privilege of being involved as a representative of General Eisenhower, along with representatives from the Secretary of the Treasury, who were put into uniforms with colonels' insignia on and went down to negotiate with the allies what

the foreign exchange rates were going to be in the post-World War II period. I had an opportunity to learn a lot from a very brilliant international finance guru named Pforzheimer. My early assignment when I got to General Eisenhower's headquarters was to attach myself to a gentleman named Carl Pforzheimer who was to be the key negotiator for the military side, along with the treasury, in setting the foreign exchange rates. I learned a lot there at the negotiating table about international finance and international affairs. I learned a lot about what happens when a war is over, in the post-war reconstruction of an economy and a country.

I was in that army of occupation just long enough to get a feel for that, that an officer had to be prepared not just to fight the war but to work in adjusting after the war, restoring the German economy, which we did through the Marshall Plan, and helping our wounded allies recover from the war. It gave me a feel for how an education has to be tailored in a professional way in the social sciences and the humanities, a way that we perhaps didn't think about when we were preparing cadets for commissions.

> I went on to the Harvard Business School. I think there are two things I learned there that were most valuable to me. They were organized to get things done and then having visions and goals and making analyses that would lead you to a decision on where to go. I guess that would come down to a simple definition of management. It had been the custom for about ten years or more, perhaps, that the Harvard Business School admitted ten army and ten navy officers into every class. It was a two-year program for the Air Corps (then becoming the Air Force the year before I got to Harvard). We picked up another quota so there were thirty officers

from the Air Force attending Harvard. We were associating with people who were learning how to manage in organizations in the free-enterprise system, but we were also learning a lot about leadership and human relations that we wouldn't have been able to learn in any other context as well as we did there at Harvard. It was a good leadership development program and a good education that prepared me for what I was going to do later both in the academic arena and in business.

Q: West Point Mentors

While teaching at West Point, you worked with two highly respected officer-scholars: Colonel Herman Beukema (a classmate and friend of General Harmon) and Colonel George Lincoln (a close friend and advisor to both President Eisenhower and General Harmon). How did your associations with them influence your thinking and your career?

McDermott: I had entered the Harvard Business School with a career goal in mind. The Air Force had decided that every officer had to have two specialties, one a flying specialty and the other a non-flying specialty, because there wasn't enough gasoline to keep us trained daily in flying operations. I was selected to go to the Harvard Business School, one of those lucky ten, and my goal was to enter a new career field called the comptroller career field. The man who controlled who went to Harvard for the Air Force was the comptroller of the Air Force. He promised me that when I got through with that

two-year program, I would be coming back and joining his new organization, the comptroller division of the Air Force.

Looking forward to that as my non-flying specialty, what I wanted to do was come out of the Harvard Business School and go fly for a few years, then go back into that new career field. It didn't work out that way because of another interesting thing about West Point. West Point had a 100 percent military faculty and a lot of inbreeding. Almost all of the instructors were Military Academy graduates. They graded you as a cadet in your recitations not only on the subject matter presentation but in your ability to teach. They evaluated whether you would make a good instructor and should be called back to the academy. Fortunately or unfortunately I was on that list and I got picked up in April. I went down to Washington on spring break and had a conference with General Stone, who had drafted me to West Point in the first place. I expected to get right out of Harvard and go into flying, and then become a comptroller. Instead I came right out of Harvard and went to West Point to teach thanks to General Stone.

General Stone turned out to be one of my mentors. I would have to attribute it more to his mentoring and General Rosie O'Donnell's than to any other people who got me into professional military education, in a strange way. One, I was drafted to come back and teach; two, the Korean War started ten days after I got there. The head of the department, Colonel Beukema, said, "Well, you're the only one on our social science faculty with a business degree, so I want you to write a small course on insurance and related government benefits to prepare our officers for managing their personal lives as we go into another war."

The result of that was that I taught a full load—there was no getting out of teaching a full load—and I also wrote a book on the principles of insurance. That was followed up later by a book on personal finance. They kept me on one more year to get that done. Then the two books were combined. What that did for me was this: One, as all of us who have taught know you learn more by teaching than by being a student, so I learned a lot about insurance and personal finance, which prepared me for something down the road that I never thought was going to happen, had no way of knowing was going to happen. I also got involved then in preparing the legislation that was drafted to take care of survivor benefits for the military. So I prepared that legislation, which is still inadequate when I think all of what is being given to the survivors of "9-11" and how the military survivors of the war are treated. They get a pittance in comparison, and they are the ones who volunteered to go out and fight for the rest of us. But I did prepare a package that seemed reasonable to me, and achievable, and we did get that through.

Then I expected, "Well I'll finally get my flying assignment that General Stone committed me to."

He had said, "I owe it to you, McD."

But then I was drafted by Colonel Beukema in a conversation with General Harmon and General Eisenhower at a dinner they had in Washington. Colonel B was going to retire. He was despondent because his son had been killed in an aircraft accident. I knew his son well. He was married to General Bradley's daughter, and he died in an airplane crash. Colonel Beukema decided to retire, and at that time the legislation came up for the Air Force Academy. Colonel Beukema had asked me whether I

was interested in becoming a professor in the department of social sciences at West Point.

I told him, "No, I had gone from the khaki to the blue and I was going to stay with the blue. I was going back to flying." Then suddenly I got drafted because the Air Force Academy Act passed. So I had no choice there.

Based on my experiences as a cadet at Norwich and then as a cadet at West Point, when I was in the social science department I tried to interest the cadet that I was teaching in the "dismal science" of economics. I encouraged them to read the *New York Times* financial section, and I built up a little reading library in the department and recommended they do some outside reading. I was having some fun doing that, departing from the prescribed teaching methodologies that Sylvanus Thayer was holding everybody to. So I was a little bit off course there, but it was respected by Colonel Beukema.

If you went out to choose mentors, if you had that opportunity in life to go choose two mentors for what you were going to be, first you'd have to know what you were going to become, and second, you would have to be able to evaluate those two. But guardian angels or somebody put all this together. They set it up for me and then I followed. I didn't know where the goals would be when I got through that experience, but they were wonderful people to work for. They were off the seminary academy model. They departed in many ways in teaching methodology from what was customary at West Point. They were the only two professors who did any teaching there. That struck me. There were professors there who from the day they were appointed as professors never got in the classroom again. That wasn't true of Beukema and Lincoln. They had several courses under them, but they kept their fingers in the teaching and the subject matter of all the

courses under their jurisdiction in the department. They also kept their fingers in outside activities. Lincoln had a lot of official assignments to Washington, so he was down there on TDY frequently during that period of the Korean War. He had had great experience in the operations division of the WarDepartment during the World War II working for General Marshall. Beukema, just because of his reputation, although he was older, was called for as a consultant on many things. He initiated courses like "Contemporary Foreign Governments" that you wouldn't find in the Annapolis curriculum.

By the way in the Annapolis curriculum, if you go back in the history of when Annapolis was founded in 1845, the Navy specified that the curriculum would be almost identical to that at West Point. So West Point had followed the Sylvanus Thayer model, and then Annapolis joined them, and they were joined at the hip, going through on the same model. The only way they departed was on the faculty. West Point had an all-military faculty, and Annapolis did not. They had a mixed faculty, and Annapolis had no graduate preparation for its officer-instructors. West Point had it for some but not all. The departments at West Point that were perhaps the best academically prepared were those in the social sciences and humanities, and in particular Colonel Beukema's department. So that was a good departure from the tradition that had begun with Sylvanus Thayer.

I think I was very much impressed by those two men. That kind of encouraged me to seek change. When I finally got to the Air Force Academy, I thought, "Well here I've got a chance." It's not like moving a cemetery, which it is when you try to change a service academy or a curriculum in almost any school, a prescribed curriculum or a core curriculum. I studied what they were doing at Columbia and Chicago at that time, and they were having a tough time coming up with a core curriculum program at those

institutions. That's because so many faculty members are in postholes. They just go with tunnel vision down a path depending on what they are teaching and what their pursuits are in writing and publishing and research. It's physics, or it's chemistry, or it's history, but there's no attempt whatsoever to broaden their vision in any way. Well, that wasn't true in the social science department. They would have liked to have done more. That was an incentive for me, with those two as mentors and General Stone as a mentor. General Stone was unique in that before he entered in the class of 1934 he had gone to Cal Tech. There was a meteorology program, and so many officers a year were sent to Cal Tech to get graduate degrees in meteorology. So he was lucky to get that kind of a background in science. Then while he was teaching in the social sciences—here he is with a meteorology background teaching in the social sciences—he went down to Columbia at night and got a degree in the social sciences, in economics. He had the breadth, and luckily he had some experience in the planning phases of the Air Force Academy. He was scheduled to be the dean of the Air Force Academy if it had been founded earlier. But time went on and he got promoted a little ahead of the power curve. So for whatever reasons he latched onto me, and I was Stone's disciple. I think I've got to say that mentors and the fact that I had people who had faith in me—and I don't know why they did, but they did—General O'Donnell in the Pentagon, General Stone, and Colonel Beukema, Colonel Lincoln; people like that encouraged me.

> There was plenty of opposition out there because there was tremendous opposition to making any changes in the curriculum. I'll never forget when I was going for a master's degree program and I had to appear before the American Council on Education, a committee of college

presidents. The other two service academies testified against me. The Naval Academy was sort of neutral. The Naval Academy representative, the secretary of their academic board, was sort of like a Russian at the table: "We have to go back to Moscow for a decision. I can't make a decision." He couldn't make a commitment on the Navy, but General Bessell, the West Point dean, said, "I can't figure out what McDermott is so upset about. If the curriculum was good enough for Grant and Lee and MacArthur and Eisenhower, why isn't it good enough for him?"

He took that kind of approach. And at the Naval Academy, when I went to visit them and tried to get some people on my side, that's when I learned about the ships. "You don't understand, McDermott. Everything depends on academic rank when you graduate. The ships at sea sail in an order of battle that is tied directly to academic rank when you graduate. So that's why we're not going to have any advanced placement." Well, there were plenty of people out there to think that way.

So starting a new academy was a unique opportunity to start from scratch. I didn't have to move a cemetery. I had a unique opportunity, and nevertheless there was a lot of resistance. But it wasn't the same as re-digging graves and undoing things like that. I had an opposition that came mainly from the service academy people, on the one hand, in departing from the prescribed curriculum. For the few civilians we had in there, and Archie Higdon was one, their postholes were more in their disciplines, as his was in mechanics and engineering. He was the co-author of a best-selling textbook. But no one was more dedicated to engineering, that

narrow focus. There was nothing phony about it. It was not something that went back to 1817. His objections were mainly, "That's not the way we do it in engineering, or the way we do it at Iowa State."

The West Point people would say the same as General Bessell: "If it was good enough for Grant and Lee and Eisenhower and MacArthur, why isn't it good enough for you?"

That sort of thing. But I think being mentored by Stone and Beukema let me realize that there are people who want change and who think differently. So, "Go for it, McD," you know? Set up your goal and try to get there. Recruit people to your cause. That's the kind of stimulus I got from serving with those two men.

Q: First Impression of the Air Force Academy

By the time President Eisenhower signed the academy bill on April 1, 1954, several boards, task forces, and committees had already done a great deal of planning for the academy. What was your impression when you first heard of the academy, and how much did you know about early planning efforts?

McDermott: I was somewhat aware, but I didn't have an interest in being a part of it, so early on I hadn't followed it very closely. I didn't think it was going to mean anything to me. I was pleased that there was going to be one, because another thing about West Point that I objected to was everybody being educated to become a civil engineer. Civil

engineering was the main thrust of the curriculum, and that seemed ridiculous to me. I was very anxious to see that at the Air Force Academy if we had engineering, it didn't have to be civil. We could get into other engineering and technology fields. I would have to say that I didn't follow it very much until General Stone alerted me that that's where I was going. So then I started looking at it.

> The main thing I practiced all my life was this: Before I went to any meeting, I did a lot of reading and got prepared so I would not get blindsided. I found that was so useful in getting to your goal. If you know what the other fellow might be thinking and where he's coming from before you go in there, you can handle the situation better, particularly when you know he's probably not going to try to find out where you're going because you're wrong—anybody who tries to institute change is wrong: "The status quo is the way we have to go."

By the time I got very far into my career at the Air Force Academy, I had read all the planning documents from the two planning groups that had been preparing things and had come up with a package. The way those meetings were conducted was, "Well, if that's what you think, we'll add that, too." So they came up with a curriculum that would take six years to complete. They were taking the easy way out without making decisions. Nobody wanted to focus on anything like an elective program or a departure from the prescribed curriculum. "Just put my favorite subject in there as one of the prescribed courses. That's all I care about."