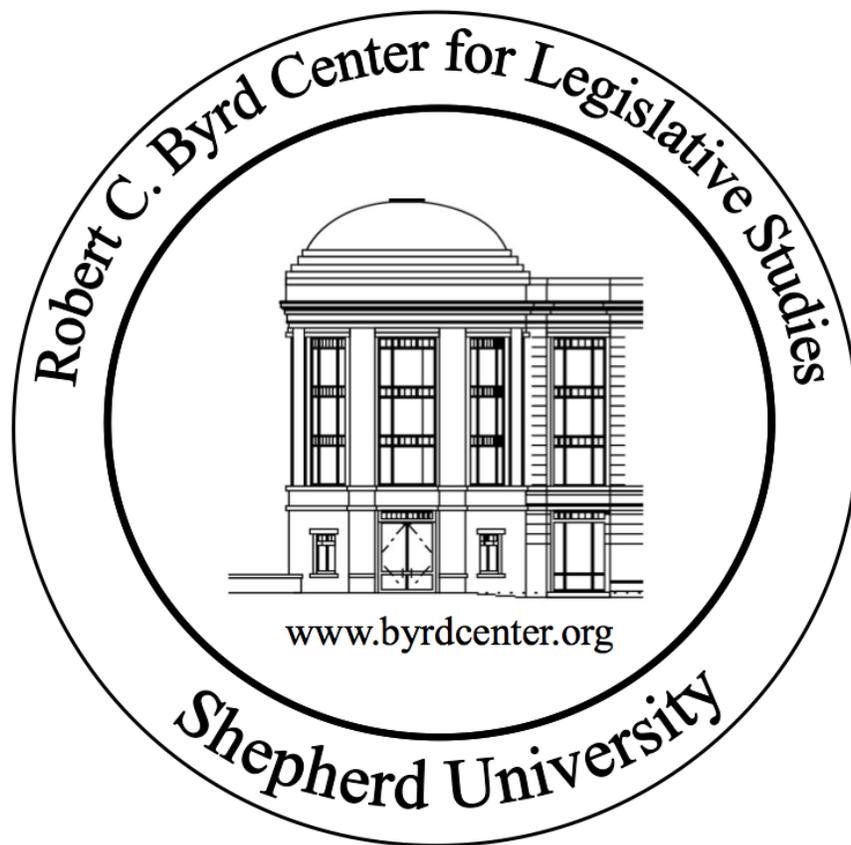


# **Robert C. Byrd Legacy Project**

**Oral History Interview**

**Major General Allen Tackett**

**March 21, 2013**



## Preface

by Keith D. Alexander

Major General Allen Tackett has had a remarkably diverse career, as the following interview makes clear. Held in the West Virginia National Guard headquarters in Charleston, West Virginia, the interview traces Tackett's rise through the ranks, touching also upon his involvement in boxing and coal mining.

Tackett makes it clear that his career is closely entwined with the subject of this oral history series, Senator Byrd. Tackett devotes special attention to Senator Byrd's unique qualities that allowed him to rise from poverty to become, in Tackett's view at least, "the most powerful person in the world."

**About the interviewer:** Alan Sturm is a retired educator, former teacher, principal, and assistant superintendent of Upshur County Schools. He also served for two terms on the Jefferson County Board of Education. He has a BA in history from West Virginia Wesleyan and an MA in Public School Administration from West Virginia University. He has made the study of West Virginia political history his lifelong hobby, and he has been working to collect interviews for the Robert C. Byrd Oral History Project since July 2012. He lives with his wife, Libby, in Shepherdstown, West Virginia.

**Interview #1**  
**Thursday, March 21, 2013**

**Sturm:** Today is Thursday, March 21, 2013. I'm Alan Sturm. I'm working with the Robert C. Byrd Center for Legislative Studies on the oral history segment of the Robert C. Byrd Legacy Project. We are speaking today from West Virginia National Guard Headquarters at Coonskin Park in Charleston, West Virginia.

It is my pleasure today to be talking with a true West Virginia and American hero, Major General Allen Tackett, retired adjutant general of the West Virginia National Guard. General Tackett began his career as an enlisted man in the West Virginia Guard's 16<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group and retired as a major general in charge of the entire West Virginia Guard. Along the way, he's been a Golden Gloves boxer, West Virginia Boxing Commissioner, a coal mine superintendent, and was named by the *Charleston Gazette* as the 2010 West Virginian of the Year.

He has brought, in his teaming with Senator Byrd, the West Virginia National Guard from twenty-fourth in the nation in combat readiness to number one in readiness. The partnership, in addition, has brought hundreds of millions of dollars into the West Virginia economy and earned General Tackett the nickname of "The Greatest General since Hannibal," which was bestowed on him by Senator Byrd.

Welcome, General. I want to thank you for taking time to do this interview.

**Tackett:** It's certainly my pleasure to talk about Senator Byrd and the great relationship that he and I had and the dividends that it paid to the state of West Virginia and especially to the men and women of the West Virginia National Guard.

**Sturm:** Well, we certainly appreciate it.

Now, as you know, this session is being recorded. Is that agreeable with you?

**Tackett:** Yes, it is.

**Sturm:** Let me give you the small print before we start. A complete transcript of this interview will be sent to you, at which time you can go over it and make any changes that you want. Then send the edited copy back to the Byrd Center. At that time, you will be asked to sign a Deed of Gift stating that it will become a part of the Robert C. Byrd Oral History Collection. Until that happens, everything that we say is private and confidential and is subject to your control until you are satisfied with it and sign it over to the Byrd Center.

**Tackett:** Okay.

**Sturm:** I'm going to ask you several types of questions today. Some will be about Senator Byrd, some will be about your experiences in working with him, and some will require you to do a little speculation based on your knowledge of Senator Byrd and West Virginia politics.

**Tackett:** Okay.

**Sturm:** But let's begin by having you tell us a little bit about yourself and your background, your career, your childhood, how you became a soldier, how you became the adjutant general of the Guard. Just tell us about General Tackett.

**Tackett:** Well, I was actually born in Baltimore, Maryland, on November 22, 1944, and I was less than six months old when my father left Baltimore and moved to Cabin Creek. He had a job in the coal mines up at Wevaco, which was the left-hand fork of the Cabin Creek when you get past Eskdale. He worked in the coal mining industry there, and we stayed the rest of our lives there on Cabin Creek.

My dad moved from Wevaco over to Kayford. He was working for Carbon Fuel when he was at Wevaco, and he worked for Bethlehem Steel when he went over to Kayford. Of course, the mines back then were not as stable. Sometimes you'd work. Sometimes you wouldn't work.

I started grade school actually at Kayford, and then in 1951, on January 6, 1951, we moved to Miami on Cabin Creek. It's the house—

**Sturm:** Not Florida. You're still talking about—

**Tackett:** Miami, West Virginia, there on Cabin Creek, and that's where I still live today. I actually stayed with my mom and dad when I got married, and raised my family and took care of my mom and dad in their later years and still take care of my mother's sister, my aunt. She's ninety-three years old and still lives with me there in the house. But I've lived in that same house now since January 6, 1951.

I went to grade school, started at Kayford. We moved down there in January of '51, and I went to a schoolhouse up at Dawes. Then I went to Sharon, and then they built a school called Sharon Dawes in Miami where I lived. So I finished the fourth grade, the fifth and sixth grade there at Sharon Dawes Elementary School.

**Sturm:** Is the school still there today?

**Tackett:** Yes, the school's still there, and it's still right there in the community just like it was whenever they built it there whenever I was going to it. From there I went to Chelyan Junior High School, and, of course, there's no longer a Chelyan Junior High School. Then from there I went on to East Bank High School and graduated from high school in 1962. I went all twelve

years of school and never missed a day of school. I had perfect attendance for twelve years of school, and when I graduated from East Bank High School, I got a special certificate from the Board of Education for having perfect attendance from the time I started school until I ended my school career.

**Sturm:** That's quite a record in itself.

**Tackett:** Well, very few people have ever accomplished that goal. As a matter of fact, the first time I was ever absent from anything, whether a job, school, or anything, the first time I ever missed a day of not being where I was supposed to be was when my dad died. So that was the first time that I had ever missed a day's work or a day's school in my career at that time.

**Sturm:** General, someplace along the line that ethic has gotten lost.

**Tackett:** That's for sure. [laughs]

But whenever I graduated from high school, I mean, I was a really good athlete. I played football and baseball, All-County baseball player. Wasn't big enough to really play sports in college, and I wanted to go into the Army, and my dad wanted me to go on to college. Of course, my dad was a very strong-minded person.

**Sturm:** Did your dad have a college education?

**Tackett:** My dad didn't even have a high school diploma. He was illiterate and worked in the coal mines all of his life. You would have never known that he couldn't read or write, because he was probably one of the smartest men I ever met in my life. He had more common sense and knew how to work and do things, probably more than any man I ever met in my entire life. But he didn't have any formal education.

**Sturm:** But he was actually a working miner? He wasn't in management?

**Tackett:** Yes, he was a UMW miner all of his life and died with black lung at age fifty-four. But he was a very strong-minded man, and so I went to first semester of college at West Virginia Institute of Technology up in Montgomery. I'd had two years of French in high school, and I took like fifteen, eighteen hours of college courses, and I failed every subject except French. [laughter] Because my mind and my soul was not into going to college.

I had a cousin by the name of Bob Willis, who was in the 16<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group here in Charleston, and he had been in the regular Army and he was in the National Guard in this Special Forces Unit. He met with me and my dad, and he knew we were having problems. I didn't want to go to school. I wanted to go in the Army. He said, "Why don't you make a happy medium here? Why don't you join the Guard? Then you can go in the Army. If you like it, you

can stay in the Army. If you don't, you can stay in the Guard and then do whatever you want to do."

Well, even when I went to school, I worked part-time at Kroger's.

**Sturm:** As did I when I was about your age.

**Tackett:** And paid for my own college by working at Kroger's. I was a full-time part-time employee, thirty-six hours a week.

**Sturm:** That's what I worked.

**Tackett:** And worked and went to college. Then when I decided to join the Guard, January 20, 1963, I signed up, and then on February 10<sup>th</sup>, they shipped me out. I got on a train here in Charleston, first time I'd ever been on a train, and I rode to Louisville, Kentucky to go to Fort Knox for basic training and advanced individual training. Went to basic training and AIT there at Fort Knox, on to Fort Benning, Georgia, to go to jump school, Airborne training, came back home, and then later went to Fort Bragg for Special Forces training.

By the time I got through all the training—and believe me, it was difficult training. Special Forces training is nothing to sneeze at. I mean, it's very hard both physically and mentally, and I was kind of glad to get back home and glad to go back to college. [laughter]

**Sturm:** A little time off.

**Tackett:** I truly didn't think at that time that I would ever stay in the Guard. I thought my dad was hard on me at home, but, boy, you know, when you're going through training in the military, they're pretty tough on you as well. None of the training physically was that hard for me. I got through it all, but a lot of the screaming and hollering and those types of things kind of had a big impact on me, and so when I came back, I had intentions of going back to college, which I did, still working at Kroger's, going to college.

I met my wife in junior high school. We went to school in grade school, junior high school, and high school, and we only had one date all the time we were in school. Then when she started college when I came back from the military, we started dating and got married. She got pregnant shortly after and had our child, and her parents were a little upset because they wanted her to go college and my dad wanted me to go to college, and I couldn't put us both through college, so I dropped out of college and made my wife go back to school, and she got her degree and became a teacher.

After she got her teaching degree, then I started going back to get my degree and finally got my degree in '85. I graduated from high school in '62, and once you get a family and you're

working a full-time job, you don't have enough money or time to go to school full-time and to do that. So she became a teacher and started teaching at Leewood Junior High School.

**Sturm:** You have one child?

**Tackett:** I have two. My daughter that was born November 2, 1965, and then I had a son who was born October 17, 1979, so there's fourteen years between my two children.

**Sturm:** I believe I read he's a pilot in the Guard.

**Tackett:** Yes, he's a major now in the 130<sup>th</sup> Airlift Wing. He's a pilot. You know, funny thing, when he was five years old, he told his mother and I that he wanted to be a pilot someday, and went on and became a pilot.

My daughter was in grade school, she was ten years old, and they went to Kanawha County Courthouse and watched a court proceeding. She came home and said, "You know, I think I want to be a lawyer." And she went straight into pre-law at University of Charleston, on to West Virginia Law School, and she's a lawyer. Today she's the court administrator for family law, so she runs all the family law for the Supreme Court in the state of West Virginia. But when she was ten years old, she decided she wanted to be a lawyer, and so she became a lawyer.

But at any rate, I came back and went to work at Kroger's, and as I got into an A Team on the Special Forces, I really got very close to these soldiers and stuff that were in my organization and my team, and to the point where that when it came time for my six-year enlistment, I decided, well, I'm going to make this a career, and if I'm going to make it a career, I think I should go to Officers' Candidate School.

They had been on me for probably two years before I actually went to Officers' Candidate School, and they wanted me to go to the state OCS program here in the state of West Virginia. It took a year to do that. You had to go to Camp Dawson every month and then had a couple of summer camps that you had to go to, but it took a long time. Rather than doing that, I told them, "If you want me to be an officer, then I want to go down to Fort Benning, Georgia, and go to the Officers Candidate School on active duty."

So they sent me to Fort Benning, Georgia, in 1966, '67, and in June of '67, I was commissioned a second lieutenant. My wife and I were in this hallway here at the adjutant general's office, and we saw the pictures of all the adjutant generals, and I told her, I said, "Someday my picture is going to be on that wall. I'm going to be the adjutant general of the state of West Virginia."

She laughed and she said, "When do you plan on doing that?" [laughter]

"Well," I said, "it'll be a long time, but that's what my goal is in this organization."

So when I started at Kroger's, I started at Kroger's as a checkout boy or a bag-boy putting groceries in people's cars. When I quit Kroger's ten years later, I was assistant manager of the largest store they had in the Charleston division. The reason I quit was because it tied into the time of when I became an officer and it was requiring more time for the military for me, because I was taking on the responsibilities in the Army National Guard. And Kroger's was open seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day, and when you're in management, they want all your time. They basically kind of gave me an ultimatum of either get out of the Guard or get away from Kroger's.

Elliot Meadows was the zone manager, and he was a good friend of mine. He told me, he said, "What are you going to do?"

I said, "Well, I guess I'm going to find me another job."

He said, "We don't really mean that. We don't want you to quit. We want you to stay."

I said, "Well, I'm going to stay in the Guard. I like the Guard, and I'm going to make a career out of the Guard, and someday I hope to be the adjutant general of the state of West Virginia."

He said, "Well, you go home and think it over and let me know."

My dad had worked in the mining industry all of his life, and he knew a lot of people in the mining industry, and he had a great reputation, my dad did, and he was a really hard worker. A guy by the name of Jim Scarborough was the personnel manager at Cedar Coal Company, and I called Jim Scarborough on a Friday and asked him if he had any openings at the coal company, that it looked like I was going to have to change jobs, that I was in the Guard and I wanted to stay in the Guard, and working at Kroger's, they just didn't want me to be in the Guard because of the seven-day-a-week, twenty-four-hour-a-day operation.

He said, "Sure, I can give you a job."

I said, "Well, I'll have to give Kroger's a two-weeks notice."

So I went to work on a Saturday. Elliot Meadows came and he said, "Well, did you make up your mind?"

I said, "Yeah, I'm giving you two weeks' notice. I'm quitting. I'm going to take another job."

They really got on me and told me what a great future I was going to have at Kroger's. I just told him, you know, that the demands that Kroger's wasn't going to go with my demands in

the Guard, and so I was just going to have to change careers. So he said, “Well, you handle too much money for Kroger’s. If you’re going to do that, hand me the keys, and we’ll pay you the two weeks, and you go ahead and find another job.”

**Sturm:** That was a big step, because as I remember it, at that time Kroger’s was a good-paying job.

**Tackett:** Oh, yes, I made really good money. As a matter of fact, I took a big cut in pay, and I started at Cedar Coal Company as a payroll clerk, and I took a substantial reduction in pay to take the job. And less than six months after I took the job at Cedar Coal Company, then I was promoted to a supervisor over all of the clerks and all that, and then in less than six months after that, then they promoted me to a foreman in transportation and maintenance. About six months after that, I became the superintendent of transportation and maintenance, and for nine years I ran all transportation and maintenance, took care of all reclamation, all coal haulage, all maintenance of all the equipment and stuff on that job. I mean, we had better than two thousand employees, and we had several deep mines, several surface mines, and I was over everything on the outside maintenance-wise and coal haulage-wise and stuff like that, all the reclamation work.

At that time, Cedar Coal Company got bought out by Appalachian Power, and I worked there for a couple more years, and Appalachian or AEP decided to get out of the coal business, so they shut down their operations. So that’s when I actually went back full-time to get my degree in college. I was actually going to be a history teacher and a coach in high school if I had gotten my degree in teaching. I went back and got my degree in management and graduated from the University of Charleston in 1985. While I was taking twenty-four hours of college course credits, Homer Toler, who was the personnel director for Hobet Mining, which were part of Ashland Oil at the time, called me and said, “What are you doing?”

I said, “Well, I’m going to school.”

He said, “Well, get over here. We’re going to put you to work.”

I said, “Hell, Homer, I don’t want a job. I’m taking twenty-four hours in college right now, and I’m trying to get my degree.”

He said, “Buddy, get on over here.”

So I went over and interviewed and ran into Raymond Smallwood and Ken Woodring, who were the president and mine manager of Hobet Mining at the time. They interviewed me and put me to work the next day. I had to go take the physical, and so there I was. At that time, I had worked my way up to where I was the battalion commander in Special Forces.

**Sturm:** What rank was that?

**Tackett:** Lieutenant Colonel. I had twenty-four hours of college courses and went to work as a mine foreman on the evening shift at Hobet Mining.

**Sturm:** What did you do in your spare time? [laughs]

**Tackett:** Well, and that's not all. I was also the chairman of the State Boxing Commission.

**Sturm:** I didn't know exactly when that happened, but I knew that was in your résumé.

**Tackett:** When I was in high school, I wanted to box. Golden Gloves was a big thing here in Charleston and Huntington.

**Sturm:** I remember when it was big in southern West Virginia, yes.

**Tackett:** I mean, it was a big deal, but I was afraid that if I boxed and I got beat, that I'd have to fight my way out of school every day, so I wouldn't do it while I was in school. But when I went to Fort Benning, Georgia, in Jump School, they had smokers every Friday night. So I signed up to represent the company that I was in, and I fought in these smokers the four nights. Jump school at that night was four weeks.

**Sturm:** What class did you fight?

**Tackett:** I fought 135-pound class, which was a lightweight, and I won four straight Friday nights by knockout. So I decided when I came home that I would fight in the Golden Gloves. I went down and won my first fight and won my second fight, but I hadn't really trained and I wasn't really in real good shape.

Well, the third fight I had was a young kid who had been training for probably a year or longer and was in really tiptop shape, and he just absolutely wore me out. [laughter] And I lost the decision because I'd just run out of gas.

My dad told me, he said, "Now, do you really want to box?"

And I said, "Well, I wouldn't have gone down there and made a fool out of myself if I didn't want to box." [laughter]

So he actually turned our basement into a training gymnasium, and we started boxing. My brother and I both trained to box, and then we had a lot of kids in the neighborhood, and we had a boxing team and it operated right out of the basement, the basement of our house. So I got into it real heavy, and my brother won four state championships, and I won five state championships because we got ourselves in shape and we learned how to box and went to places where they had professional boxers that could teach you how to box and how to handle yourself

in a ring. So we started doing all that stuff, and then I became a Golden Gloves champion, and I won five state championships.

At the time, the sheriff of Kanawha County, Kent Melton, and the sheriff of Boone County, Johnny Protan, pretty much ran the boxing, and the Fraternal Order of Police had the state tournament in Huntington.

**Sturm:** And the politics, too, they ran. [laughs]

**Tackett:** Oh, yeah, they had it all. So I got out of boxing and started refereeing, and then they talked me into becoming the chairman of the State Boxing Commission. So under Governor Rockefeller, I was the chairman of the State Boxing Commission.

So I boxed, but from the time I was a young kid, my dad and one other guy used to set up the entire Cabin Creek District in politics. They'd run all the precincts and set all the workers up. They had hired drivers and done everything to set up all those precincts and stuff.

In, I think it was 1957 or '58, somewhere in that vicinity that Senator Byrd first ran for Senate, I had heard of Senator Byrd, but he was a congressman at the time. When he ran for senator, then it was a statewide election, and he met with my dad and Earl Bailey. They both were the two that set up the Cabin Creek District and the Cabin Creek area. When I was just a young kid, I actually met Senator Byrd, became acquainted with him, and he knew my dad fairly well.

So that's how I first got my start with Senator Byrd, but I didn't really have any more dealings with him at all, other than elections. When he would run, I'd support him, but didn't really get a lot of acquaintance. I knew him, but I didn't really know him really well, and always supported him and thought he was a great elected official.

**Sturm:** Now, was he a congressman from your district?

**Tackett:** No, no, he wasn't.

**Sturm:** You would have been the Key's. The Key family would have represented your area, or was it John Slack?

**Tackett:** John Slack represented my area for congressional.

**Sturm:** I was trying to think back about who was in Congress at that period.

**Tackett:** Yes, it was John Slack. So I got into politics as well, and Johnny Protan and Kent Milton, they kept pushing me, you know. Then I became the vice chairman of the Democratic Party for the state of West Virginia, and I held that position for, like, twelve years.

**Sturm:** Now, what period was that?

**Tackett:** That was during the Rockefeller administration and part of the Arch Moore administration.

**Sturm:** Arch's second—actually his third term.

**Tackett:** Third term.

**Sturm:** His second time in the Governor's Mansion.

**Tackett:** When he got elected as governor, I resigned from the State Boxing Commission because those were political-appointed positions. I was a Democrat, he was a Republican, so I resigned from that position so somebody else could have it from his party. But I still was the vice chairman of the Democrat Party for the state of West Virginia and kept that until Gaston Caperton won the election.

Then all the time Gaston was there, I was vice chairman of the Democrat Party working at Hobet Mining. I met Gaston Caperton through boxing when I was the chairman of the Boxing Commission. He had taken a liking to a young black boy by the name of Ronnie Mitchell, and he would promote some professional fights for Ronnie to try to have a pro career in boxing, and I helped him do some of that and got pretty well acquainted with him.

Then when he decided to run for governor, I knew his wife really well. She was in the House of Delegates, Dee, and so I started helping them. I went to the people there in Hobet where I worked, at the time I was an evening-shift boss, and I utilized their telephone at night to call. I had like seventy-nine deputy boxing commissioners that had worked for me when I was the chairman of the State Boxing Commission, plus I had all these Guard people that I knew. So I started calling all of them at night in the evenings and setting up events and stuff for Gaston Caperton in the primary election.

He beat Clyde See, when everybody thought Clyde See would probably be the candidate. Gaston came out of nowhere because he had money, but he had to get name recognition. So I utilized the State Boxing commissioners all across the state of West Virginia and people in the Guard to help set up events and fundraisers and all those kinds of things for Gaston, and he won. Then he beat Arch Moore in the general election.

I told Gaston, I said, "You know, I'm a battalion commander in Special Forces. I'm getting ready to leave the battalion because I'm at the end of my tour as a commander, and I'm going to go to state headquarters and be a full colonel."

**Sturm:** What year was this?

**Tackett:** 1988. I told him that my goal, the reason I was supporting him is because someday I wanted to be the adjutant general, so he was going to make me the assistant adjutant general, but I told him, I said, “No, I’m not ready. I’ve not been a colonel yet, and you can’t make me a general. I don’t want to skip any ranks. I want to be the adjutant general, but when I get there, I want to have the knowledge and the experience that’s necessary to be able to do the job.”

So when I was in Special Forces, I served in every staff position that you can serve in. I mean, I was an S-1, an S-2, an S-3, an XO, a commander, S-4, I had every staff position, and I got to work for several years in each one of those staff positions. Then I came to the state staff, and I was the state maintenance officer, then I was the logistics officer of the state. Then I became assistant chief of staff of the West Virginia National Guard. Then I became the chief of staff of the National Guard.

So I actually spent six years of Gaston’s elected term, the first term and two years of the second term, before I felt like I was ready to be the adjutant general. And I went to him and I told him, I said, “I’m ready to do this.”

But at the time, General Skaff was the adjutant general, and he wasn’t ready to take off that uniform. [laughter] So they made me the assistant adjutant general, which he had offered to me six years before and I wouldn’t take it because I hadn’t had those assignments. The last assignment I had was a special assistant to the adjutant general, and my job was to go around all the armories and check the condition of the armories. That’s where I got the idea of wanting to build the Guard in the armories across the state, when I was in that particular position.

I actually wrote things up from all those armories and made notes, and then I made a booklet. Like I said, then when I became the adjutant general, I gave that to my staff and had them fine-tune it. I said, “These are things that I want to do, but I don’t know where all the infrastructure, where the road networks are going to be, where the jobs and people’s going to be, but that’s what we’ve got to put together. If we’re going to build the Guard into the twenty-first century, then we’ve got to know where the population growth is going to be, where the infrastructure is going to be so that we can make sure we’re doing the right things.”

But to go back, they made me the assistant adjutant general, and nine months later I became the adjutant general. So in January of ’95, I became the assistant adjutant general of the West Virginia Army National Guard. Then on September 11<sup>th</sup>, I became the adjutant general.

Now, I was the mine manager at Hobet 21 mine, and it was the largest surface mine east of the Mississippi River. The president of the company, Raymond Smallwood, was getting ready to retire, and Gaston Caperton called me into his office and said, “Okay, I’m going to make you the adjutant general.”

I told him, “Well, I’ll need to give the company a couple weeks’ notice before I can do this.”

So I set up a meeting with the president of the company to talk to him. I go in to see him, and he said, “I’m glad you came to see me, because I was going to have you come and see me.”

I said, “Yeah?”

He said, “Yeah. You know I’m going to retire. I’m retiring, and I’m going to go to the bigwigs and tell them I want you to take my place as president of the company.”

I said, “You know, Raymond, when I came here, I told you that the Guard was my first love and that someday I wanted to be the adjutant general of the state of West Virginia. I just came yesterday from seeing Governor Caperton, and he’s going to make me the adjutant general, and I made this meeting to give you two weeks’ notice.”

He said, “Are you sure you want to do that?”

I said, “Well, that’s what I plan to do.”

He said, “How much does that job pay?”

I said, “Well, it pays \$50,000 a year.”

He said, “Do you have any idea how much money I make as president of Hobet mine?” [laughs]

I said, “Well, as the mine manager, I have a pretty good idea what you make. I know what I make.” So I turned down a big six-figure job that paid close to a quarter of a million dollars a year, with bonuses up to your salary, plus stock options, nearly a million-dollar-a-year job, to take a \$50,000 a year job as the adjutant general. But I did that because my love was for the Guard and people in the Guard.

**Sturm:** You did what you wanted to do.

**Tackett:** Well, when I got into the Guard and got to meet and know all these people and stuff, they’re some of the finest people I’ve ever met in my life, and I wanted to be the leader of this organization, and not just the leader, I wanted to come in here and do good things for the people that put their lives on the line for this state and our country.

I had all of these plans. I used to war-game every decision that the generals would make, the adjutant generals, and what they were faced with. For six years I was on the state staff and

ran the state staff for a couple of years as the chief of staff. I used to war-game every decision that was made, and I'd think, "If I was in his position, what would I do?"

I got to see how it turned out, so I got to see if my idea would have been better than what their idea was, and so I constantly war-gamed it because I knew or felt that someday I was going to be the adjutant general, and I didn't want to make the same mistakes that other adjutant generals have made or other people have made when I come into this job. So I tried to prepare myself for this job as the adjutant general.

**Sturm:** Let me ask you specifically about the job. You earned an outstanding reputation nationwide as an expert in antiterrorism. How did that come about?

**Tackett:** Well, being in Special Forces, you deal with guerrilla warfare and the kind of wars that we're fighting now. That's what Special Forces does. They go into a country and build an army to fight. People are trying to overthrow governments. We went to [Operation] Desert Shield and [Operation] Desert Storm in 1990 and 1991, that war was on CNN, and the whole world saw us demolish at that time the third or fourth largest military in the world in forty hours. So that sent a message to every country out there, that you can't take the United States of America on on a battlefield and expect to get anything but killed.

**Sturm:** Obliterated, yes.

**Tackett:** Yes, basically obliterated. We had the strongest, most proficient military in the world, and CNN proved it to everybody because they showed it. In forty hours we defeated, just annihilated everything that was in Kuwait trying to get back into Iraq and just liberated. So I came up with a conclusion and basically told everybody that, hey, we sent a message to everybody, and the only way that they can hurt us is through guerrilla warfare or through terrorist acts and terrorism. I said the only way they can hurt us is to try to destroy our economy, and they can't do that on a battlefield. They've got to do it through terrorism.

So I started looking at all this, and with my military background in Special Forces of how are you going to go about doing this and how do you do that, and then before 9/11 ever hit, I had already talked Senator Byrd into opening the old Memorial Tunnel.

**Sturm:** I was going to ask you if you'd talk a little about that.

**Tackett:** On the turnpike.

**Sturm:** Explain what that is.

**Tackett:** Well, it used to be the road going from Charleston to southern West Virginia. The turnpike, when they first built it, it was cheaper to put a tunnel through the mountain than it was to try to take the mountain down and to go through, but when they upgraded the turnpike to

an interstate, they had this larger equipment, much bigger trucks, much bigger loaders and excavators, and it was cheaper to take the mountain down, and as they would take it down, take the coal and sell the coal, it would help pay for the expenses of building those roads. And it was much cheaper to do it that way than it was to bore another tunnel through the mountain.

So that left the Memorial Tunnel, which was nine-tenths of a mile long. It was being utilized by the turnpike, and they were having burn studies there because they were doing the big dig in Boston where they were making the tunnel in Boston, and they were doing all these fire tests and stuff in there. And I thought, man, the Sarin gas in Japan really turned me on to the tunnel.

**Sturm:** You mean what they did in the subways over there.

**Tackett:** Yes, exactly. And I thought, man, you know, New York, Chicago, and all of our big cities have all these underground transportations, and, I mean, if I was a terrorist, those are the kind of things that I would try to hit and do, and we don't have any kind of a training facility or any way to train our first responders and our military to deal with terrorist events and terrorist attacks. When I went up and explained to Senator Byrd how I felt—

**Sturm:** At that time, were you the assistant adjutant general?

**Tackett:** I was the adjutant general.

**Sturm:** I thought you said 1993 was when you came up with the idea.

**Tackett:** I was the special assistant to the adjutant general at the time.

**Sturm:** Okay. I just wanted to get the timeframe straight here.

**Tackett:** But whenever I became the adjutant general, though, I went up and talked to Senator Byrd and to our elected officials, and I told them my theory that we were vulnerable to terrorists and terrorism and to terrorist attacks within our country. Because everybody knows they can't beat us on a battlefield, then the only way that they can bring destruction on the United States is through terrorist events and to try to destroy our economy and bankrupt us.

Senator Byrd said, "You know, it's funny that you would come to me and talk to me about that. I have been discussing those kinds of things with my staff, and I think you're exactly right." So I went and briefed General Hoyer at the Pentagon and the assistant secretary of defense.

**Sturm:** Did Senator Byrd arrange this?

**Tackett:** No, I set it up myself. I gave him my briefing on what I thought the future would lie and where I thought we should go and what we should do.

He laughed and said, “You know, that’s all good. First off, I don’t think anything like that’ll ever happen, and if it did, we wouldn’t ask the National Guard to do it.”

At that time, General Hoyer, who’s the adjutant general now, he said, “I can’t believe this. You just got me kicked out of the Pentagon.” [laughter]

So when I went and briefed Senator Byrd, he bought in to it, and I told him, I said, “I want to take that tunnel, clean it up, and turn it into a training center so that we can train first responders in America to deal with terrorist attacks or terrorist events. You train as you fight, and we need a training facility.” I said, “Everything that they’ve hit has been transportation or some kind of means.” Of course, the early attack on the World Trade Center, several things that they had been doing all over the country, and then, like I say, the Sarin gas event there in Japan, and I just thought the tunnel would be a good place to put a training facility so that we could try to train the National Guard or America’s first responders militarily and civilian-wise to work together so that the first time that they see each other is not at a terrorist event.

Well, Senator Byrd gave me \$26 million to get that tunnel up, running, and set up everything and get it going.

**Sturm:** Now, when you say he gave it, how did that come about?

**Tackett:** He issued \$26 million.

**Sturm:** He was chair of Appropriations at that time?

**Tackett:** Yes, he was. And it went to the Department of Defense for us to upgrade that tunnel, and there was a contractor hired to get that thing up and running and get it going. We did the first concept of operation in October of 2000, and we finally got it up, got it running, and set up to start training people in it and bringing people in to train. By that time, they were getting Civil Support Teams all across the country in all the states, and I think we had thirty-five teams at that time. Now we’ve got like fifty-seven teams.

**Sturm:** Now, are these teams all military, or are they a combination of military and civilian?

**Tackett:** No, they’re strictly military. They’re Civil Support Teams, a twenty-two-person team that’s trained to detect chemicals to—it’s a terrorist or weapons-of-mass-destruction training team that works in every state now. Like I say, there’s fifty-seven of them. There’s two in California, two in New York, and two, I think, in Texas.

So, September 11, 2001, the Towers were attacked, the Pentagon was attacked, and later that week, the assistant secretary of defense called me up and wanted to hear that briefing again. [laughs]

**Sturm:** Again. Was this about the same time that you were developing the program that you have at Camp Dawson now?

**Tackett:** Yes, sir.

**Sturm:** Can you talk a little bit about that, Camp Dawson, if you would, too, about what was going on there?

**Tackett:** The Robert C. Byrd Regional Training Institute, I had that built to try to do terrorist training and to do all kinds of training.

**Sturm:** Now, at what point did you start that?

**Tackett:** 1997, '98.

**Sturm:** Again, before 2001.

**Tackett:** Oh, yes.

**Sturm:** Long before 2001.

**Tackett:** Yes, sir. We built those facilities up there at Camp Dawson, and so what I did was put West Virginia way out in front of everyone else. Now all the training for the Civil Support Teams, the CERF teams, the HERF teams, is done by what's called the Joint Interagency Training and Education Center, JITEC, and the JITEC is what was being built at Camp Dawson to be a training center for the CERFs, the HERFs, the CSTs, and all of that. It later became even more than that, but at least once every eighteen months now all of the CSTs have to come.

**Sturm:** What are the CSTs?

**Tackett:** Civil Support Teams, twenty-two-member Civil Support Teams. They come to the tunnel to do their evaluation training, and our people at the tunnel conduct it. We also send people to states to train their Civil Support Teams, their HERF teams, their CERFs. These are all weapons-of-mass-destruction teams that America has to deal with terrorist attacks.

So the JITEC, which does all the training for weapons of mass destruction within the continental United States, all that training is done by the West Virginia National Guard for the National Guard Bureau, and I set all that up here in the state and had it all up and going. Now,

other adjutant generals and people have tried to steal some of this training and do it, but they've never been able to catch up with me.

With Senator Byrd's support and help and funding, it kept us so far ahead of everybody that we are the national training center. The tunnel up there is known as the Center for National Response. The JITEC is the teams that train all the first responders from the military and civilian when it comes to terrorist attacks and terrorist events. All of that is done by the West Virginia National Guard.

**Sturm:** Now, Senator Byrd was able to get you federal money for all of these projects. This is not a state-funded initiative.

**Tackett:** No, and now they're funded through the Department of Defense. The Department of Homeland Security funds a lot of our teams that we have that are in the Joint Interagency Training and Education Center. We have teams that go out to every special event, like the Super Bowl or a summit when they have all the leaders come in. They go out and do all the security checks and give it to the Secret Service. And they do all the security checks and everything for the entire country now, and that's all done out of West Virginia with our teams that we have here doing that. They're actually on the payroll for the Department of Homeland Security, but they're military and they go do all that.

**Sturm:** Now, as this was being set up and you were working with Senator Byrd, did this have to go through committees and subcommittees of the Congress, or was he just able as Appropriations chair?

**Tackett:** He had to get all of it approved.

**Sturm:** Did you have to go testify?

**Tackett:** I never did have to testify. I just had to convince him and then he would convince his brothers in the Senate and the House to support it and do it. We had a great many problems getting the Department of Defense to get on board to do all of this. I mean, they just couldn't believe that a state could generate a program that normally would be generated by the Department of Defense and come down to some place to do it. It wouldn't be done in a state and crammed down the throat of the Department of Defense, basically. So we hired contractors to work with the Army staff and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and we hired General Abrams, who was a very well-respected person.

**Sturm:** Creighton Abrams.

**Tackett:** Yes. His company and him and the old Chief Conaway, the chief of the National Guard Bureau, John Conaway, we brought them in and gave them all of our briefings, showed

them what we were doing, and they thought, man, this is fantastic. This is what should be going on.

So we were able to convince the Army staff to support JITEC, and it became an actual unit within the Army, and now it's funded by the Army and it's a unit within the Army and the Army National Guard and the Air National Guard. We have both Army and Air people in there. But it's a unit now recognized by the Department of Defense, and it's funded through Homeland Defense and the Department of Defense.

**Sturm:** And I would say that this is something that very few people who haven't followed your career or Senator Byrd's career or have someone in the Guard know anything about. It's not well known throughout the state.

**Tackett:** I can tell you that not very many people know because I tried to keep a very low profile. Everything that I did, you know, you've got fifty-four adjutant generals across America, and all of them are trying to do something for their states. I mean, it's kind of like a senator being in the Senate. All of them are trying to bring programs or jobs or something back to their state. So I tried to keep a low profile. In the latter years, I started this rebuild program, and I got the Guard into ISO 9000 and Lean Six Sigma Training, to where we got certified in ISO 9000.

**Sturm:** Explain what that is.

**Tackett:** Lean Six Sigma is the business term for learning how to peel the onion back and look at an organization and do it by saving money and doing it to find a better way to do things, and make it more cost-effective and cheaper to do business. So I put hundreds of West Virginia National Guardsmen through Lean Six Sigma Training, and I got green belts and black belts in Lean Six Sigma.

Now we have probably close to 250 maintenance jobs or other jobs, we're taking care of military equipment, and we have a tire program that's over in Kanawha City that saves the federal government \$25 million a year, and it's just a small tire shop. If we could get the whole tire program, we could save \$250 million of the budget for the Department of Defense by doing business the way we do business.

**Sturm:** What do they do?

**Tackett:** They rebuild tires. In other words, what the military did before is, they just go buy wheels, tires, and ship them. What we do is when they, in turn, get damaged, we fix them and then put them on there, and we save sometimes as much as \$1,000 on a tire or a wheel assembly. That one tire shop saved \$25 million last year, and we're putting West Virginians to work here in West Virginia.

**Sturm:** Now how was that funded?

**Tackett:** It's funded by the Department of Defense.

**Sturm:** Was Senator Byrd involved with that?

**Tackett:** Yes, he was, in the beginning, yes. It didn't require any money from Senator Byrd. It just required a little arm-twisting—

**Sturm:** Well, sometimes that's as important as the dollar. [laughs]

**Tackett:** —to get people to come in and do this. So what we did, we built a better mousetrap. We can do stuff twice as cheap as anybody else in the country here in the state of West Virginia because our costs are that much lower than Army depots and everybody else that's out there working and doing this stuff. So we're trying to find a way to save the Department of Defense money.

**Sturm:** And that's so important right now with what's going on in Washington.

**Tackett:** Yes, it is.

**Sturm:** It's important any time, but especially now.

Let's talk about something else I know you're extremely proud of. It's your educational component in the Guard. Tell us a little about what you've done with that, how that was funded and what's going on with that.

**Tackett:** Well, you know, I told you there earlier that when I first became the adjutant general, the very first legislative session that I was the adjutant general, that we were able to steal on the last night of the session a million dollars that went into my education budget to give me the ability to—I had money, but I wasn't paying 100 percent. The million dollars would have put me to where I can pay 100 percent. And I told them that this was a twenty-year investment, and Oshel Craigo, Earl Ray Tomblin, and Lloyd Jackson were the three people on the last night two hours before the end of the session, they transferred a million dollars out of one account into my account.

Well, that was on a Saturday night. I remember Monday morning, I heard General Skaff in there, "I don't know how he did it. You've got people down there that keep stuff like that from happening. How did they do it?"

So Gaston Caperton called me in and he told me, he said, "I don't know how you did it, don't care how you did it, but I tell you, if I hadn't just made you the adjutant general, I'd fire you. You don't come down here and work against my budget." [laughter]

Then I tried to tell him, I said, “But I’m telling you this will do great things for the Guard.”

And he said, “Well, now you come through me to get it done.” [laughter]

So that was the beginning of the Tuition Assistance Program, and it has grown now to where it’s about a 4- to 5-five-million-dollar-a-year project, and we have anywhere from 800 to 1,200 people every year in college, and it’s been that way. We have had as much as 2,000 people in college since that Tuition Assistance Program came about.

I used to recruit for the Guard, and I would go into high schools and talk to parents along with their kids, and I’d say, “You let me have that young man for six years, I’ll get him a college education and I’ll teach him how to live the right kind of life, and I’ll make him successful for the rest of his life. Now, whether he stays in the Guard or not, I’ll make him a better man or a better woman.” So we really started recruiting and got our strength to where we were close to 130 percent strength in the state of West Virginia.

**Sturm:** Talk about your percentage of enlistees who are in college or have degrees.

**Tackett:** Well, right now there’s 43 percent of our Guardsmen have degrees and are working on masters or other degrees, and 13.8 percent of the population of the state of West Virginia have college degrees. In the West Virginia National Guard, it’s 43 percent. But if you go into trade schools and everything else that we’ve done to help people get jobs, and kids, then about 72 percent of our people have higher-education degrees, not necessarily a master’s or a bachelor’s of science, but they have some kind of degree that helps them in jobs and in their lives. So it’s really turned the West Virginia National Guard into the most educated Guard in the nation. I told those three individuals that it was a twenty-year investment, but it didn’t take twenty years to get us to where we’re at today.

**Sturm:** You have higher college-going rates than any school system in the state.

**Tackett:** Yes, sir. Yes, sir.

**Sturm:** Which is phenomenal.

**Tackett:** It really is. I can remember when Lloyd Jackson was the chairman of the Education Committee and he talked about my Tuition Assistance Program and wanted to know what intellect or what level these kids were, wanted to know what was their average scores on the ACT or college exam test and stuff. I took it back to him, and he couldn’t believe the kind of people that we were getting in the Guard. I mean, our average scores on ACTs was like 25, 26 percent, and, you know, 18 gets you into college, 21 gets you the PROMISE Scholarship. Our people were averaging around 24, 25 percent on that, and we had, like, three people who had scored 36, which is a perfect score.

**Sturm:** Better than any school system in the state.

**Tackett:** When I took it and showed it to him, he couldn't believe it. That's when they were working with Bob Wise to do the PROMISE Scholarship. I was against the PROMISE Scholarship because all those kids, I was getting them in the Guard, these smart kids, and they were getting a free college degree through me, but when the PROMISE Scholarship came along, they didn't have to join the Guard to get a free ride to college.

So what I did was talk the legislature into everybody in the Guard who qualified for a PROMISE Scholarship, not only would they get the PROMISE Scholarship, but if the tuition was \$5,000, then we'd write a check to them for \$5,000 to go along with their PROMISE Scholarship. So they got a double scholarship, so that we could try to keep those good, bright young kids coming into the Guard, and it has paid such great dividends for this organization and for the National Guard in the state of West Virginia. That has been, I think, the key to success, and it's not only what that program has done; it's been a generational change. A lot of these kids have been the first one in their families to ever get a college degree, and a lot of them that got their college degrees now have kids in the Guard getting a college degree. So it changed the evolution of their life and it did that generational change in saying that, "I've got a college degree. I'm successful. My kid's going to get a college degree."

So it's really had a distinct effect on communities and families throughout the state of West Virginia because of what we've done with this Tuition Assistance Program. Out of everything I ever accomplished, and, I mean, with Senator Byrd and all the construction projects and everything that we've done, I always say that the thing that I'm the most proud of is the Tuition Assistance Program because of what it does for the kids and what it does for the state. I mean, that, to me, was the greatest contribution that I ever made to the National Guard, was getting that Tuition Assistance Program.

Whenever I started as the adjutant general, I had a \$4 million budget, and when I retired I had a \$21 million budget because of all the construction projects going on, with the tuition assistance, the rebuild, everything that we were doing. We were bringing \$450-500 million of federal money a year to the state of West Virginia for \$20 million.

**Sturm:** Pretty good return on your dollar.

**Tackett:** And it was the best return on anything in state government.

**Sturm:** Absolutely.

**Tackett:** So I was able to continue to talk the governors and the legislature into funding and supporting the Guard and funding this to keep up with Senator Byrd. I mean, Senator Byrd

was getting old, and to get through these construction projects and to make all this stuff happen for the Guard, I had to really stay on the tip of the spear.

Senator Byrd was a really—you had to dot the “i’s” and cross the “t’s.” I knew that, and I made my staff dot every “i,” cross every “t,” and we never ever failed to execute a project on time. There were a lot of people who would get projects for their states, and their states either didn’t have money to match it with state money, or they didn’t have the money to buy the properties to build, and their projects would go two, three, four years, and it would look bad because here they appropriated this money and they can’t spend it.

**Sturm:** Isn’t that the story, though, with so many federal projects? Over schedule and over cost.

**Tackett:** Yes. And every project that I ever took to Senator Byrd, and, like I said, every year we were building. I mean, it was a two-year process. I was out with my people getting property, getting everything done. We had all the “i’s” dotted, the “t’s” crossed. When the money came in, we went out for bid for the projects, and we never failed to execute on time. Senator Byrd, quite frankly, was very impressed, and he’d never seen anybody do those kinds of things. But it truly did put a lot of pressure on my people.

After September 11, 2001, when we were sending all of our units and everybody overseas to fight the wars, I still had all these construction projects going on. My plan was—and we were executing all these projects, two and three a year—to try to get it done and get everything, the i dotted and the t crossed, when you had your whole section gone to war. I had to put new people in there and train them. I mean, it became a real chore, but we never failed to execute, and we got it done right up to the very end.

Senator Byrd and I talked about Martinsburg and Charleston both having C-130s. The first experience I had as an adjutant general with force structure reductions and force structure problems was in 1997, when they came up with the quadrennial defense review and they were going to do away with two National Guard Special Forces battalions, and they chose the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 20<sup>th</sup> Group in Mississippi and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 19<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group in West Virginia.

**Sturm:** Was that different than the base alignment thing that the Pentagon does?

**Tackett:** Yes. The quadrennial review is where they look at their force structure and decide what are they going to do away with.

They decided in the chairs of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Joint Staff, everybody was going to take a cut and they were going to cut. All the time they were cutting, I was adding. I went from 2,900 to 4,700 in the Army Guard. I went from, like, 1,900 to 2,400 in the Air Guard. All the time, that force structure was coming down in the Guard, and I was going the opposite

direction, but I had all this strength and all these people. I mean, 130 percent strength. Other states were out there with 70 and 80 percent strength.

I'd just go to the Guard Bureau and I'd tell them, "Hey, they can't fill that unit, they can't go to war. Put that unit in the state of West Virginia, and I'll get it full strength and get it ready to go to war." And I was able to do that, and with Senator Byrd twisting arms and helping me, we built a terrific organization here in West Virginia.

**Sturm:** How did you and Senator Byrd—you know, a lot of people refer to what you all did as a partnership. How did this come to pass? I mean, you've talked about when you first knew him and what he did for the tunnel and Camp Dawson, but what kind of strategy did you all do, or did you do any to sit down to decide what you were going to do for West Virginia through your offices in the Guard?

**Tackett:** I had the program laid out, the plans. I went up and briefed him and his staff, and he bought off on it.

**Sturm:** This is what you had developed as the assistant adjutant general and in all these other positions.

**Tackett:** Once I became the adjutant general, I got my plans together in early '96 and '97, and first I had to convince Cecil Underwood, who was the governor and who kept me on as the adjutant general, and he said, "That's a great plan. I totally support that."

I said, "Well, that's going to require you putting some more money in my budget. But I'm going up to brief Senator Byrd and our delegation in Washington to see if I can't get them to help me."

So I went up and briefed Alan Mollohan, Nick Joe Rahall, Byrd, and Rockefeller, of course. The person that was in the position to do all the help was Senator Byrd.

**Sturm:** He was Appropriations.

**Tackett:** Well, he was the chairman of the Appropriation Committee. He was the second-ranking Democrat on Senate Armed Services behind Levin of Michigan, and Byrd, I mean, he was on every important committee. He could start a project and nobody could stop it. He was on every committee. He was on Appropriations. He was on Authorization. You know, you had to authorize a project and then appropriate it. Well, he'd authorize it, he'd appropriate it, and nobody could stop it. You know what I'm saying?

**Sturm:** I know what you're saying, yes.

**Tackett:** I mean, he could do it all, and he was so anxious to help West Virginia and especially the Guard. I mean, he had a soft spot in his heart for soldiers and for airmen, and he wanted to help me make all this stuff happen.

Well, the Army and the Air Force have what they call a FYDP. That's a Five-Year Defense Plan for construction. Well, the McCain rule in the Senate is that it has to be on the FYDP for you to be able to bring funding forward. In other words, let's say 2013 projects are funded, but you've got '14, '15, '16, '17, '18, and if it's on the FYDP, that five-year plan, your senator can reach and get a project from '18 and move it up to '14 and fund it if he can put the extra money in there to do that. And that's what I did with Senator Byrd.

I had him every year get those, but what we had to do, we had to work as a team to get those projects on a FYDP, because the National Guard Bureau and the Army and Air Force staff, when you take fifty-four states and territories, and you only have like \$50 million worth of construction, and so that doesn't go very far in your five years. That's \$250 million worth of projects. We would talk them into putting our projects three, four, five years out in the future plans. Then he would just reach and grab them and put them in that year and fund them.

**Sturm:** And fund them and appropriate the money.

**Tackett:** Yes. So that's what enabled us to get all this done, and so we had to have a lot of meetings. Like General Clyde Vaughn's meeting there, that meeting was set up because of the Special Forces and construction projects being on a FYDP. Byrd had to convince him it was the right thing to do and he needed to be supporting me and what I wanted to do. And so he did, and he had his staff do it. But if you put it in those out years and you got your project pulled forward, then whatever project they had to take out could be put back in so it didn't hurt anybody, because so many states didn't have the state money to match the 75-25 match to get armories built.

But the state of West Virginia, because of my relationship with the governors and the legislature here, they gave me the money. I had the money. I could do any project Byrd wanted to do, and, like I said, we stayed right on it all the way.

**Sturm:** Let's talk about the governors for just a minute here and how they play into this. Counting what you did as a boxing commissioner for Rockefeller, you actually served directly under six governors.

**Tackett:** Yes.

**Sturm:** Now, with all this going on and changes in political parties, changes in political philosophies, what kind of line did you have to walk? Because I think the adjutant general, if I'm not mistaken, serves at the will of the governor.

**Tackett:** Will and pleasure of the governor, and normally anytime there's a change in governors, there's a change in adjutant generals, because it's such a political position. I tried to take politics totally out of the Guard and say, "You know, when people sign on the line and say they're willing to give their lives for our freedom, that's way beyond politics. We need to form an organization that looks out for these kids and does what's right, and leave politics totally out of it."

Whenever I came in, I told everybody in the organization, "I'm the only politician in the West Virginia National Guard. Everybody else is soldiers and airmen. You let me worry about politics. You worry about getting ready to go to combat and doing your jobs as military personnel."

So I didn't promote people or put people in positions that couldn't do the job. I promoted people who were the best leaders and the best people to do the job, so if that unit went to war, your son or daughter was going with someone that knew what they were doing, that would bring them back home alive. And I got a reputation for doing the right thing, and it just followed me.

So when the governors would have their people, you know, they always have these committees to select who's going to be their department heads and all that, and when they'd talk to the people and stuff, they would say, "Hey, this guy is really sincere. He's trying to do the right things for the right reasons, and he takes care of his people, and he doesn't let politics play into what's going on."

So when Underwood got elected, Steve Canterbury was the guy that interviewed me to see if I was going to stay on or not, and I told Steve my plans and what I planned on doing with the Guard. He briefed Underwood and told him that he felt like that I was the right person to stay in this job. But at the time, when Gaston put me in this job, I was still the vice chairman of the Democrat Party. So when Underwood got elected, I was still the vice chairman of the Democrat Party and a Republican governor. So his staff, his chief of staff, Phillips and a few others said, "Hey, you can't keep this guy. He's the vice chairman of the damn Democrat Party."

So Canterbury said, "Hey, he's the right guy for the job. Don't care what he is or does, he's the right guy."

So Underwood called me up and said, "You know, I want to keep you on as my adjutant general, but there's something you've got to do."

I said, "I know exactly what you're talking about, and it's done. I resign. The only reason I continued to keep it was in case I lost my job as the adjutant general. I want to continue to work with the party and do this thing."

So I resigned as the vice chairman of the Democrat Party, and then became the—and I'll tell you, Cecil Underwood was a Republican and he kept me as a Democrat, but he probably

treated me the best of any governor that I served. He truly supported my plans, gave me the money I needed for the education program, for the construction program. Jim Teets became his chief of staff later on in that term, and I had probably the best relationship with Jim Teets and Cecil Underwood than I have any administration, whether Caperton, Wise, Manchin, Tomblin. I had the best relationship with Governor Underwood and his chief of staff than anyone else that I'd had.

But I always had a great relationship with the legislature, because I was vice chairman of the Democrat Party for twelve years, and so I knew most of them, and I had donated money to their campaigns and I wasn't even in their districts, and I did all that with the intention of trying to build a relationship with those people so that when I became the adjutant general that I didn't just sit up here and not get anything done. I wanted to be able to go to them and be able to get the monies and the things that I needed to make the Guard successful.

When Senator Byrd signed on and started making all these things happen, I mean, everything I told the legislature down here, I mean, it happened and it came true. A lot of people said, "Well, you might get one facility, but you won't get three or four." But it just kept happening and happening and happening.

Then we redid the base in Martinsburg and spent \$300 million and put all that infrastructure up there, you know, and redid the base here in Charleston, completely rebuilt Camp Dawson; \$129 million worth of projects are just now getting completed at Camp Dawson; \$300 million in Martinsburg; over \$100 million here in Charleston Air Base. Then when you look at all the armories, I mean, the armory in Preston County there at Camp Dawson, the armories at Millwood, the armory in Williamstown, the armory in Lewisburg, and Glen Jean, Summersville, Fairmont, Buckhannon. You look and they're all over the state.

I didn't really think anything about it until Creighton Abrams was sitting with me last year up at Camp Dawson and he said, "You know, you really don't know and understand what the hell you've done."

I said, "What do you mean?"

He said, "You and Senator Byrd have done something for West Virginia that no other adjutant general in the history of this nation has ever done. You completely rebuilt the National Guard in the state of West Virginia, and you've done all these projects and you got all these programs. Nobody has ever in the history of the National Guard done what you've done, and you don't realize it."

And I don't because when you're in combat every day doing all these things and making them, you don't think about what it really is. But if you go down to Eleanor and you see the new maintenance facility that caused and created the ISO 9000 and the Lean Six Sigma training, and then you go down to where that armory was in Point Pleasant, there was thirty-two employees

there when it was the old maintenance facility. Well, now the new maintenance facility has got about fifty-six employees, but I've got fifty-eight employees doing rebuild work in that facility that I left in Point Pleasant.

So I'm taking all these facilities and providing jobs for the community all over the state. When you look at Summersville and Millwood there in Jackson County, and all these armories are having events almost every weekend that are bringing economic development to the cities and the towns and places all over the state, it's become an economic—Joe Manchin made the statement, he said, “Well, hell, you did more for economics than my economic development people.” But it was just a part of trying to build the Guard in the right direction.

**Sturm:** Can you put a number, approximate number, on the amount of money that the partnership you and Senator Byrd formed brought into the state of West Virginia?

**Tackett:** Well, people just don't have any idea. Whenever I came here back in 1995, for the whole state of West Virginia, we got \$87 million in federal funds for the state.

**Sturm:** That's total.

**Tackett:** Total.

**Sturm:** Not just National Guard. That's the total amount of federal money.

**Tackett:** Total. Total. We had 971 full-time employees, and we had 4,900 total members in the National Guard. Well, when I left, we had 2,700 full-time employees. We were bringing close to \$500 million a year to the state in federal dollars, and we had 6,800 National Guard. So I came from 4,900 to 6,800. When the rest of the whole nation was going down, I kept going up, which is almost impossible to do, but I did it with the help of Senator Byrd and with my staying on as the chief of the National Guard Bureau.

I mean, I was very—well, arrogant, I guess you would say. [laughs] That's how other adjutant generals would look at it. If states were out there and they had real weak strength and they didn't have combat readiness, I mean, I forced the National Guard to do something about it. You can't go and fight America's wars if you don't have the people that are trained and qualified to do it.

So you've got to rearrange the states and put them in the states that are performing and take them away from the states that are not. So, I mean, I pissed a lot of adjutant generals off. I mean, because of all the help that Senator Byrd gave me, I mean, I got the lion's share of every MilCon [Military Construction] budget from the time I took over as the adjutant general until the time I retired.

I'll never forget Gordon Stump, who was the adjutant general in Michigan, and he was like president of the Adjutant Generals Association, and he had Carl Levin, who's the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and we were in a meeting down in Little Rock, Arkansas, and all fifty-four adjutant generals were there and most of the Joint Staff, big general officers, and he was pissed because I had just gotten like \$70 million worth of MilCon projects, and the whole rest of the fifty-four states and territories only got like 48, and I had \$70-some million in construction.

He said, "You hog up everything. I mean, you take it all."

And I listened to it for about five minutes and finally I just said, "I've had all I'm going to take from you or anybody else. Let me tell you something. I'll be damned if I'm going to go to Senator Byrd and tell him to build armories in the state of Michigan. By god, you've got the top senator on the Senate Armed Services Committee. Goddamn it, you can do the same thing I do with him. Why don't you get off your ass and do what you're supposed to do, and then you can do these projects?"

So I actually started teaching classes at adjutant generals' conferences on how to do MilCon projects and how to make the system work, because really, most of them were not political; they were general officers. I was a political animal.

**Sturm:** Hey, listen, you came from Kanawha County. You had to be to survive. [laughs]

**Tackett:** Well, Cabin Creek. [laughs] I was a political animal and I knew how the political process worked, and so I made it work to the advantage of the West Virginia National Guard. A lot of adjutant generals didn't understand how to do that and how to make that happen, so I actually started training. When we'd have our national conferences and stuff, they would give me an hour every conference to talk about MilCon and how you make it happen, what you have to do with your elected officials to get them to add congressional adds. So we went from like \$50 million a year to up to about \$354 million a year because they were getting all these add-ons from their delegates. They could have done it all along; they just didn't know how to make the system work. So I taught them what they had to do to make that work.

**Sturm:** After you got what you needed. [laughs]

**Tackett:** Yes, exactly.

**Sturm:** Well, Senator Byrd, to paraphrase him, he was quoted at one point as saying that his goal had been to be the billion-dollar senator from West Virginia, but then he met Allen Tackett and now he was going to be the \$2 billion senator. Is that a fair appraisal of what you guys did?

**Tackett:** Yes, sir. I mean, really when you get down to the bottom line, just in military construction projects, he brought \$750 million. But when you look at the units, the full-time employees, and the amount of money coming into the state every year and did every year, like I said, when you started in '95 with 971 full-time employees, \$87 million total budget, and you increase that to where it's \$450-500 million a year, I mean, you take ten, fifteen years of that, and that's billions of dollars.

**Sturm:** Absolutely it is.

**Tackett:** I mean, he was more than just a billion-dollar senator with me. I mean, when he left the Majority Leader's position in the Senate and took over as the Appropriation chairman, he promised to bring a billion dollars to the state. Well, through me, he probably brought 3 to 4 billion in military construction, or not just construction, but military. Then if you put all the new helicopters, airplanes, tanks, I mean, we worked every angle to make sure West Virginia got the right kind of equipment to be able to do our jobs. I mean, if we were called to war, we weren't going to go with World War II equipment. We were going to go with modern equipment to where our people could do the job and be counted on to do the job, and he made sure that that happened.

So when you really figure up all of that, I would hate to even guess how much money that he put into the West Virginia National Guard, not only through the facilities, but the equipment, full-time manning, projects like the tunnel, our rebuild, the JITEC. I mean, these are all things that he helped me make happen. You know, you go from \$87 million to \$450-500 million a year, that's a big jump.

**Sturm:** Let's talk about the Air Guard for just a minute. Were you the adjutant general when then C-130s came into West Virginia, or did that predate you?

**Tackett:** The C-130s were programmed for West Virginia, and the first ones came in '95.

**Sturm:** The year you were actually appointed.

**Tackett:** The year that I was appointed, I was up there when the first C-130s came to Martinsburg, the H-3s, and we got twelve of them. We got three or four there in '95 and three or four, I think, in '96 and some in '97. But we ended up with twelve H-3s, which at that time was the best C-130 in the American Air Force.

But here we were with two C-130s units, and BRACs [base realignments and closures] going on and quadrennial defense reviews going on. I went up and met with Senator Byrd, and I told him, I said, "I'm really nervous about having two of the same kind of units in this small state."

**Sturm:** That's where I wanted to go with this, was how we got from Point A to Point B.

**Tackett:** In a small state like West Virginia. I said, “We have got to get into another air frame or another weapons system for the Air National Guard in West Virginia, and the best place and the only place we can really do it is in Martinsburg.”

**Sturm:** At that point, was there some discussion that Martinsburg was going to totally lose the unit?

**Tackett:** Well, not at that point. Not at that point. We first thought about trying to change from C-130s up there to C-17s, which was the new transport plane. The director of the Air National Guard at that time was an old New York Guardsman, and he went and talked to Senator Byrd about C-5s. He had a C-5 unit in New York, at Stewart in New York. The C-5s brought us about 350 full-time jobs and built the biggest infrastructure. I mean, it was the largest plane in the Air Force. So you were going to build an infrastructure that would support any aircraft that the military has, and you would have all this infrastructure there. If anything happened, it's still there for the state of West Virginia. So we decided to go with C-5s, built the infrastructure, and put the C-5s in Martinsburg.

Well, before we got to that point in 2005, they had a BRAC, and the BRAC had Charleston. Now, before the BRAC ever came out—

**Sturm:** Explain what the BRAC is.

**Tackett:** BRAC is the base closures. It's where the Department of Defense looks at their military infrastructure and they determine what they want to get rid of, and it's a base closure, is what it amounts to, base closures.

I was sitting here in my office, and they had formed a BRAC Committee. Principi was the chairman of the committee, and they named the other members, some of the members, not all of them, and the BRAC hadn't come out yet. Well, I got a call from a good friend of mine that worked in the Pentagon, and these guys are sworn to secrecy, but still he called me, and he said, “Allen, you need to be worried about the 130<sup>th</sup> Airlift Wing.”

I said, “What do you mean?”

He said, “Well, I can't tell you anything other than the fact that you know there's a BRAC coming, and if I was you, I'd be worried about the 130<sup>th</sup> Airlift Wing. That's all I can tell you.”

I hung up the phone, and I called Senator Byrd's office, and I got Terry Sauvain and Senator Byrd on a conference call with me, and I told him, I said, “Senator, there's no doubt in my mind from the call that I got, and I can't say who it was because he'd get in trouble because he's not allowed to give that information out, but the 130<sup>th</sup> Airlift Wing is going to be on this BRAC. You know, we've still got C-130s in Martinsburg. Even though we're transitioning over

to C-5s, we've still got two C-130 Wings, and they're going to try to take Charleston out. They're going to BRAC it."

He said, "I know Principi. I'll just call him over here and talk to him."

So he called Principi. Principi came in to see him. This is before the BRAC ever came out. And he said, "You know, I've got two really good units in West Virginia, and we're transitioning to C-5s in Martinsburg, and we've got C-130s in Charleston. Both those units are very high in strength and readiness. They're top units and they're really good units. Now, if one of those units were to fall on that BRAC, I want you to make a commitment to me that you'll come and see firsthand what those units are and what they're made of." And Principi promised him that he'd do that.

Well, when the BRAC came out, the 130<sup>th</sup> was on there, and they had on there, unless you lost 3,000 jobs or—I mean, there was a lot of statistics that said the BRAC Commission wouldn't come to visit the states unless there was—like Groton, Connecticut, was going to lose like 30,000 jobs.

**Sturm:** Submarines.

**Tackett:** Yes, submarines. And places like that they were going to go because of the large impact it was going to have on the communities. Well, because Principi made a promise to Byrd that he would come to West Virginia, he kept that promise, and we were able to give him a briefing. Well, to start with, one of the things was that in the BRAC report that we could only park eight aircraft, and it was not that productive for the Air Force to have less than twelve. They needed twelve to sixteen airframes at any one place, and you could only park eight in Charleston, so that base really wasn't viable to be a base. Well, that base cost the Air Force a dollar a year, is all that it cost, and it was one of the least expensive airbases in the country.

**Sturm:** Now, how did it just cost a dollar a year? Explain that.

**Tackett:** Well, the Airport Authority leases it to us for a dollar a year.

So when Principi came in here, I had fourteen airplanes on the ramp up here. When he flew in, the first thing I showed him, I says, "Well, now, if you look at that report, it says that we can't park but eight airplanes on this ramp. Now, if you'll look and count, you'll see that there's fourteen, and I've got two in the hangars. So that's sixteen. So that tells you to start with that this BRAC is not [accurate]—the figures and the calculations are not correct."

Then I took and showed him four or five other things that were in the BRAC that said that's why it needed to be BRAC'ed that were totally false. Then that wing was the actual wing that planned the Left Hook operations for Schwarzkopf in the '90-91 Gulf War.

**Sturm:** That's the Hail Mary that he did, yes.

**Tackett:** Yes, that Left Hook, they're the wing that supported that. They were the lead wing, and they did all the planning and the operations for that whole exercise from an Air Force standpoint. They had been superior in all of their ORI inspections, Operation Readiness Inspections. Their strength was way up, better than any unit in the country, practically. Everything that could be good was there, and we got to brief and show that to him. Our comment was how could this unit be on the BRAC when it cost the military less and they're getting more bang for their dollar than any place in the country, and this is a unit that actually led the most important part of the Gulf War.

Well, there was a Navy captain, which you know is a colonel, that was on that staff, that BRAC staff, and he really took a liking to me and to the 130<sup>th</sup> Airlift Wing, and every time they had a meeting, no matter where it was, I was there and I was testifying to the BRAC commissioners and to the BRAC that it was wrong, and I was trying to defend them.

Senator Byrd was working behind the scenes, along with all of the rest of our elected officials, and when it got time for the BRAC report to come out, the final report, a lot of the states that had BRAC units that were BRAC'ed were suing the federal government and saying that they don't have the authority to BRAC a National Guard base because it's under the control of the governor, and the governor is the only one that can say it goes or it doesn't, not the Department of Defense.

Well, that was kicked out later, but I thought, well, maybe I better file suit and do that. So I called up and I talked to this Navy captain, and I said, "You know, a lot of the states are filing suits to try to beat this BRAC through the courts. I'm ready to go to my attorney general and try to file suit on behalf of the 130<sup>th</sup> Airlift Wing."

He said, "Well, General, if I was you, I'd wait until this report comes out. I don't think I'd do that."

I immediately got on the telephone and I called Senator Byrd. I said, "Senator Byrd, I feel positive that he was trying to tell me in a roundabout way that we have saved this base."

Sure enough, when they did the report, you know, Byrd was down there listening to the report, and the 130<sup>th</sup> was saved. I mean, all they wanted at the time, the Air Force wanted to steal those modern airplanes that Senator Byrd had bought for the state of West Virginia and take them down to Pope Air Force Base so that the Air Force wouldn't have to buy other airplanes to put there to do it. That's what they wanted. They wanted to steal our airplanes. It wasn't a matter that this base wasn't relevant. It was that they wanted those airplanes down there to where the active duty would have them rather than the Guard. The BRAC Commission saw through that, and they saved our airplanes.

**Sturm:** Now, I've seen a picture of you and Senator Byrd on the stage with you punting the BRAC Commission report. Was that when this happened? Tell us a little bit about that.

**Tackett:** Well, we had a meeting and brought all of our elected officials and brought everybody into the hangar up here in Charleston at the airbase because of this BRAC report, to try to formulate a plan to fight the BRAC and to try to save the base. Byrd had his BRAC report, which is a big, thick report, and he had it there, and he threw that thing. He was trying to make a point, and he threw it down on the stage, and he kicked at it a couple of times. Joe Manchin was sitting beside of me, and he said, "Get up there and kick that for Senator Byrd. You go up and kick that."

I said, "You don't want me to do that."

He said, "That's an order. By god, I'm the governor. I'm your boss. That's an order. Get up there."

So I got up there and I kicked that, and when I did, it came loose and the papers just went, I mean, way up in the air, and they got a picture of that.

**Sturm:** I saw the picture.

**Tackett:** And that picture went worldwide. We had guys that were over in Germany and other places in the Middle East, and everybody, everybody saw that picture. So, I mean, I became an instant non-friend to Rumsfeld, who was secretary of defense. [laughs]

**Sturm:** Since we're having a little levity here, I mentioned when I introduced you that you were the "greatest general since Hannibal." Tell us a little bit about that title and how that came to be.

**Tackett:** Well, Senator Byrd bestowed that upon me. He, as you well know and everybody knew, was a great historian. I mean, he studied the Roman Empire and all of the great generals and all that. In his opinion, the greatest general that ever served in ancient times was Hannibal, and he talked about Hannibal's feats and how he took armies that didn't speak the same languages and was able to lead and conquer almost the whole world at that time, across the Alps with the elephants, and how he got along so well with all the people. Even though he had different sects of people, he was able to be their leader, and they had so much respect for him.

Well, he had been to several events with me with the National Guard, and he was so impressed with my ability to know almost everybody in the Guard and know their families, know their children. When I'd introduce him to them, I'd tell him about their history, and he was just so impressed with my knowledge of my people and the way I treated my people and my ability to get things done and to be able to dot the "i's" and cross the "t's" and get things done that nobody had ever been able to do, and he said, "You know, you're the greatest general since

Hannibal,” and it just stuck. And every time he would talk about me, whether it would be on the floor of the Senate or wherever, he would refer to me as the greatest general since Hannibal.

**Sturm:** I heard him do it two or three times in public speeches, so I know it was widespread.

**Tackett:** As a matter of fact, when he got the West Virginian of the Century, he referred to me as the greatest general since Hannibal down there in front of the state legislature and all of their delegates and everybody there. But he just kept that phrase.

He and I spoke often at home, not so much at work, and we’d talk about our families and things that we’d done in our lives and things we’d liked to have done, just friend talk. He really got to like me, and, I mean, he made the statement to me on more than one occasion that he would have been proud to have been my father.

**Sturm:** So you consider yourself a personal friend as well as a political ally of Senator Byrd.

**Tackett:** Oh, very much so, yes.

**Sturm:** Did you all socialize together? Did you do things together?

**Tackett:** No. He was in Washington. We went to some events together when he’d come to the state. I would always go to his hotel room with him and his wife and my wife and like that. But as far as going out and socializing, Byrd was never a socialite.

**Sturm:** I’ve had a number of people tell me that he had very few close friends, and most of his friends and acquaintances were political allies. But you would categorize—

**Tackett:** I think that he looked at me as one of the best friends he had, and I looked at him as the same. We really did love each other. I mean, no ifs, ands.

**Sturm:** I want you now to talk a little bit now about what you told me coming over here, about when he was named the West Virginian of the Century by the state in 2001.

**Tackett:** Well, that particular year, I’m trying to think what took place, but Ted Stevens from Alaska, the state of Alaska had bestowed that phrase onto Ted Stevens, and it was like we were going from the twentieth century to the twenty-first century. I talked to Terry Sauvain, I said, “Terry, there’s no way Ted Stevens has done any more for Alaska than Robert Byrd has done for the state of West Virginia. If there’s anybody that deserves to have that title, Senator Byrd does.”

So I went to the governor and to the leadership of the House and the Senate. We put a resolution together, and they all agreed. I mean, it was unanimous between everybody. Nobody thought anything about it until I brought it to their attention, but they all agreed it should be done and that he was the right guy for that, to have that name. I think the newspapers kind of frowned and said, "Well, who are they to choose who the Man of the Century should be?" But they did, and he came in. And he had told me on many occasions that that was probably one of the proudest moments of his life.

**Sturm:** I was fortunate enough to be there that day, and it looked to me like he was ready to pop.

**Tackett:** He told me that that probably was one of the best awards that he had ever won in his life. He used to talk to me a lot about that had he not been a member of the Ku Klux Klan when he was young, that he could have probably been president of the United States.

**Sturm:** Did he talk to you any about the Klan, his membership in it, other than to—

**Tackett:** He would just say that back when he was growing up, that the Klan was an organization that most of the whites in West Virginia belonged to, and he just got into it like a social club and didn't really participate a lot in it or anything, you know. But he said it was the biggest mistake he ever made in his life and it probably cost him the presidency. And I'd say it probably did.

**Sturm:** Now, someone, and I don't know who it was, said that the Klan membership was where he first began to realize he had some leadership abilities. Did he ever talk anything about that?

**Tackett:** No.

**Sturm:** I can't remember where I read that, but—

**Tackett:** He didn't talk hardly at all about the Klan or anything like that. I mean, he just showed it as being kind of a regret in his life that he did that. But he did tell me that by being a member of the Klan, it encouraged him to run for political office, because there were so many people that were in it.

**Sturm:** Okay. I was going to ask you [about that]. That was coming later.

**Tackett:** That it kind of influenced him to run for the House of Delegates from his area up there, because he was in the Klan and—

**Sturm:** Was he still in the Klan when he ran for House of Delegates?

**Tackett:** I don't think he was, but I think that's what encouraged him to get involved in politics, or at least he kind of led me to think maybe that, you know.

**Sturm:** He wasn't in the state legislature for very long. He was in the House, I think, for maybe two terms and the Senate for one.

**Tackett:** I think he served two terms in the House and didn't complete his term in the Senate.

**Sturm:** But he was elected to the Senate.

**Tackett:** He was elected to the Senate, and then he had three terms in the House of Representatives, Congress.

**Sturm:** I was going to ask you, did he ever talk with you about what made him decide to run for Congress, to give up his seat in the Senate, in the state Senate?

**Tackett:** I'm trying to think. I think somebody who was the congressman decided to run for something else, and it left a seat open, and he just decided to try to run for it and do that and won.

**Sturm:** Now, since you've had a lot of discussions with him which were not political, they were the personal kinds of things, can you talk a little bit about how Senator Byrd might have been different personally than he was politically, or was he the same man?

**Tackett:** Oh, I think Senator Byrd was the same, whether he was in politics or at home. He was the same man. I mean, he may have gotten on the floor of the Senate and filibustered and done those things, but from a standpoint of the man he was and who he was, he was the same no matter where he was at. I mean, he didn't change anything he was doing anywhere. Well, other than maybe for Erma. [laughs] You know, Erma was always—he always told me that she always put him in his place.

**Sturm:** I've heard him say that.

**Tackett:** I mean, he told me that. He said, "Every time that I got a little bit too big for my britches, she'd always put me in my place." [laughs]

**Sturm:** Now, you say he was the same, and yet when you look at his record, he voted against the Civil Rights Bill in 1964. He was a proponent of the war in Vietnam, but later wrote the War Powers Act and was the most vocal critic of Bush's invasion of Iraq. To what do you attribute the change in his attitude over the years? Because in his later years, he was even given very, very high scores by the NAACP.

**Tackett:** Yes.

**Sturm:** What happened here?

**Tackett:** Well, I think it's a matter of as you go through life and life's lessons, you learn from mistakes that you make and you read more and you get better acquainted with the facts of what's going on, and you make better decisions. I mean, it's called experience.

**Sturm:** Do you think, though, that basically his belief system – his belief structure remained the same throughout his career?

**Tackett:** I think his belief structure was the same, and I think because of his ability to absorb more and more knowledge and more and more experience and get to see—you know, when you stay as long as he did and you get to make decisions and see how those decisions turn out, then it goes in your memory bank, and when you're faced with that kind of situation again in the future, you will make better decisions because you learn from the mistakes you made in the past. And I think that that's exactly how Senator Byrd was.

Senator Byrd was educating himself every day of his life up there in the Senate and by reading. I mean, he wasn't a guy that watched television. He was a guy that opened books and read and, in turn, did those things. It was strictly to educate [himself and teach himself to make better] decisions. I think his experience in seeing how those votes turned out and how what happened turned out let him learn from the mistakes he made, and it helped him make better decisions in his later years and in life.

You know, I have worked with people in my lifetime that would make the same mistake every day of their life and not learn from it. Senator Byrd was the kind of guy who learned every day from his mistakes and got smarter. And the thing that made Senator Byrd so great is that he didn't give up. He continued to fight for what he believed in, and he would outwork and outsmart anybody else that was in that body up there. I mean, there were many nights that I would be here in my office talking to Terry Sauvain at nine and ten o'clock at night, and he and Senator Byrd and the staff would still be there working on issues, and everybody else was out partying in Washington, going to events. But he would be there at the Capitol in his office with his staff working and finding ways to get around legislation or rules or things that were keeping him from doing what he wanted to do for the state of West Virginia.

I'm telling you, he knew the rules of the House. He knew the rules of the Senate. He knew everything about how legislation was passed and how to get things done. There's never been anybody that's ever served in Washington that had a clearer understanding of the rules of the House and the Senate than Robert C. Byrd. He designed himself around the Constitution and the rules, and he would use those to outsmart his opponents.

I mean, he learned from his mistakes early on, and he became better and better as he got older and older, and he kept that knowledge. I mean, like I said, he was the kind of guy that learned from his mistakes, and he didn't make those same mistakes again. Where a lot of people make the same mistakes over and over and over, Byrd didn't do that. I think he's the smartest and brightest statesman to ever serve the United States of America, and somewhere somehow some historian somewhere will catch on to this and print that.

**Sturm:** Hopefully at some point part of what we're saying now will come to the attention of some of the historians who are doing research on him.

**Tackett:** There has never been anyone who served in the Senate that was able to master the rules and the system and to utilize it to help his state than what Senator Byrd did for the state of West Virginia.

**Sturm:** Let's talk a little bit about when you were the vice chair of the state Democratic committee and Senator Byrd and the elections that took place then. There are those people who have said that Senator Byrd frequently did not see eye-to-eye with the state Democratic party and its goals. Did you find this to be true or not?

**Tackett:** Well, Senator Byrd had higher standards. He probably had the highest standards of any politician that I've ever seen or known. I mean, Byrd didn't like dirty politics and he didn't like to criticize and talk bad about other people. I mean, Byrd tried to look at the good in people rather than the bad, and there were politicians that he disagreed with and didn't like their style of life. He tried to live the right life with the Lord and for his family, and he kind of expected other people who were going to represent the people of the state of West Virginia to do the same thing.

**Sturm:** Was he willing to endorse other candidates who met his particular criteria?

**Tackett:** He endorsed a lot of people that met that criteria or he felt like they did. There was a lot of people that he didn't endorse.

**Sturm:** Now there are also people who say that during his campaigns, his campaigns for the US Senate were sort of parallel to the rest of the campaign that the state Democratic party was running in the state, that he had his own mechanism, his own supporters, his own fundraising, and he did his and let the state Democratic party do theirs. Is that a pretty fair evaluation?

**Tackett:** Yes, yes it is. He had his own people throughout the state. I guess probably one of the things that was more emotional to me than probably anything else is when Senator Byrd decided to run for a ninth term, there had never been anybody in the history of the United States of America ever run for a ninth term in the Senate. It was the very first time it ever happened, and it's never happened since.

**Sturm:** Absolutely.

**Tackett:** And he called me and talked to me—it was on a Sunday—at home. He said, “You know, I’m going to make the announcement that I’m going to run for my ninth term, and I want you to be the man to introduce me and to be a part of history with me.” Of all the people that he could have chosen, I mean, Senator Rockefeller or Congressman Rahall or Congressman Mollohan or Governor Manchin, of all the people that he could have chosen to do that, he chose me, and he wanted me to be in my uniform. He said, “You’re the greatest general since Hannibal, and I want Hannibal to introduce me for my ninth term.”

**Sturm:** That’s fantastic.

**Tackett:** And I told him, I said, “You know, there’s laws that prevent me from being in political events in uniform. I’d do anything for you, and you know that, but it’s probably going to cause some hard feelings from some people and stuff, and it may cause a little bit of stink.” [laughs]

He said, “Well, if you don’t want to do it, you don’t have to. But I want you.”

I said, “No, I want to do it and I will do it and I’ll be in uniform.” [laughs] And I did, and then there was an IG [Inspector General] complaint filed.

**Sturm:** So there was some stink after. [laughs]

**Tackett:** Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, made a lot of papers.

**Sturm:** Did he help you with that?

**Tackett:** Well, I’m sure he did. He never told me he did. But the investigation was confirmed that I was in uniform at a political event and performed a political—

**Sturm:** Couldn’t very well deny it, could you? [laughs]

**Tackett:** No, I mean, I was there in black and white in uniform. But the chief of staff of the Army wrote and said, “You were found guilty of this violation. Don’t wear your uniform at political events. In six months this’ll be removed from your file, and nobody will ever know it happened.”

**Sturm:** Except all those people who saw it on TV. [laughter] Talking about his announcement, I interviewed a couple months ago Reverend Ernest Lyles in Shepherdstown, who I think he brought with him. He’s a black minister who I think did the benediction and the invocation at the announcement, and he was absolutely thrilled to death that he had picked him,

which looks to me like it says something about Senator Byrd's racial attitudes, that he was willing to do that.

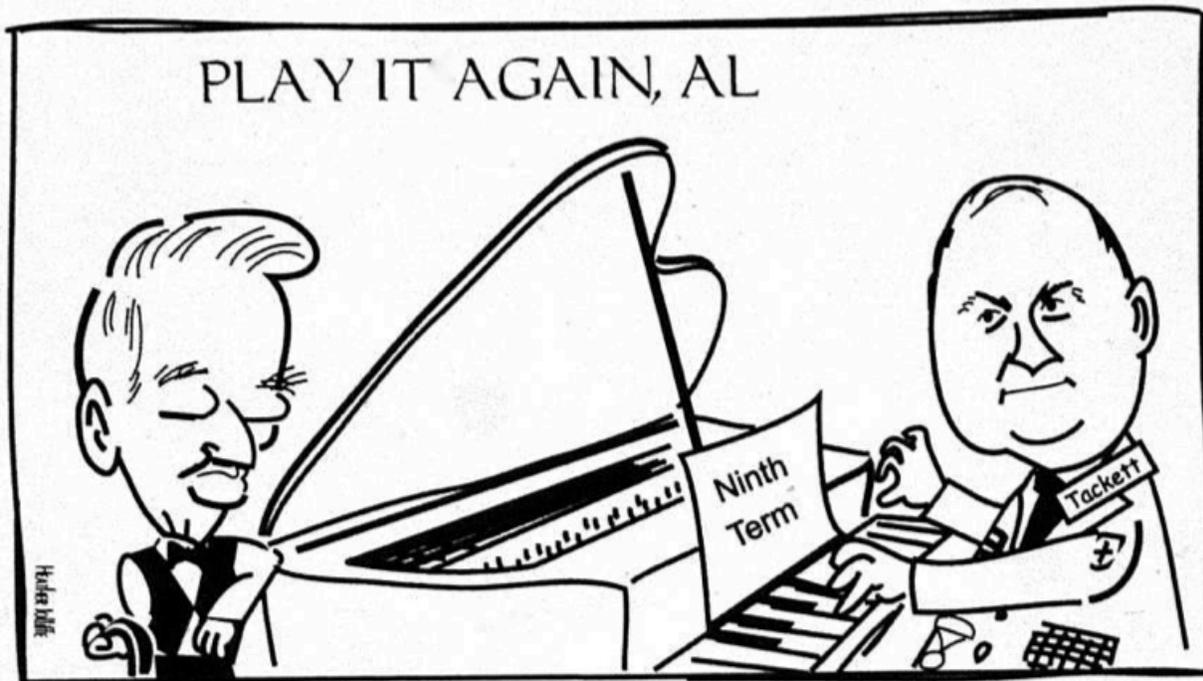
**Tackett:** Exactly. Yes, sir. I thought I brought it, but I evidently left it at home; I have a little newspaper article from the Martinsburg newspaper. It had me playing a piano in it, and it had Senator Byrd up by the piano, and it says, "Play it again, Al."

**Sturm:** I'd like to see that.

**Tackett:** And it had "Ninth term." I thought I brought it. Maybe it's out there in the car, but I thought I brought it. But it said, "Play it again, Al." It was the ninth term, and I was playing the piano with my two stars on. [laughs]

**Sturm:** That's something we need to have, so if we don't have it now, I'd like to get it from you.

**Tackett:** Well, I might be able to go home and bring it back to you, because I thought I brought it. I thought it was part of what I brought, but I don't see it here.



*The Journal*, October 2, 2005, A6.

**Sturm:** A lot of people have said that Senator Byrd was the "King of Pork," and I guess he really was. How do you feel about that title for him?

**Tackett:** He was proud of that. I mean, to him, that's what he was elected and sent to Washington to do, to take care of the people of West Virginia, and it took so much more money to take care of the state of West Virginia because of our topography. I mean, to build roads in Indiana or Arizona or somewhere where it's flat, you just lay the gravel and put the asphalt or cement on it and build the roads. It didn't take a lot of money to do that.

You know, the price per mile to build highways in the state of West Virginia is something like ten times more than it is in another state. So what they were calling pork, he felt was just a fair shake for the state of West Virginia. Wasn't his fault these mountains and stuff were here and it cost more to do things in the state of West Virginia than it did other places.

But believe me, when I say he was all for bringing jobs and money to the state of West Virginia, that's what Senator Byrd was about. And I truly think part of the reason why he thought so much of me was because I wanted to do the same thing for the Guard and bring infrastructure and jobs to the state of West Virginia.

**Sturm:** You shared a view. You shared a goal.

**Tackett:** Yes. Our views were the same when it came to the state of West Virginia, and I didn't care to take criticism from the other fifty-three TAGs [The Adjutant General], and he certainly didn't care to take criticism from the other ninety-nine senators.

**Sturm:** And it sounds to me like you didn't care to take criticism from the chief of staff of the Army over appearing in uniform, either.

**Tackett:** No, sir. No, sir.

**Sturm:** I think that's great, General.

**Tackett:** I mean, that's why I became an adjutant general. That's why he became a senator. So we were friends and we matched up, and what we did is history. What we did is history. It was great teamwork between us. We were always on the same page. We were always speaking the same language. We talked on the weekends so that when we talked to the press and we talked to people in the Pentagon, we were both saying the same thing.

**Sturm:** One voice.

**Tackett:** One voice.

**Sturm:** When he was first elected to the Senate, a lot of the liberals, I guess, considered him just another southern Dixiecrat, like John Stennis or Strom Thurmond or Richard Russell or some of those other old-style southern senators. Do you think that's a fair evaluation at that particular time in his career?

**Tackett:** No, I don't think that—he was who he was. He just had to wait his time to get into the roles. You know, your first term in office, you're a freshman senator, you're not going to have a lot to say, you're not going to have a lot to do, but he just slowly worked his way and paid his dues. You know, he served in more leadership positions than anyone else in the history of the Senate.

**Sturm:** Absolutely, yes.

**Tackett:** It's kind of like me becoming an adjutant general. I served in every support role in the National Guard of West Virginia, so there was no way that one of my officers or the men could feed me a line of bull, because I had done every job from a private all the way to a general, and I knew what it took to run this organization. I knew what all these jobs did and what they were supposed to do. So people couldn't come in and feed me a line of BS, because I knew what was going on.

And that's the way Senator Byrd was. Everybody looked to Senator Byrd for advice on how to do legislation, how to get things done, how to get around the rules, how to make everything happen. I mean, in his later years he actually trained every senator. Every Democrat, I think every Republican senator, had to meet with Senator Byrd, and he gave them kind of a 101 on the Senate. I mean, he's got volumes of books that he wrote about the operation of the Senate. Nobody knew as much about that organization as Robert C. Byrd. When you have that kind of knowledge, you know how to get things done, and that guy knew how to get things done.

**Sturm:** Now, this is going to tie right into that. How in the world did a man with his background and upbringing from the southern West Virginia coal fields, practically no education until later in his life, how did he become one of the most powerful leaders in the world at the peak of his career?

**Tackett:** Determination. Determination. He wanted to make this country better, he wanted to make his state better, and he was determined to do that at all cost. And he would read and read and read. He would study history. He would study, and he was a historian, and he learned. It's like I said before, you know, he learned from mistakes and he learned from other people's mistakes by reading what they did and what went wrong and how history proved had they done things this way or that way. And he would absorb all that information, and he was determined to get into a position where he could make a difference for his state.

I think at one point in his career he thought about running for president, and at one point they talked about appointing him to the Supreme Court, and he chose not to do that because he felt that he could get himself in a position to do more for the state of West Virginia as a senator than he could as a Supreme Court justice or as president. I mean, he just kept plugging along, paying his dues in the different positions that he held within the party itself, and building a

reputation of being a stern politician and being able to teach people lessons who tried to defy or defeat him or to come against him.

He became a very shrewd politician who gained the respect of all the people there, and with his knowledge and his abilities and, like I said, constantly reading. While other people were out partying and having a good time or watching football games, Senator Byrd was either writing books on the history of the Senate or studying history so that he could be smarter and represent [the state].

**Sturm:** I read somewhere that even when he got a shoeshine, he was reading something while they were working on his shoes.

**Tackett:** He made himself, through determination to do the best for this state, the best senator to ever serve the United States of America. He did that through determination and willpower. I mean, if there was ever a self-made man, Robert Byrd was a self-made man.

**Sturm:** Do you think he was an overachiever?

**Tackett:** Oh, yes. There's no doubt. Yes. I mean, I feel like thanks to him, I'm an overachiever. I'm serious when I say that.

**Sturm:** I understand what you're saying, yes. He made you be a better general.

**Tackett:** Oh, he taught me. He taught me how to dot the "i's" and cross the "t's." Let me tell you, if I'd send something up there, it would come right back to me if it wasn't right. I mean, it had to be right, and he taught me.

**Sturm:** I have a hunch though that didn't happen very many times.

**Tackett:** Well, it happened a few times, not very many. It happened in the beginning.

**Sturm:** I was going to say in the beginning maybe, but not later on.

**Tackett:** But what I did was I got an English teacher that was on my staff, used to be an English teacher, and I said, "You go through this and you make sure that it's grammatically correct, the 'i's' are dotted, the 't's' are crossed, commas in the right places, and you make sure what I've got is right."

**Sturm:** He wouldn't even let a letter go out his office unless it had been proofread and every i dotted and t crossed.

**Tackett:** You're exactly right.

**Sturm:** He always said that, “This may be the only letter that somebody will ever get from their US senator, and I want it to be right.”

**Tackett:** Yes. Like I said, everything about that man is just historic. I mean, who could ever from any other country in this world that we’ve ever seen or known can rise from the coal fields of southern West Virginia and become probably *the* most powerful person in the world? When he was chairman of the Finance Committee and controlling the money of the United States of America, he was the most powerful man in America.

**Sturm:** Everyone came to him hat in hand, absolutely.

**Tackett:** He was the most powerful person in the world because the United States is the richest country in the world, and he controlled the purse of the richest country in the world. Think about that now.

**Sturm:** Absolutely.

**Tackett:** How could an orphaned kid raised in the coal fields, didn’t have pants to put on, hardly, rise to that kind of position if he weren’t determined and smart?

**Sturm:** I read somewhere years ago, Jim Comstock, who used to do the *West Virginia Hillbilly*, said that the time he decided to run for his first term in Congress—you mentioned the pants thing—that he told him he only had two or three pair of pants at that time. When he was a member of the West Virginia Senate, he still was that poor that he didn’t have appropriate clothes to suit himself if he got to be elected to the House of Representatives.

**Tackett:** Well, I mean, he is what the American Dream is all about. I mean, he came from rags to never riches, but from rags to fame, and never about his family or himself or money. It was always about helping the people of the state of West Virginia and the United States of America.

**Sturm:** We’ve mentioned that he was elected nine times, a record probably never to be achieved by anyone again. How did that happen in West Virginia with the changes that have taken in the state since he was first elected and the diversity of the economy in the state? How could one man, in your view, be elected nine times to represent the state?

**Tackett:** Well, because of his work, his work ethic, his ability to produce for the citizens of the state of West Virginia. I mean, he didn’t get the name King of Pork for no reason. [laughs]

**Sturm:** Do you think he really represented the views of the people of the state?

**Tackett:** I think he probably represented the views of the state of West Virginia probably better than anybody we’ve ever elected. I mean, he knew what it was like to be poor and he knew

what it was like to be from a poor state. So he spent his whole life trying to improve the infrastructure and everything so that people wouldn't have to be poor like he was. You know what I'm saying? So they had a chance to become middle-class Americans and to have a chance to have something in life.

I mean, everything was based around infrastructure, education, hospitals. I mean, it was all about taking care of people. Everything he did was all about taking care of people. I mean, any federal agency that he could push, pull, stampede into West Virginia, I mean, he pushed it in that direction, because he knew the work ethic of the people of the state of West Virginia, and bringing those agencies to the state of West Virginia would provide permanent jobs and stability to organizations that otherwise couldn't really function because they couldn't keep people in hire. But he was doing the right things for the country and doing the right things for the state at the same time, and a lot of people didn't see and understand that, but he was smart. He was a smart man.

**Sturm:** What do you think his legacy will be, and how will it relate to Allen Tackett's legacy?

**Tackett:** His legacy is that he came from nothing to the most powerful person in the world, and he was kind enough to pull a dumb hillbilly from Cabin Creek up that ladder with him and make him successful too. I'm who I am and what I am because of Senator Byrd. I could have never accomplished the things I accomplished or have done the things that we were able to do for the West Virginia National Guard and the state of West Virginia had it not been for his wholehearted support, believing in me and what I was doing and believing in the people of the state of West Virginia. I mean, he made Allen Tackett who he is. Allen Tackett would still be a nobody from Cabin Creek if it hadn't been for Robert C. Byrd.

**Sturm:** I'm not going to ask you what your legacy is going to be, because you may not be finished yet. [laughter] But I will just say one other thing. Everybody that I've talked to has a favorite story about him, whether they liked him, didn't like him, whether they were opposed to him or in favor of his policies. Do you have a favorite story that you haven't shared with us? Or are there too many? [laughs]

**Tackett:** When I think about a favorite story, I mean, I've had so many times that I've been with him alone and with Erma and his family. I think probably—he invited me to a reunion along with his wife up in Beckley, oh, probably '97, '98 somewhere in that vicinity, somewhere in that range, and I got to spend the whole day with him and watch him work the crowd and work the people and see how many people he knew by name.

He talked to me about how he tried to remember people and to always pay tribute to them, and it kind of taught me to try to remember who people were and to treat people with respect. I mean, that's what made Senator Byrd so popular in the state of West Virginia. I mean, he was their senator and he was a fantastic man, but he was just like them and they knew that. He

was a man that had lifted himself up and made himself successful through hard work and determination and education, and people looked at him as an example of what you can do in this country if you're willing to make the sacrifices to do that. You don't get to where he was at and do the things he did without making a lot of sacrifices with your families and with life.

He dedicated his whole life to the people and the state of West Virginia, his whole life. That's what his life was about. It was about West Virginia and the people of West Virginia. I think that's why he won every county in this state, is because people knew and understood Senator Byrd loved them, and they loved him. It's because he was one of them. He came from hard beginnings, made the most of it. He didn't complain. He worked hard to put himself where he was and to gain the respect of practically everybody in the world.

**Sturm:** General, we've covered a lot of material here today.

**Tackett:** Yes.

**Sturm:** And I'm sure that there are some things as we analyze what we've talked about and looked at it that we will want to follow up on it. Would you be willing to sit for another interview after we've had a chance to evaluate what we have here?

**Tackett:** I'd be glad to do that.

**Sturm:** Well, I do appreciate that, and I want to thank you so much for your time. I've enjoyed minute of it, and I've learned a whole lot about you and a whole lot about Senator Byrd that I didn't know. I thought with the people I'd talked to I was getting to be pretty good about Senator Byrd's background, but you've told me some things I hadn't heard before. I certainly appreciate it. Thank you very much.

**Tackett:** Well, you're certainly quite welcome. Thank you, Alan.

[End of interview]