



EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH BRIAN AND ALMA HART

February 18, 2009
Bedford, Massachusetts

Interviewer

Janet Heininger

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TRANSCRIPT

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Heininger: This is an interview with Brian and Alma Hart, on February 18, 2009, in Bedford, Massachusetts. Tell me about your son from the time he was a child.

A. Hart: We moved up here from Austin, Texas, just before John [Hart] started kindergarten, when he was five, so he got his whole education here in Bedford.

Heininger: Why did you come here?

B. Hart: I became assistant treasurer at Boston University. I was recruited to come up here by Dr. [John] Silber, from Boston.

Heininger: Was it hard to leave Texas?

B. Hart: We thought we would be here for two years and then we would go back home. That was 20 years ago.

A. Hart: We thought it was a big adventure.

Heininger: Do you still see yourselves as Texans?

A. Hart: No. It took about 10 years, but I think we consider ourselves Yankees now, don't we?

B. Hart: Well, you do. [*laughter*] Time moves on.

Heininger: Half of my family is Texan, and boy, if they ever leave Texas, they're still Texans no matter what, no matter where they go.

B. Hart: It's a tough transition.

A. Hart: There was a lot of concern from the family that we were kicking back three generations of progress by moving back east.

B. Hart: As things have evolved over the last five years, there have been a lot of changes. The country has evolved almost as much as it did during a period like the Civil War. I think it has permanently altered us.

Heininger: So you came here when John was five, and he was educated here.

A. Hart: Yes, and we chose this area. We're between Lexington and Concord, so there's lots of historic stuff. We're real history buffs, which we taught our kids. I think that all the battlefields and things we visited stayed with John. He was that little boy who always wanted to be a soldier. He was in ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] in high school and loved it.

Heininger: Did you serve in the military?

B. Hart: No, but my two younger brothers did, during the first gulf war. As he grew up, he saw his uncles coming back and so on.

Heininger: Neither of you came from a military family?

B. Hart: No. Well, Alma's brother—

A. Hart: My brother was a 20-year Navy officer. Brian was the oldest son, and he went to business school and did his duty to the family that way. Given the chance, he might have, but—

B. Hart: The times were different. We graduated from high school in '77, and [Jimmy] Carter was President, and the military was collapsing, so it was not a good time. We met at the University of Texas at Austin, and I was the president of the University Republicans, in 1980, which has caused some interesting discussions with the Kennedys. *[laughter]* Moving right along.

Heininger: So he grew up with some military element in the family. He saw his uncles coming back.

B. Hart: Well, Bedford High School services the Hanscom Air Force Base, so it's a little unusual. Maybe a fourth of the kids are from the base. It has a very good ROTC program and a rifle team, things that high school boys want to do, and John did them.

We wanted him to go to college. If he then wanted to go into the military, he could go in as an officer. The deal was that we would take him to every college that was of interest to him, and if he still wanted to go into the military, then he would go in with eyes open with our blessing and that would be that. September 11 came along in 2001 and changed the atmosphere entirely.

A. Hart: That happened in the fall of his senior year of high school, exactly one week before his 18th birthday. We were terrified that he would run off and enlist because of it. But the ROTC officer at the high school that morning called all the senior boys into his office and made them all raise their right hands and swear that they wouldn't enlist until they graduated in June. John held to that. The Colonel is a career military man, and he knew what he was doing. It was brilliant of him to do. But we knew that John would go ahead and enlist. I kept calling the Navy recruiters, because I wanted him to go into the Navy.

Heininger: Once a Navy family, always a Navy family.

B. Hart: He could never figure out why the Navy recruiter kept calling.

Heininger: I take it he was not interested in the Navy.

A. Hart: No. “I’m going to be a soldier,” John insisted. John would have been a good Army sergeant. I think he would have done well at that. He was always leading the other kids. He was like Tom Sawyer. He’d get them to do things. During, I guess, his sophomore year in high school, during his April vacation, the kids were off from school. I came home from work, and he and his buddies had dug a regulation foxhole in the backyard. Brian’s brother had given him his Marine handbook.

Heininger: So he had the instructions, and he knew how to do it.

A. Hart: How wide, how deep, how long.

B. Hart: That year, we went to Disney World, in Florida, and the regulations had obviously tightened up after 9/11. I said to him, “Whatever you do, don’t take anything sharp—no knives, anything—on the plane ride.” We got to the airport, and Alma, I, and the girls went through, and they flagged John and his backpack. They ran it through again and then again. Finally, “There’s something in here,” and they started pulling books out, books like *How to Kill With Your Hands*.

Heininger: Oh no.

B. Hart: Then they said, “There’s still something in here,” and they started cutting the lining out of his book bag. He had had a hole in it, and they found my Swiss Army knives that I’d been looking for, for a year.

A. Hart: They had slid under the lining.

B. Hart: There was a little Puerto Rican woman, probably 50 years old, doing the search. John was standing there—blonde hair, crew cut—and she was pointing her finger right in his face, saying, “What are you doing?” She took everything. I told Alma, “Go catch the plane, because John and I aren’t making it.” She took everything to her supervisor, and the supervisor said, “What’s all this?” She said, “It’s just another high-school book bag.” [laughter]

A. Hart: It’s a good thing he had his ROTC haircut.

Heininger: “Really! There’s a reason for this!”

B. Hart: He graduated Bedford High School in June 2002. Somewhere we have a photo of him and a friend of his, Travis Desiato, and Tracy [Desiato], who would become Travis’s wife in ’04. Travis was killed in Fallujah in November 15, 2004. He was also from Bedford.

On John’s 19th birthday, he went into basic training, and he later came out through the airborne program. In September ’02 he went in, and then he finished his airborne training in early ’03.

Heininger: How did you feel about him going into the military?

B. Hart: Well, the mood of the country was different then. Two of the hijacked planes were out of Massachusetts, with family from this area on them. At the time, the focus was still on

Afghanistan. There was a growing alarm as the emphasis shifted to Iraq and as we began to research the implications of the connection between Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, which at the time was masked in mystery and implication. So John went in and came home in March.

There was a huge Speak Out for Peace banner on the Unitarian church in the town common.

A. Hart: It was there during the month we were going into Iraq.

Heininger: The third week.

B. Hart: Yes. John had just gotten back from airborne training, and he was about to go to Italy with the 173rd Airborne, which was already moving to Iraq. He was very upset because he felt that in the few months that he'd been gone, the town seemed to have turned against him. A few of the neighbors approached us about protesting this huge banner that was on, essentially, the town common, which goes back to 1730.

A. Hart: The church is on the town common, so the banner, which was stretched across the front of the church as you drive by, looked like it was on the town common. It seemed more like it was from the town than from the church.

B. Hart: All of the kids from Hanscom AFB who came to high school from the base had to drive right past this. We protested the sign at the town selectmen's meeting, which was quite contentious. It was discovered that the banner violated local sign permits. The church declared that it was their first amendment right even if it was on the town common and in violation of permits. We threatened to sue, and the pastor of the church, to his credit, discussed it and decided that the best course of action was to remove the banner that Saturday. It would have been up for a total of 30 days. This was satisfactory to us because the sign came down a week before John left for Italy.

A. Hart: The 30 days was almost up. It was like, "If we leave it up another three days, that will be 30 days." Everyone agreed, "Okay, that will be fine. Take it down in three days."

B. Hart: In the meantime, we were facing a number of issues here. One is that our company had been sold, and we were planning to move to Illinois. We were facing some intense issues here in town, with families saying that they would rather have their sons go to Canada than join the military.

A. Hart: "How can you let him enlist?"

B. Hart: It left us in the position that this was no longer a town for us.

Heininger: So you got pressure because of a decision your son had made. People were putting pressure on you as parents.

A. Hart: Often there were just thoughtless comments that people probably regretted later. They'd say, "How can you let him enlist? You're going to be part of this. It's aggression," and blah, blah, blah. "I'd send my son to Canada."

B. Hart: There was one event at a town election or something like that where we were confronted outside the school where the vote was taken, to the effect of, “I would rather send my son out of the country to avoid any prospect of military service.” That left a very bad taste in our mouths.

Heininger: Did you feel it as personal hostility toward you?

B. Hart: No.

Heininger: Or was it more that this was the mood of the town, and it was your son who happened to be going?

A. Hart: It was, “How can you be so stupid? Don’t you know what’s going on?”

B. Hart: We became more isolated. John went to Italy to join the 173rd Airborne Brigade.

Heininger: Was he aware of all of this?

B. Hart: No, not all of it. There was no point in aggravating things.

A. Hart: Upsetting him, yes.

B. Hart: He went to Italy. His unit had parachuted into northern Iraq, into the Kurdish territories, so he was a replacement. In July of ’03 he called me and said that his deployment to Iraq was imminent as a replacement, but that they had run out of body armor and ammunition in Italy, to the point where the rifle he had been given had a broken sight, the body armor was too small, and they did not have enough ammunition for him to even sight his weapon.

Heininger: This was in July.

B. Hart: Yes. So I wrote a letter to Congressman [John] Tierney in July, which seemed to have disappeared in their stack of mail somewhere, and John went to Iraq with what he had scrounged. During his first week there, he was in a combat engagement almost immediately and got his combat-infantry badge right off the bat. I guess they were driving through a village one night, and they thought some teenage boys were throwing rocks at them. The rocks turned out to be hand grenades that blew up, so they killed the teens.

A. Hart: The story we got from the letters to his friends was that one of them turned around and shot these guys. They then found out that the kids were, like, 15 years old.

B. Hart: The area up there was hotly contested, and they were in a fault line between the Kurds and the Arab Sunnis, and between the Sunnis and the Shias, just south of Kirkuk. The supply lines going north had been cut off by Turkey. So equipment continued to be in short supply, and they took a number of casualties through August and September. When there was a bit of a lull, John would call us. In October—it must have been around Columbus Day or the 11th or thereabouts—he called at an unusual time and wanted to talk. He was at the Kirkuk air base. He talked to his sisters and to Alma, and then he asked to speak to me on the side.

A. Hart: He asked me to hang up.

B. Hart: He said that they were being ambushed on the roads. I later found out that he was calling because they had brought back his lieutenant colonel named Tunnell, who had essentially had his foot shot up in an ambush. John said that they were being ambushed on these roads and that he had body armor on because they were sharing it. They called it hot swapping. He had been assigned to an assault squad, with a squad assault weapon [SALS 249], but they needed armor on their Humvees or else they would get killed on the road. He said it was just a matter of time before that happened to him. He was very matter of fact.

Heininger: When he was first posted to northern Iraq, how did you feel about him being there? Were you worried from the beginning?

A. Hart: Remember, this was after the Mission Accomplished sign. I remember going for a walk with my best friend and saying, “I’m so glad he missed all the violence.” I thought they were doing just peacekeeping.

B. Hart: He was so upset that he didn’t get in with the first wave, because he felt that he would be the new guy and that the war would be over by the time he got there.

Heininger: In the summer, that’s kind of what it looked like.

B. Hart: Little did we know.

A. Hart: That’s what they led us to believe.

Heininger: Yes. Were you worried about him at that point?

B. Hart: Yes, because I was reading, heavily, everything that was in the public press, and it was obvious that convoys were being ambushed. This was the way it was done, going back to Lawrence of Arabia and well before that. Anybody with any idea of what was going on could see that the supply lines and convoys would be hit. Despite the denials from the military that they had never seen this type of unconventional warfare, blah, blah, blah, all of which was a total lie—I mean, it was not an inaccuracy. It was a lie to the public. Anyway, I was worried about John’s call because it wasn’t a nervous call. It was a matter-of-fact call. “I’m telling you, dad, this is what will happen.”

Heininger: How did he feel about his unit? Did he like the people he was serving with?

B. Hart: I don’t know. He had several friends, to be sure, but there was an article that came out in October ’03, in the *Stars and Stripes*, featuring his unit as one of the most poorly supplied. They had photos of guys sleeping on totally destroyed Humvees. [*Viewing a picture of seven GIs.*]

Heininger: Was this his unit?

B. Hart: Yes.

A. Hart: This was John, Chris [Williams], and Joshua Sams.

A. Hart: The fourth guy from their Humvee was their lieutenant, who was inside having a meeting when the picture was taken. These guys are another Humvee team, but they worked together.

Heininger: How did he feel about being there? He was concerned that he had missed the real action.

B. Hart: He said he could not figure out who was shooting at him. That same weekend, we sold our house here in Bedford.

Heininger: This house?

B. Hart: No, another one about a mile from here at One Sibley Drive, and we were building a house in Gurnee, Illinois, north of Chicago, because we decided we were leaving here forever. We told him that the house was gone and that by the time he came home, he'd have to be in Illinois. He wasn't too keen on that idea. Since this was all in the same call it must have been unsettling news for him.

Heininger: How did the girls feel about moving?

B. Hart: At the time, they seemed okay about it, but that would change. Anyway, the next news we heard came a week later, from a group of people at our front door early on Sunday morning. They told us he was dead.

Heininger: Did you have any intimations that that might happen after you received that call from him, and did you tell Alma about the call?

A. Hart: Yes.

B. Hart: Yes.

Heininger: He said, "Mom, get off the phone," but moms always get told anyway.

A. Hart: Yes, but he didn't have to say it to me. There are some things you don't want to talk to your mom about.

Heininger: No. Did he feel that his life was at risk?

B. Hart: Oh yes. It was definitely a fatalistic phone call.

A. Hart: Brian was pacing back and forth, and I said, "Tell me what he said. Talk to me."

B. Hart: He said they desperately needed armor on their Humvees, and if we could do anything about it, please do so.

Heininger: He felt that because he didn't have the armor to protect himself from these ambushes, it was just a matter of time until his number was up.

A. Hart: John knew his dad would do something. He's that kind of person. Our first thought was, "Okay, what can we do about this that won't get John in trouble?" We didn't want any backlash against him. It wasn't long after John's death that we decided, "They can't do anything worse to him. We can piss off anybody we have to."

B. Hart: There's a point where you feel like they can't take anything more from you.

Heininger: That's true.

B. Hart: It was a liberating feeling, and we realized that we could say things, especially in 2003, 2004, up to mid-2005, that others couldn't without being accused of being against the government or against the country.

A. Hart: Unpatriotic.

B. Hart: Unpatriotic. We should circle back to that.

Heininger: Did you get the sense from him that other members of his unit were feeling the same way he was and that they were also making calls home?

B. Hart: I don't know about calls home, but I definitely got the impression that they all knew they needed this equipment. That would later be confirmed in conversations we had with returning soldiers in the cemeteries, as we buried David Bernstein and John Hart. They were being restricted from telling people, especially the media. John was calling us, literally whispering into the phone so that he wouldn't be overheard, because he was afraid of disciplinary implications for him for revealing that they were in danger.

Heininger: So they were told not to talk about the fact that they were underequipped.

B. Hart: Oh yes. This came out a few months later in the hearings. There's a GAO [General Accounting Office] report that just came out, describing the need for armor. I think they even call the Humvees "death traps." Now it's all revealed, but at the time, we were learning it bit by bit.

Heininger: How much was in the newspapers at the time about the equipment?

B. Hart: Nothing. I went back, and there were only two stories discussing the issue. One was from Scripps Howard, out of San Diego. There was a small one in which Senator Jack Reed, from Rhode Island, became aware of the problem in August '03, when two Humvees full of Rhode Island National Guardsmen were blown up. Some of those guardsmen were Massachusetts policemen. Jack Reed started to put two and two together. He didn't go public with it at that moment, but he raised a concern. That was in August. That was the same month they cut production of armored Humvees, in August of '03.

So John called us and told us that he needed our help in order to get them armor on their Humvees. They were desperate for it.

Heininger: He was explicitly asking you to find a way.

B. Hart: He was explicitly asking us to do that. Later, in fact, I was quoted in the *Indianapolis Star* and then in *USA Today*. Army Secretary [Francis] Harvey had the editor of *USA Today* fire his reporter because the quote was identical to one in the *Indy Star*, a sister publication. There was retribution. This has been a full contact sport for the last five years.

Heininger: Was he asking you to do something publicly about the situation, or did he want armor for his unit? Did he want you to help get armor for his unit, his vehicle, or both? How did you interpret it?

B. Hart: I interpreted it as a big problem, because he would not have talked like that. It was not a panicked phone call. He was telling us, “We’re going to get ambushed. I may get killed. I want you to know what’s happening and why. If you can do something about it, do it,” because it was not above us to make contact with someone in Congress. Soldiers have redress to their Congressmen if they can get access.

Heininger: Had you been politically active prior to this?

B. Hart: No, we had not been politically active at all in the 20 years we’d been up here. Then they showed up at our door—

A. Hart: We voted and stuff, but we weren’t writing to our Congressmen.

B. Hart: We had started a company, making safer pharmacy-automation equipment that included bar coding. My dad had been killed in ’87 by a nurse—essentially killed him, in a gross-negligence case, so we, a few years later, started a company to make drug dispensing safer. We were fairly successful at that. We believe in direct action.

Heininger: But you hadn’t had to turn it toward something like this.

B. Hart: No, and the political implications turned out to be much greater than we had anticipated.

Heininger: Plus there was the potential of us doing something that could potentially bring retribution onto John.

B. Hart: Correct, and it probably did, because all of the records involving his incident were destroyed, which we found out in 2005. Kennedy helped us unearth that. To this day that is an ongoing discussion.

Heininger: So they showed up at your door.

A. Hart: It was, like, 5:30 in the morning. It was pitch black. I thought it was the middle of the night. The dog went wild, barking and barking.

Heininger: At 5:30 in the morning?

A. Hart: They want to tell you as soon as they know. I looked out the front window, and there was a police car parked in front of the house, and I was completely alarmed. I looked out the

window to the porch, and there was a policeman and the local Catholic priest. I recognized the policeman as one of our local officers. I didn't know either of their names, but I recognized them. There was also a woman in an Army officer uniform. I screamed to Brian that it was the Army.

The policeman was saying through the door, "Could you put the dog away?" So I grabbed our dog Charlotte and dragged her to the back of the house to put her in the backyard. I stopped in the kitchen and thought, *I'm not going to open the door. They can't tell me if I don't open the door.* I remember that I stood there for a bit, and then I came to my senses and let them in.

Heininger: I don't know; I think that's a very sensible response.

A. Hart: I probably needed to gather my wits. So Brian came down the hall, and there was a pause while they waited for him to come out. Then she very politely said, "I'm sorry to inform you that your son, PFC [Private First Class] John Hart, was killed in an incident last night by RPGs [rocket-propelled grenade] and small-arms fire." At that point the priest grabbed me by the arm and asked them, "Is she going to fall? What's going to happen?" Then we all sat down in the living room and talked for a bit.

B. Hart: Actually we sat down. They didn't.

A. Hart: They stood?

B. Hart: Yes, and we later learned that that's a protocol. I think the priest was Father Mark Sheehan. So they left a while later.

Heininger: Did they tell you anything else about the incident?

A. Hart: That's all the information they had.

B. Hart: In fact they couldn't reveal the name of the other soldier. They said there was another casualty, another KIA [Killed in Action]—and, I think, another wounded soldier—but they couldn't reveal his name until his family had been notified, which would take another 14 or 15 hours.

Heininger: They gave you no details.

B. Hart: They didn't have any more to give at the moment. In fact you can read the release. They were basically reading a press statement that said he'd been killed by small-arms fire and RPGs in Taza, Iraq. So I went on the Internet. There were some brief mentions of it in the, I think, Associated Press. I was trying to stitch the facts together. They said, "We have to notify the Pentagon, and then the Pentagon will notify the press. You had better call your family because within about two hours, the media will start showing up at your door." So we got on the phone.

Heininger: What was the time gap between when he was killed and when they told you?

B. Hart: I think it was an eight-hour time difference. He was killed around 9:30 to 10:00 PM, local time, so it must have been about, what, eight hours, something like that. I later found out that they would notify families between 6:00 AM and 10:00 PM. So they may have had the information for hours, but they wouldn't come until those time periods.

A. Hart: I looked at the clock when they left. When they walked out the door, it was 6:30 in the morning, so I estimate it was about 5:30 when they rang the bell. It was still dark.

Heininger: So you had a sense that it had been how long since he'd been killed, about eight hours, or it had been an hour?

B. Hart: I'll have to do the math. I don't know.

A. Hart: A few hours.

Heininger: So relatively fast notification.

A. Hart: Yes. I mean, they notified this officer in the middle of the night. She got up, put her uniform on, and called the local police. The policeman called Father Mark because he knew him, and he knew that he'd be a good guy to bring to the house.

B. Hart: It must have been 18 hours, working the math.

A. Hart: Because it was a nighttime attack in Iraq when it happened.

B. Hart: Anyway, all of a sudden that same church that we had protested over the sign, a neighbor of ours saw the police and military cars in our front yard, and word made it to the church, and within a couple of hours—

A. Hart: It was the Townsends who told them.

B. Hart: —they showed up, and within a few hours people were mobbing our house.

Heininger: They told you he had been killed. Did they tell you anything else, other than he had been killed?

B. Hart: No.

A. Hart: They gave us the information they had.

B. Hart: A few days later they apparently lost John's body. We heard about it separately. That's another story.

Heininger: So they didn't tell you anything about when you would receive his body or when you would get more details?

B. Hart: No, they had no idea. They didn't have a clue.

Heininger: They come in and say, "He's dead. Goodbye."

A. Hart: They basically said, “The casualty officer will be in contact with you, and he’ll be able to help you.”

B. Hart: A few days later we were assigned a casualty sergeant named Joseph Smith.

Heininger: So you were left with lots of questions and no answers.

B. Hart: Correct.

Heininger: That had to be frustrating.

B. Hart: The town converged very quickly.

A. Hart: All the churches announced it in Sunday morning service.

Heininger: What day was this?

A. Hart: It was a Sunday.

B. Hart: It would have been the 19th of October, ’03.

A. Hart: By noon, people were coming by after church. They had gotten the word. We have two sets of best friends, the Gants, Ralph and Deb Ramirez, and Doug and Kate Townsend. Brian called the Townsends as soon as they left, and they were right up the street. They immediately came down to the house, and they attended this Unitarian church that had put up the banner. Kate was saying, “You need to talk to John. You need Rev. John Gibbons.”

B. Hart: He’s the minister at that church.

A. Hart: That we had the big argument with. Finally we relented and said, “Yes, okay.” So they went and talked to him and he came over. He was a big help in our learning to focus our grief.

Heininger: Was there a church that you belonged to?

A. Hart: No. And everybody, even the school bus driver from when he was in elementary school came. Everybody came. There were people in the yard.

Heininger: What about your daughters, were they here at the time?

A. Hart: Yes.

B. Hart: One of them was staying at a friend’s, and one was upstairs.

A. Hart: Yes, she was spending the night at a friend’s house in Nashua.

B. Hart: They were in middle school and high school.

Heininger: When did you tell them?

B. Hart: The first one heard the conversation with the notification party—didn't come down but heard it. That was Rebecca [Hart]. We called Elizabeth [Hart] about an hour later, because we didn't want her to hear it on the news. She was driven home from New Hampshire.

Heininger: What about extended family?

B. Hart: We started calling immediately because we were afraid that they would start to hear it on CNN [Cable News Network]. In fact it was a good thing because we barely beat the media on it. Word travels fast on stuff like this. Then there was no news at all, zero. We got a call from Senator Kennedy. It was, in fact, the first time we had ever talked to him.

Heininger: From himself?

B. Hart: Yes.

A. Hart: He called the house, and the line was busy. He left a very nice voice message on our phone, which surprised me, because it was like a normal person calling to say that he was very sorry and that he would call back and talk to us at a better time.

Heininger: It was that unexpected.

A. Hart: Yes.

B. Hart: Yes, and in the midst of all the other activity, it was a bit of a nuisance at the time, but later it would turn out to be crucial.

Heininger: Did you hear from John Kerry?

B. Hart: No.

Heininger: Did you hear from the Governor?

A. Hart: The Governor called.

B. Hart: Yes, [Mitt] Romney, who turned out to be quite helpful.

A. Hart: He called Monday morning, and yes, I was very surprised.

B. Hart: This was before Romney ran for President and all of that. We saw him at numerous events, mainly funerals, and he's an impressive person. I didn't vote for him, but I highly respect both him and his wife for the way they handled us and other families.

Heininger: Who was your local Congressperson?

Hart: Tierney.

Heininger: Did you hear from him?

B. Hart: Yes, the next day the media showed up with trucks, cameras, and satellites. A reporter from the *Boston Globe* snuck into our living room and was sitting there as if she were someone I didn't recognize in my living room overhearing a side conversation I had with a friend. She was taking notes, and she quoted me saying that John had called about a lack of equipment, and that I had tried to reach Tierney in the summertime, and that he had never responded. The first contact we got from John Tierney was a call on Monday afternoon after the story came out, saying that they could not find my letter from last July. Tierney did a lot of things afterward that were more redeeming.

Heininger: So you heard from his office, but did you hear from him?

B. Hart: Yes, he called.

Heininger: So your public officials were fairly responsive on a personal basis.

B. Hart: Yes.

Heininger: Would you have expected that?

B. Hart: We didn't know what to expect. There should be a manual for how to handle this stuff, but there isn't. You're riding the white waters and trying to figure out how to make it through the afternoon and the next five minutes barely in control.

We finally did an interview that afternoon, about one or two on Monday after the media started going to the high school and interviewing kids who were going to school, because it turned out that John had been killed at about the time when the number of casualties after [George W.] Bush declared victory matched the number that had occurred before.

Heininger: So there was a story.

B. Hart: Yes, and we didn't know it. We couldn't figure out why this was all happening.

Heininger: There was a story that was bigger than John.

B. Hart: Yes, correct. One thing we learned for certain is that the best information on the actual casualty is from the local news. The national news could care less about the person. It's about how they fit into the national, bigger story. So most of the news, even now, the last two casualties in Massachusetts, is local news. No one cares anymore at the national level. It's a sad reality. Anyway, a couple of days started to pass—no news, no body. (They could not tell us where John was.)

Heininger: Had you been contacted by the casualty officer?

A. Hart: Oh, yes.

B. Hart: Yes. He didn't have a clue either.

A. Hart: He was as frustrated as we were. He's a sergeant and he was assigned this. It's not as if he does family casualty assistance all the time. He was as frustrated as we were.

B. Hart: In the meantime things were moving on, and the kids in the high school decided that they were going to organize a big candlelight vigil the following Thursday.

A. Hart: On the town common.

B. Hart: People wanted to know when the funeral was, and we couldn't even find the body. So Melissa Wagner—

Heininger: This had to have driven you crazy. I can't even imagine.

A. Hart: He didn't tell me that part. I knew nothing about it for probably a year.

B. Hart: We found out where John's body was from our second child Rebecca's preschool teacher in Lexington. She had a son who went to West Point, and he knew Lieutenant Bernstein—

Heininger: Who was John's lieutenant?

B. Hart: —who turned out to be the other man killed with John. We've become close friends with the Bernsteins. So her son and, I forget, the McMahons or something like that, had a girlfriend who was at a base in Germany. She heard that two bodies had come in, one of them a lieutenant from the 173rd. She thought her boyfriend had been killed. So she went with a priest to the morgue and then had breakfast with him. She found out that the name was Bernstein and that there was another man with him named Hart. She e-mailed McMahon's mom, who lived in Lexington. She had been Rebecca's preschool teacher. She called me and said, "I just heard from an MP [military police] lady at the base in Germany that your son is in Germany. I'm so sorry."

A. Hart: She was letting us know that this priest had done blessings over the two caskets and had given them fresh flags.

B. Hart: That's how we found John's body.

Heininger: This isn't how you should have found out. The military didn't tell you.

B. Hart: No.

Heininger: It's a circuitous route from somebody—it must have been a relief to know, but—

B. Hart: So they had a candlelight vigil on Thursday. In the meantime we had found David Bernstein's name. One of John's teachers contacted a friend at the Pentagon who had been her boyfriend. He told her the name of the other family, which was Bernstein, because the Bernsteins had moved and the Army couldn't find them. They had moved from the Philadelphia area down to Tennessee. The Army, in its wisdom, drove 14 hours to find them in rural Tennessee. In the meantime we waited for them to be contacted, and then we contacted the Bernsteins, whose son had been fifth in his class at West Point, a young lieutenant, and who had died with John.

Heininger: Were they given any more information than what you were given about what had happened?

B. Hart: Later they would be given a lot more.

Heininger: Because he was an officer?

A. Hart: Probably.

B. Hart: Yes.

A. Hart: We were making waves, so people were shutting up around us.

B. Hart: We had an enormous candlelight vigil in the town common, on the front steps of the church we had protested against, which was irony at an intense level.

A. Hart: They provided the candles.

Heininger: It demonstrates that there is a difference between people's feelings about the war and people's support for the people who are fighting it.

B. Hart: Absolutely correct.

Heininger: When you reacted to the protest, it was not necessarily clear that there was support for those who were fighting it.

B. Hart: Correct. So a lot of people wanted to come to the funeral, and there was a big search to find the biggest sanctuary. It turned out to be St. Michael's, which was a Catholic church that the priest who originally gave us notice was the priest at.

A. Hart: They had the biggest church, with a big meeting room, an activity room.

Heininger: But you still hadn't been told by the military where John's body was, even though you knew where it was.

B. Hart: So with no body and no knowledge of the body, we had a memorial service a week later, which would have been on the following Sunday October 26. It allowed us to at least get the relatives in and out of here and for the town to calm down a bit. We had found John by then, and without much more information, we decided, since we were moving to Illinois, that we would bury John at Arlington National Cemetery, where he had gone on the eighth-grade field trip with the school.

A. Hart: They get their trip to Washington.

B. Hart: We felt it was appropriate for him. Arlington told us that there was a six-week waiting list, at least. We called Senator Kennedy's office, and they were able to expedite that.

Heininger: But you still didn't have a body.

B. Hart: Right. Then Bernstein's body showed up. It was available for burial on Halloween, and they buried him at West Point. By then we found out that John would be coming shortly thereafter, so we were able to—

Heininger: The military told you this?

B. Hart: No, Senator Kennedy's office helped us on this.

Heininger: You still were not getting any information from the military.

B. Hart: No.

A. Hart: Bureaucracy.

B. Hart: We got no help at that point. So the Bernsteins had a funeral set at West Point, and we went to West Point, knowing that we would have a funeral on the 4th of November, in Arlington. We met the Bernsteins at an old hotel at West Point in the dining room and bar. We went to David's funeral in the cemetery there, and I was, by that point, almost haunted by John's request for armor.

I approached the body escort for David Bernstein, a man named Sgt. Frank Lauer, who had been his friend and staff sergeant. Frank was kind enough to talk to me on the side with a captain, and I asked him if it was true that they were short of equipment. I basically relayed what John had told me. He said yes, absolutely they were short of ammunition, and they were short of bandages, particularly tourniquet-type large bandages. They had no blood-clotting agents, and they had no armor, and there were only five armored Humvees in all of northern Iraq. This he told me while standing in the cemetery at West Point.

A. Hart: It was 40 degrees in a slow, drizzling rain, and we were standing out there in the cemetery. Everybody else had gone inside but we needed to talk to Lauer out of earshot.

B. Hart: You can see a photo of that event on the cover of the *New York Times*, November 2nd.

Heininger: Why did it make the *New York Times*?

B. Hart: Because this happened about when the number of casualties doubled.

Heininger: Had the Bernsteins been bombarded by the media as well?

B. Hart: Less so because no one could find them. They were looking for them in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, and we knew they had moved to the Clarksville, Tennessee area.

A. Hart: They moved about a month before.

B. Hart: We didn't see any point in inflicting the media on them. We also were debriefed by a captain who had come to brief the Bernsteins, not us, but who was willing to talk with us.

Heininger: To give them more information about what had happened?

B. Hart: Yes.

Heininger: You were finally able to get information from the military about what happened, even though he hadn't come to tell you.

B. Hart: We never got official statements. This was all secondhand. But he confirmed the shortage of vehicles and said that anything we could do to help would be appreciated. We had a long drive home from West Point in the fall leaves.

I immediately turned around, and on Sunday morning I flew to Arlington. There I met a young specialist, 19 years old, named Chris Williams, who had been sent as John's body escort and who was in the vehicle with John, which is significant because it turns out that only sergeants or higher are allowed to escort. I had a long and lengthy talk with Chris Williams. So John's body was flown directly to Dulles, where apparently it ended up in luggage. Chris, furious, found him.

Heininger: It didn't even go through Andrews Air Force Base?

B. Hart: No.

Heininger: It didn't go through Dover.

B. Hart: It went to Dulles. So he got him out of luggage and got him to the funeral home.

Heininger: This isn't standard procedure.

A. Hart: They've fixed their procedures since then, but this is what happened to us.

B. Hart: These procedures have been fixed because of incidents like this.

A. Hart: John was, like, number 260-something for casualties.

Heininger: You would think they would have had the procedures in place by then.

B. Hart: Well, they fixed the procedures by banning the press at Arlington after John's funeral.

Chris gave me a detailed account of what happened in the engagement. There were three vehicles in a convoy. There had been a rocket attack on an air base, and John had been in a vehicle, I think, with kitchen equipment, delivering food to the unit. They were escorting a lieutenant, and they had been out all day on an IED [improvised explosive device] event on a bridge. Captain [John] Kilbride organized these three vehicles into a convoy to chase these rocket shooters who, in reality, had set up an ambush. The three vehicles detoured, so the normal quick reaction force was not called out. These unarmored vehicles were sent out, and the convoy got split up.

I know a bunch of details now, so I won't ruin the story, but essentially they were ambushed on a road that had a large 10-foot berm running along the right side, with somewhere between eight and twelve insurgents shooting RPGs, rocket-propelled grenades, and they were firing machine guns at the second vehicle. The first vehicle scooted on by and kept going a long way, and that was where the captain was. The second vehicle tried to return fire, but their machine gun

jammed, and several got off rifle fire. They in turn went at least several hundred yards out of the way and hid in the darkness.

John's vehicle, which had been bringing up the rear, had David Bernstein in the passenger seat, and Joshua Sams was driving. Chris Williams and John in the back of the vehicle. They got cut off. John provided covering fire for the second vehicle. Chris hit the deck and didn't fire at all, it would turn out, even though he told people at the time that he did fire. He told me when I went down to Arlington early that he hadn't fired. Frank Lauer told me that Chris was an excellent soldier. He panicked, and they realized, when they did an ammunition check, that Chris hadn't fired. So only David and John were firing.

John ran out of ammunition as they were cut off without support from the other vehicles that left them behind, and he was shot in the neck by an RPK machine gun. A ricochet went through the vehicle, and another bullet hit David Bernstein in the leg. The vehicle went careening into the darkness and crashed into a berm. The driver, Sams, was thrown out of the vehicle and was dragged until the vehicle rolled back down the berm and rested on his arm, crushing it. So John, with no ammunition, I guess, when he ran out, was shot in the neck. Chris hid in the back. Bernstein got out of the vehicle with a wounded leg, crawled around, and was able to push the accelerator of the vehicle so that the vehicle moved slightly forward and off of Josh Sams' arm. No one fired after the vehicle left the road and crashed, neither the insurgents or the four in the vehicle, and everybody else had left them. It went very dark and quiet.

Heininger: Were they both on the same side? If Bernstein was in the passenger's seat, was John on the same right side, or was he behind the driver?

B. Hart: Apparently John was in the back, facing rear, to keep from getting shot from behind, but when they were attacked from the front-right side, he swiveled up and over Bernstein. There was no turret. There was no armor on the vehicle. They had some Kevlar, but a friend of his called me a few months ago, after five years, and said that he could no longer not call. He and John had joked that they hoped they would be attacked by Indians, because the two-by-fours they had on the side of their vehicle could stop only arrows. So John shot everything he had. He was shot in the neck. There's one report that he was shot in the chest, but I've seen the autopsies. It didn't penetrate. There was a slight wound on his leg and one across his face.

Heininger: And Bernstein was hit only in the leg?

B. Hart: Right.

Heininger: So he was able to get the vehicle off of—

B. Hart: Chris came out of it, and Sams' arm was injured. They found a bandage, but there was nothing to tie it around, no stick or anything in the field, so they used the neck of a gas can to crank the bandage down. Apparently the bandages were rotted, so the bandage shredded. From this point on, the accounts vary between five and 20 minutes, but I think it went on for about 10 or 15 minutes before the others came back. They made a number of attempts to tie off the artery or the leg. David bled to death in the sand, despite a number of heroic efforts to keep him alive. It was clear, based on what I know now, that he died for lack of blood before the others could rescue him.

Heininger: Was John killed instantly, having been shot in the neck?

B. Hart: It was quick.

A. Hart: Chris told us that when John fell, he fell. He wasn't grabbing at his neck or anything, which was a great relief to us. I mean, there were quite a number of hours of fretting, of, "I hope he didn't suffer." As we've met other families, we know how much better it is.

Heininger: It is better to die quickly than to bleed to death for want of a bandage.

A. Hart: Yes.

B. Hart: Chris was very candid with me, more so than I would have been if I had been in his shoes.

Heininger: Even though it didn't make him look very good.

B. Hart: Correct. John had been Chris's close friend, and under the circumstances, it appears that they had Chris escort John out of theater, even though he was only a specialist.

Heininger: He was probably feeling guilty.

B. Hart: We've had ongoing discussions with all of the survivors for years now, and all of them suffer from various traumas. John was left in the vehicle body-bagged. Sams and Bernstein were airlifted out about 45 minutes to an hour later.

So November 2nd arrived. This article showed recent casualties, all in the *New York Times*, including John and Bernstein and the funeral of Bernstein, on the cover. By now I knew quite a lot about the equipment situation, so we asked to meet Senator Kennedy in advance of John's funeral.

Heininger: To clarify, you still hadn't been given, officially, any details of what happened.

B. Hart: We never got anything official. In fact we were later contacted by the mortuary officer, in 2005, who told us that there had been a cover-up and that we should do a Freedom of Information search, which we did. We found that all of the official records were missing.

Heininger: But at this point you hadn't gone public?

B. Hart: No.

Heininger: Why would they have not given you—

B. Hart: Two thousand five was two years later.

Heininger: I understand, but at that point you were still waiting for his body to come back.

B. Hart: John wasn't an officer.

Heininger: They feel they don't need to inform people if the soldier is not an officer?

B. Hart: They didn't. Things have improved somewhat since then.

Heininger: So there's a double standard about what information they give families?

B. Hart: Obviously. This was pre-[Patrick] Tillman too.

Heininger: True.

B. Hart: We have talked to the Tillmans. This goes on and on.

Anyway, the funeral procession was all lined up outside, and Senator Kennedy asked to come, and we were pleased that he came. Alma and I had the information we wanted to relay to him then. The funeral party waited outside. The historian of Arlington, a guy named [Thomas] Sherlock, who was a friend of Frank Lauer's, who had helped us get the funeral scheduled, met us in the administration conference room with a military aide, a naval officer assigned to Kennedy, and a staffer named Jarret Wright. We told Senator Kennedy what we knew, that they essentially were running out of ammunition and tourniquets, that they had no blood-clotting agents, that there were five armored Humvees in northern Iraq, and that there was a chronic shortage that enlisted personnel certainly knew about but that somehow wasn't being reported up the chain of command.

Heininger: This was before the funeral took place or after?

B. Hart: The funeral party was waiting outside, literally.

We talked for about a half hour, and Senator Kennedy said that this was the first factual information he had heard and he was on the Senate Armed Services Committee. It was confirming rumors that he had heard from Jack Reed and from some of the National Guard families whose sons had been killed in August. He promised that he would look into it and that he would talk with Senator [John] Warner, from Virginia, who ironically had been at a funeral 30 minutes before, for a Captain [John R.] Teal, who is buried in the same plot, section 60.

We all together went about a quarter of a mile down to section 60, where all of the Iraq vets are buried, and we had a funeral. It was photographed by the Associated Press and by the *Washington Post*, from a respectful distance. But those photos showed up the following day in the national media, and you can still see them.

I came home haunted by what I had learned from these enlisted personnel. I started researching why we couldn't make more armored Humvees. I contacted a reporter at the *Indianapolis Star* who had written a small article on the issue. He'd interviewed a union steward who said he couldn't understand why they weren't hiring at the plant. I found out that they had never gotten the purchase orders from the Army. Senator Kennedy got Senator John Warner to hold a hearing, around November 18 or 19, 2003, which was the first hearing on the topic of body armor or vehicular armor.

Heininger: This was a month after John had been killed.

B. Hart: Correct, but only a few weeks after the funeral. I did not believe that Senator Kennedy would come through like this, but he did.

A. Hart: The funeral took place on November 4.

B. Hart: The generals were more than happy to be asked questions. Later I came to understand that Congress has to ask and then the generals answer, but they don't reveal.

Heininger: Without being asked.

B. Hart: Yes. So we formed a strange relationship with Senator Kennedy that grew into a strong bond and friendship. As Alma and I would find out information from all kinds of sources—like soldiers' family members calling us anonymously with information—we would pass it to the Senate. Senator Kennedy would ask the questions, and the generals would usually be more than happy to answer, because they were the ones being shorted equipment. That's how we formed a five-year working relationship with Senator Kennedy, and that's how all the troops, six months after those hearings, got body armor, when a third of them hadn't had it in October '03. By 2005, every vehicle that left a base in Iraq was an armored factory-built Humvee or MRAP [Mine Resistant Ambush Protected]. That's how this happened.

The hearings are public record. They revealed that a third of the troops had no body armor at all and that only about 400 armored Humvees in all of Iraq, out of almost 30,000, had any armor on them in late 2003.

A. Hart: And those rarely left the base.

B. Hart: Correct, because they were mainly allocated to the Air Force, who was hoarding them on base. The Army said that they could make only a few thousand of them, and that would take a year and a half. I was furious.

Heininger: Tell me first about the first hearing. Kennedy held the first hearing.

B. Hart: Yes, and he cited John specifically.

Heininger: Who did he have testify?

B. Hart: General [Peter] Schumacher, among others.

Heininger: What questions was he asking him?

B. Hart: He asked him about the number of armored Humvees and about the amount of body armor. Were there shortages in Northern Iraq? Specific questions. The NCOs [non-commissioned officers] were revealing Sergeant Frank Lauer's name now. It was not public information, but that's how we got this information. An ongoing correspondence, with soldiers in Iraq who found out that we were interested, ensued over the Internet.

Heininger: Back to this first hearing. Kennedy was raising these questions. Was he getting answers from Schumacher?

B. Hart: He got that indeed they had only, at that point, a little over 400 armored Humvees in Iraq, only about 2,200 in all of the Army, that it would be somewhere on the order of 18 months for them to produce a couple thousand of them, and that a third of the troops had no ceramic-plate body armor at all.

Heininger: So this was the first time you got the military to go public in response to questioning.

B. Hart: Correct.

Heininger: What was the media coverage of this hearing?

B. Hart: Intense. CNN had been tipped off, and they covered it. In fact you can see the whole hearing, Kennedy mentioning John and the whole thing, spelling it out.

Heininger: Were you surprised at the coverage?

B. Hart: Yes, we were.

Heininger: You were surprised to begin with that Kennedy called you.

B. Hart: And that Kennedy was doing something about it.

Heininger: Then he showed up at the funeral. He asked to come to the funeral. Then he was responsive when you talked to him.

B. Hart: He helped us find our son's body.

Heininger: Tell me about that.

B. Hart: Once we found it in Germany, they gave us no other information as to when it would arrive, much less where we could bury him, which dragged the funeral on for weeks because John wasn't given an allotted time slot at Arlington, which was ridiculous. Kennedy's staff, which is probably as important as the Senator himself, got things moving. I will say that Senator Kennedy is highly respected at Arlington, and he told Alma things we wanted to know, like when you can come to visit. He said he comes only in the morning because there are so few tourists there, and that's his time to go talk to his brothers. Things like that. It was a deeply personal conversation.

Heininger: Did Romney come to the funeral?

B. Hart: No, he didn't.

A. Hart: He came to the memorial service we had here in Bedford.

B. Hart: And Sergeant Smith, our casualty affairs officer, didn't show up. We later found out that the National Guard in Massachusetts refused to allocate funds for the casualty-affairs officer to go out of state. There was no money.

Heininger: So much for casualty-affairs officers.

B. Hart: It wasn't Smith's fault, but things have improved.

Heininger: Clearly this was a process that had been set up. It was inadequately funded so that they couldn't do their jobs by providing the information that families needed.

B. Hart: Or the equipment. Senators Kennedy and Warner brought this out in great detail, using John as an example. The generals are only too happy to have someone ask the questions that probably should have been asked a year before.

Heininger: And the press covers it.

B. Hart: Yes. A few days later the Pentagon, after Karl Rove met with President Bush to plan their 2004 reelection initiative, banned the coverage of funerals at Arlington. There's an NPR [National Public Radio] story in which I was interviewed, along with the speechwriter for President [Ronald] Reagan, on how stupid that policy would be and how it would backfire on the Bush administration. They went so far as to ban senior administration officials from attending military funerals.

Heininger: Had filming the bodies coming into Dover, Delaware been banned at that point?

B. Hart: No.

Heininger: Was this around the same time that they were banned?

B. Hart: There had been a policy years ago that allowed coverage, I think, going back to Vietnam, but it was no longer enforced. Having Bernstein's funeral show up on the front page of the *New York Times* on November 2, 2003, along with probably 20 other pictures of other KIAs [killed in action], including John, was too much.

Heininger: So at the same time that they banned the pictures of caskets coming into Dover, they banned senior military people from attending funerals, and what was the third thing you said they did?

B. Hart: I don't remember now. There's an NPR interview that is transcribed on the topic. You can see it.

Heininger: So the Bush administration's response to this was not to hear that there was a legitimate problem of equipment and safety of our troops. It was, "Let's prevent the information from going further."

B. Hart: Correct. It was about hiding the hard truth from Americans.

A. Hart: With the excuse of, "It's morale. The American people would be upset."

Heininger: I would guess they would be upset, and they *were* upset.

B. Hart: Basically two things were hidden. One was the bodies, which I call the blood, and the other was the cost, which is the treasure.

Heininger: They also remembered that the body bags from Vietnam had been extremely damaging.

B. Hart: Correct. I had known Rove in Texas, and I know how he thought.

Heininger: You weren't surprised.

A. Hart: Brian took a political class from him while at UT [University of Texas] at Austin.

B. Hart: I wasn't surprised. He had left, I think, Georgetown University, and had come to work as a fundraiser for the then-Governor of Texas, who was a Republican. I had a quasi-friendship with him, not close, but I understood what was going on.

In the meantime, we started researching why the production wasn't showing up. In an interview, the Army said they had plants running seven days a week, 24/7.

Heininger: But you were getting information on the ground that they were not even receiving purchase orders.

B. Hart: Correct. We got anecdotal evidence that that was not true, based on a relationship we developed with the *Indianapolis Star*.

Heininger: At the same time, you were getting top-level military generals saying, "This is a problem."

B. Hart: We would learn that Schumacher and others were lying to Congress.

Heininger: But didn't he say that there was a problem?

B. Hart: They were repeatedly asked, "Were the plants running 24/7?" and they said yes repeatedly. In the meantime I couldn't believe that this country, which could make 50,000 Sherman tanks and as many bombers in World War II, couldn't make more than a couple of thousand armored Humvees over the years, when in fact we were making 3,000 commercial Humvees a month at the GM [General Motors] plant.

Heininger: Yes, and they were selling too.

B. Hart: And they were selling because gas was cheap and war was on. We started researching, and we found great disconnects between what was said and what was occurring. We were asked to come to a speech that Senator Kennedy gave in the Mayflower Hotel, in January of 2004.

Heininger: This was two months later.

B. Hart: Yes, the quagmire speech, when he introduced us and basically called Bush out on the quagmire. That was the word, quagmire. All of a sudden we were seen photographed with Senator Kennedy at a very public event.

A. Hart: His staff asked us, "Are you sure you want to be photographed?"

B. Hart: Our relatives in Texas immediately started getting upset, and we suddenly found ourselves politicized.

A. Hart: And we said, “Wow, they were right!”

B. Hart: We got calls from my aunt, warning us that we were being used by the media and by politicians to move the public, and that we didn’t want to besmirch the memory of our son.

Heininger: So you were getting pressure within your own family.

B. Hart: Yes.

A. Hart: But they didn’t know everything we knew.

Heininger: But this was also unexpected for you because (a) you hadn’t been politicized before, and (b) coming from Texas, where many people don’t go around criticizing the government, they were upset that you were doing this. They were couching it in terms of besmirching John’s memory when you were in fact trying to remedy the situation that had caused his death.

B. Hart: Correct.

A. Hart: And their fear was, “Those liberal Democrats are using you.”

B. Hart: If you look at what we did over the last five years, individually and with Senator Kennedy, you will see that we always worked for the benefit of the enlisted personnel, the frontline soldiers. While we have been highly critical of the military and its handling of the war—and of the politicians who directed them—our emphasis has always been on the enlisted personnel and their families.

Senator Kennedy, as I have come to know him, acts in the same manner. While he often criticizes large defense programs and is criticized accordingly, the fact is, I have run across family after family who he has helped, including the Marine who was killed and left behind when we evacuated Saigon. His body was buried in the Swiss Embassy garden. Senator Kennedy went back and got him. We met his family in Stoneham. I think they’re from Woburn, if I’m not mistaken. From the treatment of our family, trying to find out what happened to John, to phone calls I have personally witnessed, such as when he called the Desiatos the day that Travis was killed, here in Bedford, in the midst of Fallujah engagements in ’04, and many others.

Heininger: Kennedy was your Senator, but what had been your view of him before John went into the military?

B. Hart: Well, we came from Texas, so it was not a particularly positive one, but in our years in Massachusetts, it had not been negative either. The fact is, he and Dr. Silber from Boston University, who had recruited me up here in the first place, had struck up a friendship of the weirdest kind. We had developed a respect, but we didn’t think he was interested in people like us.

Heininger: So you viewed him as the liberal Democrat he is, and yet you were getting some indications—

B. Hart: That he was competent, that he cared about the state, and that he was the go-to person when you had a problem, which turned out to be true in spades.

Heininger: But you didn't expect that he really cared about individual Massachusetts constituents.

A. Hart: We'd never had a problem before that we needed a Congressman for.

Heininger: There was no reason why you would think he would care, unless you knew somebody who had done this.

A. Hart: We'd heard stories of things his office had done.

Heininger: You had heard the stories, but until you experience it yourself, it's yes, okay, fine. But still, is that his office or is that him?

B. Hart: Right, and there are other politicians you could compare him to and see great contrast. Kennedy, we found out, personally cares. It's a trait that, I hate to say it, rubbed off on us in this whole cycle. He has deep empathy for people who are vulnerable.

Heininger: And who are not empowered.

B. Hart: Right. You have to be there to appreciate it.

Heininger: So you were surprised at what you found out about Kennedy.

B. Hart: Yes. It has been a most unusual friendship. I have to say that we are pleased to call it that.

Heininger: Romney, who came to the memorial service and who has been helpful, did you get the same sense about him?

B. Hart: Yes. Candidly, if you had to pick another politician who was empathetic to the Gold Star Families in Massachusetts, it was Mitt Romney. I mean, you can look in our windowsill here and see stuff from Mitt Romney and Kennedy. They are the only two you see over there.

Heininger: So you weren't getting this from Tierney, although he must have been helpful in some way.

A. Hart: Tierney's committees are other things. He wasn't on any of the military services committees.

B. Hart: Where you'll see Tierney stand up is in the treatment of veterans at Walter Reed, who we had been tipped off on. He busted that mess, to his deep credit. So maybe I haven't seen the best of Tierney, but he has not done badly by us in the long run.

Heininger: Again, you weren't seeing anything from Kerry's office.

B. Hart: No. The other person we were getting help from, of all people, was Representative Marty Meehan. In March, 2004, we had a press conference with Marty Meehan, who was on the Armed Services Committee, involving the shortage of vehicular armor. By that time, we had stats and production figures, and we were quite vocal about it. Two soldiers from John's unit had come back from Iraq, and rather than go home, they drove up to Massachusetts to see us first. They met us at Logan Airport in a blizzard, with Meehan and a bunch of press people. They were trying to get equipment for other soldiers. I think it was around March 23.

A. Hart: That's Rebecca and those two soldiers. [*showing a photograph*]

B. Hart: That would be David Geer and Chad Shearer. This was their obligation.

Heininger: It's a wonderful picture. This must have been quite an education to the fact that politicians come in different stripes and respond differently to things.

B. Hart: So he gave the quagmire speech at the Mayflower Hotel. We were sitting up there with another veteran.

Heininger: You were on the stage with him?

B. Hart: We were sitting in the front row with his wife Vicki [Reggie Kennedy], who was in a leg cast, and a person who would later become a friend of ours, who had had both of his arms ripped off in an accident a few months before. You could hear crickets in the room as the speech finished, because Kennedy called Bush out on Iraq. It was vilified in the press. As we left the speech and realized that we had stepped into it this time and there was no going back—

Heininger: But they had warned you.

B. Hart: Yes, we went in eyes open. I had also been doing research, and I had found out that the military had been lying about the production rates at the plant. I knew but I couldn't figure out why. I was approached by a person in the audience who had ties to the manufacturing plant, who told me that the purchase orders had not been received, even though the Pentagon was telling the Congress, as late as mid-December, that the plants had received the orders and were running full out. They actually were running at about 25-percent capacity. Shortly thereafter I started to receive the actual production figures from the plant, in real time, and I would receive them for several more years.

Heininger: Did you have a sense that the information you were getting was known to the Pentagon?

B. Hart: Yes. In fact I can confirm that by at least February of 2004, it was specifically known by acting Army Secretary [Les] Brownlee.

Heininger: What did you conclude about why the situation was the way it was?

B. Hart: It was about the money.

A. Hart: And the election coming up.

B. Hart: And the election. I was working with the *Indy Star*. In January, when I was walking out of that speech, it was snowing. We went down to Arlington to see John's grave, which is the way we grounded ourselves when we went down to Washington over the last few years. I found out that the plant had not received the production orders. This was months after generals told Congress in November that they had but the plant was in fact running at only about 25-percent capacity. We started to relay this information to Representative Marty Meehan and to Kennedy.

Heininger: Who were you dealing with in Kennedy's office?

B. Hart: Melissa Wagoner, Jarret Wright, and Mieke Eoyang.

Heininger: Not Sharon Waxman?

B. Hart: No, but Mieke was in charge of the defense side of his office. We started relaying this information, and then Bush gave a speech. In the 2004 State of the Union speech, he specifically said that in order to address the issue of equipment, he would get the troops the equipment they needed. Senator Kennedy called me after that speech and said he thought that Bush would come through with the equipment money, and to wait and see the budget in February.

In the meantime Dr. John Silber got Representative Jack Murtha to take a phone call from me. I called Jack Murtha in the witness of his staffer Gabby [Gabrielle] Carruth, and I told him that it was now confirmed that the plant was not producing because they had not received the purchase orders. Jack Murtha said I was lying, that I was dead wrong, that he had just heard from the generals that it was true, and that the plant was full out. He and I went toe to toe for about a half hour on the phone.

When he realized that we weren't crackpots, that we had the figures, and that we knew that the plant wasn't producing, I said that the money had not been appropriated. Jack Murtha said, "Goddamn it, I am appropriations. I told them that if there was any issue of money, I would fix it." So we left things. He said, "I have a general outside who has been cooling his heels for 20 minutes, and I'm going to confront him right now on this issue." Sure enough, the bastard did exactly that. A hearing was scheduled for early February to discuss the funding of body armor and vehicular armor.

Heininger: Because Kennedy wasn't on appropriations.

B. Hart: Correct.

Heininger: So through other contacts, you were also getting to appropriations in the House. Were you able to get to appropriations in the Senate?

B. Hart: No. In fact there's a thing in the Appropriations Committee in the Senate, which goes to this day, and it involves [Carl] Levin.

Heininger: So Murtha confronted the general.

B. Hart: Yes, and they called the acting Army Secretary Brownlee to a hearing. Brownlee said that the problem was that the plant was at full capacity. The transcripts are in there. The House Armed Services specifically asked him, “Can you confirm that? Would you go to the plant?” They pinned it because we had the production figures, and we had given them to Kennedy who had given them to Meehan.

The budget came out. There was no money for body armor, and there was an 800-unit production figure for armored Humvees, which was essentially the same budget from the year before. [Donald] Rumsfeld and [Paul] Wolfowitz had not put the money into the regular budget that Bush said, in the State of the Union Address, would provide equipment for the troops. The money wasn’t there. I asked for a meeting with Kennedy. I went to Kennedy’s office, the small one with the fireplace and the picture of—I didn’t even know who Honey Fitz [John Fitzgerald] was, but he seemed offended that I didn’t know.

Heininger: That was his grandfather, a former mayor of Boston.

B. Hart: There was also a big rudder from the ship that had been made into a coffee table, and a Gurkha knife.

Heininger: So you got into his hideaway.

B. Hart: Yes. He, me, Jarret Wright and Mieke Edyang were there. I was furious because I realized that President Bush had lied to the American public about getting body armor and vehicular armor to the troops. That was when I realized that it was not a mistake. We had thought that in a few months, this would be fixed, right? I mean, who would not put armor on our troops?

Heininger: They hadn’t put armor on the troops for a year.

B. Hart: Yes, but we thought it was possible they didn’t know.

Heininger: Once it hit the *New York Times*, though.

B. Hart: I had spent my time, up till then, making sure that the politicians and generals knew that the plants weren’t running. I found out that they not only knew, but they didn’t fund it, even going forward, despite the speeches that Rumsfeld and Bush and Schumacher were then giving to the press. I was so livid, I could barely sit still. Kennedy opened the transcript to a specific quote by him and Carl Levin, saying that if there were any question of money, they would make sure it got allocated or redirected. But the Pentagon assured them in the testimony that the plant was running 24/7, which we knew was false.

He pointed to the fireplace in his office and said, “Do you know what happened here in the early 1800s? The British came here, ate their lunch, lit their torches in that fireplace, and then went and burned down the White House.” I was sitting there looking for matches. That’s when I realized that the trust of the American public had been betrayed. That’s a fundamental change, because before that I thought it was a misunderstanding, a bureaucratic mess, but it wasn’t.

Brownlee, after those hearings, went to sit waiting for a plane at Andrews AFB. By then my sources were becoming incredible, and they had him overheard on a plane, on his cell phone,

saying, “I’m off to Ohio on a PR stunt to see a plant. I already know what’s going on,” a friend overheard him saying. Sure enough, it was supposed to be a secret trip. He flew to the plant, with the Associated Press showing up to meet him. He praised the workers for their production, and they said, “We can make more.” It’s all in the record. Then he flew back and said, “Sure enough, I found that we can get more production out of the plant.” He said it to the media, but there was no money to fund it. I was doing the calculations and I could see that we were running out of money for the war.

So at the meeting at the fireplace, in Senator Kennedy’s little office, I told him that I thought we needed a Budget supplemental, that his staff was right. Mieke said that it was almost impossible. There hadn’t been a supplemental since, I think, the Korean War. The Senator said, “This may be possible in this case because it doesn’t look like there’s enough money.” I was showing that they would start to run out of money in May.

We left and I flew home and talked to Alma. In the meantime we had sold our house here. We had built a house in Illinois, and our two daughters decided they didn’t want to move. I had had a severance because we recently sold that business, and I was a mess. So I elected to terminate. I spent a few months working on body armor and vehicular armor because it seemed like the thing to do. But we had no place to live. We were going to live in a hotel, and the dog went to the kennel, and it was snowing and cold. This was just before Christmas, and we had bought a house there. We were forced to sell here.

Heininger: What did you do with the house in Illinois?

A. Hart: We sold it in the second quarter 2004. We flew out, signed the papers, bought the house, and finished the whole thing there.

B. Hart: Brand new, beautiful.

A. Hart: I walked through it, did the sign-offs and everything. We had the morning appointment, bought the house, and went to see the final installment of *Lord of the Rings*, the third movie. Then we went back for the other meeting to put it up for sale. This was in December 2003.

Heininger: That must have been hard.

B. Hart: We drove by a huge lot full of yellow and red hummers.

A. Hart: As we were driving by them, I said, “Don’t look, Brian. Don’t look!” [laughter]

B. Hart: I was so angry.

Heininger: Oh, add insult to injury.

A. Hart: It was a huge lot.

B. Hart: That’s the first and only time we ever saw our custom-built new house. We flew back to Bedford, with no place to live. The town found us a house.

A. Hart: One of the town selectmen had a wife who was a real-estate lady, and she called and said, “I have a house for you.” The people who owned this house trained dogs. That’s why they had this house with a big backyard. They had gotten land up in New Hampshire, so this house was for sale. They were willing to rent it to us because they didn’t like the idea of Charlotte being stuck in a kennel.

B. Hart: To help our dog, these dog lovers rented us the house for six months, so we didn’t have to move to a hotel. Literally our house on Sibley Drive was being boxed. We did not know where the boxes were going, whether they were going to Illinois or here.

A. Hart: Our daughters were saying, “Please don’t make us move.” We said, “We can’t pull them out of their support group right now.”

B. Hart: A few days before Christmas, our stuff was moved into this house. I had lost my job. A former neighbor in Lexington, Debbie Ramirez, sweet-talked the nursery in Lexington into donating their display Christmas tree to us, since Christmas was almost over.

A. Hart: The nursery sold Christmas trees.

A. Hart: When she was telling them why she wanted it, they gave it to her to give to us. She showed up, and Brian was not home. No one was home, so Deb and I carried this Christmas tree up the front steps.

Heininger: So the town where you had felt hostility because your son had gone into the military turned around and—

A. Hart: Oh, they rallied around us.

B. Hart: It was like the Unitarians heaping coals on your head, coals of niceness. *[laughter]*

A. Hart: They rallied around us and were very good. People kept bringing food.

B. Hart: So we have an unusual relationship with the town.

Heininger: It would make me stay in a town—I mean, after you get a response like that from people you never would have expected it from. I mean, you obviously expect your close friends to help, but this was much more than just your close friends.

B. Hart: People and family who you thought would help instead ran away. Strangers who you never thought would help—

A. Hart: And we know other families who say this too.

Heininger: It is amazing.

A. Hart: It’s like we had a whole new set of friends. There are people who don’t even see you anymore, and all these people who never spoke to us before now were—

B. Hart: There was a period when no one wanted to see us. Like, they ignored us in the grocery store.

A. Hart: They didn't know what to say.

B. Hart: That was last month's news, but we were trapped in that, and the whole world had changed. Other families reported this too. There's a phenomenon that occurs with families that's something like a post-traumatic event.

Heininger: I think it's true for any crisis that people go through. You never know who's going to be there. People who you would expect to be there aren't necessarily there, and people you would think would never do anything come out of the woodwork. It's very odd. You learn who is fair weather and who's not.

B. Hart: So we have some people who thought we had gone to the dark side.

Heininger: Including some of your own family.

B. Hart: Yes. Then there are others, such as Senator Kennedy, who, unbelievably, help the lowly likes of us. He's trying to get this country to do the right thing on matters that go a lot farther than getting shot in the neck. They have to do with integrity and the betrayal of trust at the deepest levels, which this country has faced over the last five years.

Back to our story. There was a series of these hearings, back and forth, and our information became more and more accurate, to the point where we knew exactly what was produced before they did. In the meantime we were getting e-mails and phone calls from families of National Guardsmen whose parents had found out that they had no body armor. The casualty rates for National Guard transportation units in Illinois were among the highest in the country. The highest per-capita casualty rate turned out to be out of Vermont. Families started calling, wanting to know how they could help. We started putting email lists together, and we emailed information as we discovered it, and people started to contact their Congressmen.

Heininger: Your efforts were turning national at this point.

B. Hart: By default, not because of intent. We just had the information, and we thought it would take only a few months to resolve. What changed in the country was the soldiers' access to the Internet. They put out information almost in real time, and family members were mobilized. In prior wars, they had never tapped the National Guard, except for World War II. So there were 30- and 40-year-old cops and their families, and they weren't going to put up with the boloney that a 19-year-old would. They would call, wanting to know what they could do.

We decided that the best way to solve this portion of American history was to have the country support their troops, and that meant getting them the equipment they needed, and it resonated. We started going public, and all of a sudden CNN—not so much FOX—and MSNBC [Microsoft NBC] went public, and these National Guard families went ballistic. Before you knew it, Wolfowitz, in April, showed up in Congress asking for a \$20-something-billion supplemental that he hadn't needed a few months before.

The comptroller, [Dov] Zackheim, resigned on April 15, and Wolfowitz said, “I don’t want this money to be marked.” By that time Murtha and Warner and [Duncan] Hunter, whose son called him in the middle of the hearings to tell him that they were desperate for ballistic glass on their Humvees, decided that in fact they were being lied to, and they marked almost the entire funds for body armor, armored-Humvee production, and ammunition, which had been shorted. So the world changed, and the country, in 2004, was about who could support the troops more. That’s how it started.

Heininger: This must have been very gratifying to feel that you were doing something on behalf of your son.

B. Hart: Actually it was his friends to whom we felt we owed that obligation.

A. Hart: We buried John in Arlington on November 4, and we made arrangements with a restaurant to open up at about 3:00. There were, what, 70 of us? We all went and ate at the restaurant. People came from Texas and all over.

Then we flew home. We got home at about 11:30 that night. I got the mail out of the mailbox, and the first three letters from John’s buddies from Iraq had arrived. After that day, we sat there, read those letters, cried, and thought, *Okay, these are our sons*. That was a turning point in terms of what we could do for these boys. So yes, it was gratifying. It’s amazing that it took so long, that it was so hard, and that so many people have said to me, “The government is taking care of that.”

Heininger: Not unless they were pressed to do so.

B. Hart: Josh Sams, who had the vehicle run on top of him, after he recuperated was flown to Minnesota and was having his own issues as a survivor. He got in his truck, drove all the way to Washington, had a one-on-one meeting with Senator Kennedy, confirming all of the information we’d been giving him in order to make sure that Senator Kennedy was aware of the facts. Then he drove all the way back to Minneapolis. In the meantime these young men were showing up before they even went home. It affects you.

I won’t go on about all the budget shenanigans that went on, but it became a highly publicized and political issue, which we were driving hard. It was becoming nasty. I think even our computer was tapped, beginning in April of ’04. They weren’t wiretapping just people with strange names and swarthy skin. They were taping people like us, who were adamant now, becoming more and more angry at the way the war was being conducted—not opposed to the war but to the way it was managed. We met Kennedy at the body-armor plants out in western Massachusetts, and he was the only politician who had ever visited them.

The first supplemental finally worked its way through in August ’04. In the meantime the Army was so short of funds that they pilfered the last few months of the Army’s payroll money in order to keep the budget going and to make sure that Congress supported them. Can you believe that?

Heininger: Yes.

B. Hart: In the meantime Kerry decided to run for President. He won either Iowa or New Hampshire. We were scheduled in the winter to go to the body-armor plant. Then Kerry won, and the meeting was postponed out in western Mass with Kennedy. Kennedy called here. It was a snow day. The place was snowed end-to-end. He talked to our daughter Elizabeth, who was about 13.

A. Hart: Yes. She would have been in the eighth grade, I think, at that point.

B. Hart: Baking cookies here. I guess he must have been calling from his own kitchen at his home. They had a long conversation about cookies and blah, blah, blah. Lizzy hung up and called Alma and said, “Ted Kennedy just called. He’s important, right?” *[laughter]* She couldn’t remember who he was.

Heininger: Teenagers are in a world of their own.

A. Hart: He talked to her and said, “Could you have your father call me?”

B. Hart: When the supplemental was passed, it passed with two dissenting votes in the House and Senate, virtually unanimous. I mean, what more unification of the country could you expect than for the entire country, our entire Congress, both Houses, to come out in virtually unanimous support of funding for the troops. You will not find any article in the press where President Bush signed that. There was no signing ceremony, there was no public announcement, and there was no announcement from the White House. In fact we don’t even know where he signed it. But we knew it was signed, and we thought it was over. We thought the production plant was suddenly funded to at least capacity, as we knew it. We said, “Now we can go back to our lives.”

About a month passed, and in about September we started getting phone calls from people we had never met, who said, “We heard about what you did on armored Humvees. Why does our son not have armor on his truck?” We said, “What are you talking about? They are all armored.” We came to find out that the media had been saying, “Humvee, Humvee, Humvee,” because it was simple.

We had learned that you had to be succinct. We learned a lot about how to communicate the hard way, and one of them was that we didn’t describe two-and-a-half-ton trucks and all this. We described Humvees. Well, they had just funded the Humvees and not the trucks, so the insurgents simply shifted their attacks and were blowing the trucks apart. The National Guard families, who were largely running the transport companies, were calling us for help. We couldn’t believe it, because we were finally approaching the one-year anniversary, and we thought it was over with.

So we cycled back up again, and we went down, just before John’s one-year anniversary, with a couple of his high school friends, our daughters, and a general friend of ours from the Air Force over here at the base. It was a Sunday morning, and Congress had been running through session. It was just us standing in the cemetery. A black Navigator drove up, and Senator Kennedy and Vicki got out, with flowers and a rolled-up copy of the last night’s session, where he got about \$400 million into the budget to fund the retrofit armor of large trucks. That was in October of 2004.

A month later—on November 15, to be specific—the battle of Fallujah was raging, and Travis Desiato, who had gone to high school with John and whose father is a pediatrician here—

A. Hart: One year younger.

B. Hart: —was killed kicking in a door in Fallujah. So we had our second casualty in Bedford. I got in the car, drove over, and there they were at their kitchen table. Senator Kennedy called, and their whole life cycled like ours did. The police were out front to keep the media out of their house. People had gotten the routine down. Between 2003 and Fallujah in 2004, the country relearned its forgotten memories of how to deal with casualties. Our small town had retaught itself.

You would think that that would have been the end of things, but it wasn't. The next thing was electric counter LED jammers, and then things started to get classified. Well, that happened a year later.

Heininger: I'm surprised you hadn't encountered that up until then.

B. Hart: That happened in April and June of 2005.

Heininger: Because that's usually the first response when challenged.

B. Hart: It happened after a hearing where a Democrat, a conservative from Mississippi, named [Gary Eugene] Taylor, ripped Rumsfeld a new one. Congress had funded thousands of jammers to block the radio transmission that detonated IEDs, and only 200 had been fielded.

The day after that hearing, the Navy Secretary, apparently under orders from Rumsfeld, classified the information, which put us in a very difficult spot. They did it going into the 2006 elections. So for all of 2006 and 2007, you never saw a current photo of an American vehicle in the media. They were all old photos in the press. The *Newport News*, who had been tipped off by the Marines to photograph the damaged Marine vehicles—who were using amphibious vehicles in the Anbar Province, because they didn't have anything else—took photos and lost their credentials and were thrown out, because the Bush administration, going into 2006, had decided to hide the gross deficiencies and not repeat the issues that we had hit them with in 2004. That's a fact, and we could talk about that at length, but it would digress.

Anyway, as you see on the wall there, there was retribution, and part of the retribution was because we had figures from the production plant and the production company. In that case Armor Holdings was told that they had to turn over all their blueprints for the armored Humvees that they had privately paid for, the development, and that the Pentagon was going to send the production elsewhere. In the meantime Rumsfeld blocked funding for further Humvee production, and he did it in retribution to the plant. He got the Deputy to the Joint Chiefs of Staff to issue a memo saying that they didn't need any more armored vehicles.

Heininger: This was a period when the casualties were mounting.

B. Hart: This was in April of 2005. We talked with Senator Kennedy. We knew the score, and so did he. He went in with Senator [Evan] Bayh to fix the problem. They went in and they lost,

and the Humvee plant was to be shut down about May. [Daniel K.] Inouye was reading e-mails, which he had received from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who said they didn't need any more vehicles. Everybody knew it was a lie, but it was a budgetary and retribution issue. Senator called us at about 10:00 that night, and it was a losing battle. The next day he went back, and there was a roll call at about 1:08, April 21, 2005. He went across the aisle and got John McCain to throw a couple of votes, and when there were enough votes, it was 61-39.

Heininger: That's filibuster proof.

B. Hart: Right. It was actually 60-40 because one Senator changed his vote afterward, when he realized it was going to pass and he didn't want to be embarrassed. This is how the Humvee plant stayed open from what would be May, 2005 to October, 2005. At that point, they were making about 2,200 Humvees a month, which was about the same amount that the Army, a year before, had said they could make only in a year and a half total.

Kennedy sent me this roll call vote. "Senate roll call vote on the Bayh amendment to the emergency appropriations bill in Iraq, to appropriate an additional \$213 million for the Army to procure additional armored Humvees. Senator Kennedy was the principal cosponsor of the amendment," and blah, blah, blah. It shows the tally sheets and who voted. That's how this happened. This was a very mean and dirty time. There were more than 10 similar votes over the next five years.

Heininger: This was quite a political education you were getting.

B. Hart: Yes. They were going to shut the plant. Kennedy got the plant to stay open by getting McCain to throw a few votes. McCain, at this point, wasn't stupid, but he wasn't going to step out of line from the Republican efforts until he had to, and this was one of those times. If you look at where Kennedy was able to step across the aisle, with this single vote he produced enough equipment to cover somewhere between 10,000 and 20,000 people.

By July the Marines discovered that they needed more than 2,200 armored Humvees, of which they had none, all retrofit stuff. Even during this time period, I would find out that plants were not getting orders, including the one at Foster-Miller, down at Woburn, that made retrofit kits. I went down, interviewed the engineers, and then I called Mike Barnicle.

Heininger: Inouye voted against this. That's very surprising.

B. Hart: Well, Inouye is on the record, reading from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, saying that they didn't need this equipment. It's all in the record. This is *Congressional Record* stuff.

Heininger: That's an odd vote for him.

B. Hart: It was because they were being lied to at that point.

Heininger: Warner voted against it. That's odd too.

B. Hart: And that was that. This was just one. We've had five regular bills and five supplemental bills since John was killed. This was just one vote.

Heininger: What effect did this political activity have on your grieving?

A. Hart: I think it helped me, to do something concrete, to work on something to make the world and America better, and to protect the kids who are still alive. Personally I was always impatient with people who wanted to give me the come-to-Jesus speech: “You’ll feel so much better if you’ll just accept Jesus into your heart.” You know what? I’ll feel better when our kids aren’t coming home in caskets because of stupid mistakes. It’s bad enough we’re in a war.

B. Hart: In 2005 we watched thousands of troops get pulled out of the Anbar Province. Marines were being sent in to retake the same villages over and over. I was following everything at that point. We came to the conclusion that if we weren’t going to fight the war to win it, then we should be thinking about leaving Iraq. This was pre-Cindy Sheehan, pre-anything. We had been running a series of town forums here at the Unitarian church, discussing various issues of war policy and equipment, and Marty Meehan wrote a paper on a rational withdrawal.

In the meantime Sergeant Nick Pulliam, from Chelmsford, sent us a picture of himself in front of a blown-up Humvee that his unit had survived. You can see that the glass remained intact, as did the cabin, even though the whole front of the vehicle is blown off. It says, “Thanks to Brian and Alma Hart, Senator Kennedy, and everybody who cares for our well-being and makes an effort. You have saved lives.” We got this picture, made a copy of it, and gave it to Senator Kennedy, who has it in his office. We get stuff like that periodically, which keeps us going.

We decided in 2005 that this was nonsense, that we were simply retaking the same villages without enough equipment or men to make a difference. As a Gold Star Family, we made a public statement to that effect in June, and it was such a mindblower that it showed up, slightly misquoted, on the cover of the *Boston Globe*. It started to make national news that a Gold Star Family was questioning the Iraq War. Then we went to New Hampshire and met with a group of Quakers, a peace group. Peace was not quite where we were at, but we were becoming anti-war. We met a woman named Cindy Sheehan and a couple other Gold Star Families who had come in from Vermont. We had a very heart-to-heart public discussion.

A. Hart: Cindy was a mess, and she couldn’t see past her own family. She was making public statements that were based on her own heartbreak. Afterward we were talking and I said, “You need to get counseling. You have to get a grip on yourself,” and she said, “Fuck off!” That was my conversation with Cindy Sheehan. I’m clearly not the first person to tell her that she needed some help. This was before she went down to Camp Casey and all of that.

B. Hart: Alma and Sheehan don’t hit it off.

A. Hart: We didn’t hit it off.

B. Hart: I had grudging respect for her, and I developed, for a long time, a loose working relationship with her. Basically she went outside and I went inside. In August she camped out in front of Bush’s ranch, and the thing went electric. Between June and September, there was a 20-point shift in public opinion about the war. It was like we were declaring that the emperor had no clothes. Everybody felt it, but no one wanted to say it because of the implications and the political ramifications.

Heininger: What was the reaction of your extended family to everything you had been doing?

B. Hart: We largely disengaged.

A. Hart: We didn't hear much from them. Then one of Brian's cousins came up for business, and she came to see us. Brian told her he was tie-dying his Oxford dress shirts. *[laughs]*

B. Hart: But they raised enormous amounts of money and material for wounded soldiers. Like when Travis was killed in November of '04, I got a knock at the door, and John Saucier was there instead of Fallujah. John Saucier and John Hart enlisted together in 2003. John had been in Fallujah and Ramadi, and had gotten two-weeks leave. He showed up, didn't go home, didn't go see his family in Germany, where his dad was a chaplain at a base near Landstuhl. He flew here and showed up at our front door.

His mom Diane [Saucier] was literally welcoming wounded soldiers off the plane afraid that her son was among them, and John showed up at our front door. He was interviewed by Barnicle. This would be in the *Boston Herald*. It was the first article, I think, that Barnicle wrote when he came out of purgatory, the penalty box. I had a young soldier here who had enlisted with John and had gone through high school with him. With the Desiatos' death, the whole town was in another funeral.

A. Hart: Travis's death hit everybody hard. It was like somehow it was more than their share. For us to lose two was too much.

Heininger: One is a fluke. Two is too close for comfort.

B. Hart: Right. Two is a trend, and we were the first town in Massachusetts that had two.

A. Hart: Yes.

Heininger: Because, after all, wasn't this war supposed to be over? Weren't we supposed to have won?

A. Hart: Right. So Diane Saucier, John Saucier's mom, arrived and she worked with the chaplain there at Landstuhl.

B. Hart: Because her husband's a chaplain.

A. Hart: Her husband's a chaplain as well, and they took turns meeting the wounded coming in. The problem is, to move them from the Landstuhl Hospital to hospitals in the U.S., they put them on transport planes because they're in those hospital beds, and it's cold.

B. Hart: They take their clothes.

A. Hart: They're in those little johnnies and sheets. The chaplains were trying to get sweats and house slippers and stuff to put on these guys for the seven- or eight-hour flight in a transport plane, which isn't heated. So she arrived and she wanted to go to Wal-Mart to get clothes.

B. Hart: She showed up at our house because John Saucier, her son, who had been in combat for a second tour, showed up at our house and not hers. She flew from Germany, showed up here, and said, “I want to see my son.” [*laughter*]

Heininger: “You didn’t call your mommy.”

B. Hart: Who in the meantime had reenlisted on the anniversary of John’s death for four more years, which almost broke our hearts. He got a \$30,000 bonus, so he rented a giant black Hummer for the time he was here—which was making me insane at this point—and he was here to help. His mom left the casualties at Landstuhl, flew here to see her son, showed up here, and told us about how they couldn’t get enough clothes to put on their bodies. Though they were given an allowance to buy stuff at the PX across the base, they didn’t have any clothes. It was snowing, and the casualties were pouring in from Fallujah.

I called Patti Patton-Bader. We’ve developed these strange friends. Patti Patton-Bader was a descendent of General [George] Patton, and her son had been a lieutenant. She was out in California, and she had started something called Soldiers’ Angels.

A. Hart: Her brother had been killed in Vietnam.

B. Hart: She had contacted me early on, a year before, when she heard me on NPR talking about equipment situations, and she offered to help. She was a fundraising magician. My aunt, who had jump-founded her organization for—I don’t know how much the contribution was, but it might have been substantial—Patti ran with it and got all kinds of donations for materials. So I called Patti and said, “We have a problem. There’s no clothing at Landstuhl.” She immediately wired us, like, \$3,000, and said she would start raising more.

Well, she did. My aunts and my Texas relatives started contacting mega-churches that they were members of. Our friend, Helen [Bezas], whose son had been in Iraq and whose friend had gotten his elbow blown off while chicken winging—meaning, you hold the door, a retrofit armored door, on the vehicles, since they had no latches, since the material had been stolen. His elbow was holding the door on, and when the IED blew off, it blew off all the bones in his arm. We went to meet him at Walter Reed. His arm was flapping like Gumby. She got the Greek Orthodox Church’s bishop down in New York City to kick in. So we were at Wal-Mart with, I don’t know, 16 grocery carts full of clothing.

A. Hart: The first wave. Diane and us and our two daughters, who at that point were, what, 14 and 17, took racks and racks of t-shirts and underwear and socks and sweatshirts and pants and house slippers, and we piled them into our carts. We were standing in line at Wal-Mart. We had to make two trips.

Heininger: I can visualize it.

A. Hart: We had to go back because we couldn’t fit it all in the car.

B. Hart: Blankets and boxer shorts and cheap t-shirts.

A. Hart: A woman said to me, “What are you buying this for?” I told her why, and she said, “Oh, I don’t believe that.”

B. Hart: We ended up with a gargantuan amount of loot, and we shipped it all, tons of it.

A. Hart: Big boxes in our living room.

B. Hart: The whole place was filled with boxes. In fact we had some photos somewhere.

B. Hart: The Greek Orthodox churches in New York started sending stuff, and the mega Churches of Christ, out in Abilene, Texas, started sending floods, and they’re still coming. About six weeks later, Landstuhl asked them to stop because they ran out of room. So while we had estrangement in many relationships, at the same time, these same people—family members and strangers who we had never met but who have become good friends—were doing unbelievable things: money, clothing, boxes. It’s a fashionable thing now. We don’t worry it about it anymore.

Heininger: People want to help, and they don’t know how.

B. Hart: That’s exactly right, and that’s what was happening in 2004. The country wanted to help.

I read in your write-up about why you are doing oral history. What people need to realize is that the presumption that Americans are casualty shy, that’s not true. They are willing to take casualties if the cause is right. They are willing to bear the cost. The reason the cost of the war and the body bags and the funerals were being hidden was not because the country was casualty shy. It was because the cause of the war became highly suspect by the time the ’04 and ’06 elections occurred. That’s a fundamental, important point.

In ’05, after we went public, we got a contact from, I think, a colonel in the Air Force who had handled John’s body. He called and said, “Please do a Freedom of Information Act on your son, because I was in charge of mortuary affairs, and there was supposed to be a hearing because they were left behind. It was all covered up.”

Heininger: Was this pre- or post-Pat Tillman? About the same time?

B. Hart: It was all concurrent. The mortuary-affairs officer contacted us. He told us to do the Freedom of Information Act. We did it. Six months passed, nothing. Kennedy’s staff put a little lighter fluid under it, and we got a report back with essentially no information. All the documents were missing.

A. Hart: They sent us a letter saying they were very sorry, but they couldn’t access the computer that the information was on.

B. Hart: And the records seemed to be missing, and they couldn’t tell us what happened in any official capacity. This went all the way up to the Secretary of the Army. There was a letter to Kennedy from the Army Secretary—this was in 2006, because this had taken over a year—saying that the records were missing. We don’t know if it was retribution for what we had done, but we do know, as of October, that the colonel who was in charge of John’s unit was involved

in the cover-up of a fratricide. There was a *Salon* article—you can check it out—from mid-October, 2008, discussing a helmet video that showed the fratricide of two Americans in 2006.

The day after that article by Mark Benjamin came out, a colonel named Randy George, who was John's colonel, ordered that all of the records be cleaned out of the base at Fort Carson. The enlisted personnel who had been assigned to it realized that the records involved the killed-in-action soldiers in 2006, the actual individuals, and all the records were destroyed. They tried to reach CID, the Criminal Investigation Division, the whole thing. No one would help them. They were under orders, they followed the orders, and the records were destroyed. Same colonel.

Senator Kennedy has a staffer named Jay Maroney, who today is at Fort Hood and is going to Fort Carson to investigate the apparent hiding of friendly fire. There are almost no friendly fires documented—though I personally know of two of them—and none are documented properly. Friendly-fire events were covered up and are continuing to be covered up, as well as suicides, which are now becoming public.

Heininger: Yes, there's now press attention on that.

B. Hart: Jay Maroney was literally at Fort Hood and heading to Fort Carson to confront these officers about the apparent destruction of records and about the misstatement of friendly-fire events like Tillman's.

Heininger: The thing is, friendly fire happens, because mistakes are made.

B. Hart: Correct. Families recognize that. They just want the truth. Certain officers in the Army have determined that it's not in their best interest to tell the truth.

A. Hart: They use the families as an excuse.

Heininger: It is embarrassing, but it happens.

B. Hart: But the families want lessons to be learned. They want these deaths to have some meaning, and the meaning comes from a change of procedure—learning from the event. They want the death to result in the improvement of the lives of their sons, husbands, daughters, and comrades. That's the missing ingredient, and that's where the Army has totally missed the reality of what's going on. This is still going on today. We don't know the answer to this.

Heininger: Do you think things will change under [Barack] Obama?

B. Hart: Certain things have changed. For one thing, he has spoken out against the way those who are killed in action are covered by the media, about the restrictions on the media. Secretary [Robert] Gates, who I think very highly of—all my sources show that Secretary Gates largely saved the military from self-destruction—has agreed to review that policy. They're reviewing the policy, and he does not disagree with the Obama administration.

A. Hart: Especially covering the returning bodies. I think that's important, and they shouldn't use us as an excuse.

B. Hart: Yes, there is a change occurring, but we would like to see more. There's no clear policy or strategy in Afghanistan now, which will be a terrible thing.

One thing that sticks in my mind is that when we met Senator Kennedy in October that following year (2004) at Arlington—and there was another row or two that had formed up below John, and now there are something like nine of them—he said that what haunts him about this war is that he's seen it all before with Vietnam. From the time the country decided to leave Vietnam to the time it left, we had half again as many casualties. This is what he fears.

In 2006, on January 11, the Democrats won marginal control, Rumsfeld got the boot, much to my delight, and we were asked to come down to Senator Kennedy's event. We left the event early. It ran over in time, and we wanted to go to Arlington, see John, and go home, which we did. A few days later we were asked to come back, and frankly, we were running out of money. I flew down, but we never took a dime from anybody all this time. Well, Mike Barnicle bought me lunch once, but that was it, and we felt that was important because we needed to be an honest uncompromised voice.

I think it was the 11th of January, '07. I flew down, and Kennedy gave the speech at the National Press Club. We'd been to the Mayflower speeches in '04, and then we went to a speech at Johns Hopkins, which was highly contentious, because that was where Wolfowitz had run the international school, if you remember. So I went this time, just me. I think it was January 11, 2007. Alma would have gone if we could have afforded it.

It was his speech at the National Press Club, advocating that we leave Iraq. That was a standing-room-only crowd, mainly of journalists this time, applauding their heads off. I mentioned to him, "Where were these people the last three years?" All of a sudden it was fashionable to be anti-war. That was when I realized it had changed. Suddenly it was acceptable to talk about the war policy and to criticize it in public, because the press was there, packed to the brim with all the major news agencies.

Heininger: The mood of the country had changed. It makes a difference. Frankly the best way to deal with these things is to use the press. The press draws attention that the politicians can't afford not to pay attention to.

B. Hart: Kennedy was in the position to speak his mind when other politicians couldn't. Alma and I were in a position to speak because, frankly, we had nothing else to lose. That's one of the things that set us apart from so many other families and so many other politicians. We were, in a sense, inoculated from inevitable criticism. But by January of 2007, the entire thing had changed. The elections had occurred in '06 and the National Press Club speech happened in '07. You can see it on the news still. So the mood had changed, we recognized it, and frankly I was pretty much exhausted.

Senator Kennedy and Vicki got wind that I was going to Arlington after the National Press Club speech, because I had decided that if I were going to come down to D.C., I wanted to make just one more trip. He heard about it, I think, from his sister. It was funny. I was in a room with his sisters and his pillow behind his back and the whole thing. It was so surreal. He and Vicki got their car and a driver, and while he was being interviewed on his cell phone in the front seat, I

was sitting in the back seat with Vicki. We drove to Arlington, just a little group of us, and paid our respects to John in Section GB where we had met years before.

Heininger: That's quite a story.

B. Hart: In the meantime I've gotten involved in unmanned ground vehicles, robotics, after we watched a lance corporal get blown up while pushing a car bomb off a road in April of '05. We got a call in June or July of last summer, about 10:00 at night, from Senator Kennedy, wanting to talk about the funding for unmanned ground vehicles and how much was going to Michigan. Carl Levin's scooping all the money and shipping it to Michigan. He thinks that because it has wheels, autoworkers can make robots like Chevys. If it weren't so sad—

Heininger: Yes, right.

A. Hart: We're not going there.

B. Hart: But Kennedy's facts were wrong. He had the budget numbers wrong. That was the first time I've ever heard Senator Kennedy get the numbers wrong, and I knew it. I told him he was wrong, and he got upset. He said, "It was my hearing. I was there." I said, "Okay, I'll call Jay Maroney in the morning and sort it out." I hung up and I felt very bad. That's the first time I had ever heard him lose his temper.

A. Hart: Brian came in the kitchen and was completely puzzled.

B. Hart: I guess that was a Thursday night. On Saturday morning they hauled him to the hospital because he had had a seizure, and then he was diagnosed with brain cancer. We talked on the phone regularly, probably at least once a month.

Heininger: Even through this period of his chemo and recovery?

B. Hart: Yes. He called Alma on the anniversary of John's death.

A. Hart: He sounded pretty chipper, and we talked for a bit. He said he was looking forward to getting back to Washington and getting started on health care. That was October 18. We hadn't won the election yet, but he was gearing up for the good fight.

B. Hart: We continued to support his staff on information on armored MRAPs and jammers. The topics have changed. The problems, we've discovered, are systemic. The procurement issues, the too-little-too-late issues that we face in the military are recurring constantly, and there are some scandals about to erupt on the fake testing of body armor. I could go into about how 80 percent of the Marine casualties resulted from failure to put plates on their sides. Michael Moss of the *New York Times* broke that story a couple of years ago, and the information has yet to come out about the severity of the problems. Kennedy's staff is one of the few that will investigate these things further. We've become the conduit for credible information from all kinds of sources. Hopefully the agenda will shift away from the war, away from us, and toward healthcare.

Heininger: This has been quite a political education for you.

A. Hart: Absolutely.

Heininger: Have you enjoyed any of it?

A. Hart: Well, I have had to learn to live in the moment and to stop to enjoy things. Certainly the fondest memories I have of being with Senator Kennedy have been, like, walking down hallways. At one point we were waiting for the freight elevator, and we were listening to him talk to people who were scurrying around to see him. I remember him telling me about being in the room when his parents were notified that his brother Joe [Kennedy] had been killed in World War II.

B. Hart: Where his dad was, where his mom was, where he was.

A. Hart: When we went on the factory tour to see the armor, they had sandwiches and food for Senator Kennedy and us, and some other people were there. He gave his talk to a group of people. We had been given a tour of the factory. The workers were watching through the doorway. He finished his talk and then said, “Hey guys, there’s plenty of food over here.”

B. Hart: The whole factory basically ran for the food.

A. Hart: You have to love a man who would do that.

B. Hart: At the factory, we gave him one of those metal bracelets.

A. Hart: With John’s name and his KIA date.

B. Hart: He said he’d put it in a special place. We’ll know some day, whatever that means. He would make visits to Walter Reed. We got a letter after John was killed, asking us to help find two friends of his who had been wounded and who were at Walter Reed. They had misspelled their names, of course, so it became a very challenging issue, but Melissa Wagoner found them. We went down and started a lengthy relationship with the people at Walter Reed. That evolved into what became homes for our troops where they’re rebuilding, as well as some friendships with a wounded Alabama cop and other horribly wounded people.

We found out that there are basically three groups that visit Walter Reed. There are politicians, such as Kennedy, as well as a guy from Florida named Young, a Republican. His wife raises such hell that the staff booted her out for a while. And there’s Murtha. Murtha, in subsequent conversations we’ve had with him, has said, “I don’t believe anything the generals tell me anymore. Goddamn it, I just go to Walter Reed and ask the wounded guys what they need.” [laughter] That’s how procurement is allocated. In the last five years, it comes down to interviewing wounded soldiers at Walter Reed and having crusty old bastards like Murtha go in and sort it out. We were being told by the family of Nick [Scheider], who we went to see—

A. Hart: You can imagine they can spell that wrong. Nick and his wife Tabitha [Sheider]. We invited them to come see us.

B. Hart: They told us about the roof leaking and about animals getting in the back of the facility, the part that they don’t take the press to.

Heininger: Right.

A. Hart: So that story broke.

Heininger: That became a huge story.

B. Hart: When it finally came out in '06, Tierney ran the hearings, to his credit. They decided not to improve those facilities because they wanted to close Walter Reed and to consolidate everything at Bethesda in order to save money, and they didn't want to invest money in fixing the roof.

In the meantime they were so short of people. We visited soldiers who were stuck in hotel rooms around the area, doped up on meds so they would stay quiet and calm, with elbows that were missing, their arms shaking at the table. This is how we treated our returning veterans. Alma has taken quite an interest in helping them. First it was funding. Then there were issues like the Lucy family out in the western part of the state, where the soldier [Jeffrey M. Lucy] couldn't get into the VA [Veterans Administration], so he hung himself in the basement in front of a picture of his sisters and his Marine unit.

A. Hart: They sent him a letter saying he was 16th on the waiting list and that it would be at least six months. This is a letter they sent to a suicidal Marine.

B. Hart: So he hung himself. The underfunding of the VA was a reality for years and was known. Once I realized that these things were known and that they were not being addressed by the administration, I took a very negative view of how it was handled. I know it got funded before the recent elections, and I'm a realist about how things are done now, so we time our actions accordingly, and things happen slowly.

Now there are roughly 15,000 full-bore MRAPs. In the first couple years of the war, 40 percent of the IEDs were causing casualties, 2.5 casualties per vehicle. With retrofit armor that number fell in half. With full armor, it dropped to roughly one in six incidents that caused a casualty or an injury. Now with the MRAPs, their figures are closer to one in thirteen. So this work on armor, it saved a lot of lives. It's unfortunate that it came so late, but it wouldn't have come at all if it hadn't been for Kennedy. That's a fact.

Heininger: It wouldn't have come at all had it not been for John and your efforts.

B. Hart: Oh, it would have come years later. That's all.

Heininger: Not necessarily. It took someone to make it known.

A. Hart: I met a young Marine who had just come back. I think he was even on leave, and he said to me, "Ma'am, you don't need to worry. Things have gotten much better. We have this new equipment. You don't need to worry." He didn't realize what was going on when I was talking. I said, "Do you realize that the man you have to thank for that is Ted Kennedy?" That took him back.

B. Hart: Most people don't believe it to this day. It's so much easier to revisit the stereotypes rather than the realities, but we've lived it, we saw it and were in the room.

Heininger: That's, in part, what we do with this project.

A. Hart: Beat down the stereotypes?

Heininger: Well, when you start talking to people about what he's done and about their relationships with him, the stereotypes go out the window.

A. Hart: There is a big concern. There is a lot to be said for term limits. A lot of people should go into Congress for a short time, do some good, and then get out, people who have experience in and out and who make it part of public service. But the flipside is that you have people like Senator Kennedy and Congressman Murtha, who know the system, who know what they're doing, and who can get something through.

B. Hart: There's an institutional knowledge that has resided with only a few people, and it's in the old guard like Kennedy, who had seen how Vietnam started and stopped. That institutional knowledge has been lost. We saw it in the way our casualty events were handled, and we see it now in the way it has improved, where military planes are dedicated now so that kids don't show up in the luggage racks.

In so many ways the country has matured, and the reason I wanted to do this oral history is because people don't understand why the mood changed. Ten years from now, they won't understand the difference between what it was like in 2003, 2004, 2005, and what happened by 2006, '07, and '08. Why? Because this stuff isn't written down. They don't know. They don't want to go back and look at the transcripts of the hearings and see what casualties caused what hearings, which caused these chains of events that caused careers to end, caused generals to leave, Rumsfeld to be fired. These are enormous and critical incidents. It's probably why Rove went after Kerry's war record, because you have to discredit the critics in an environment where no one can afford to be against the administration.

People have to understand that the country was consumed by willful ignorance. Some of it was accidental, but good chunks of it were willful. Senator Kennedy had the guts, in January, 2004, to call a quagmire a quagmire. There were no other politicians in the room, and the place was like crickets. In January of 2007, at the National Press Club, the place was packed, and people could viscerally feel the change in trends. Yet we go to the same cemetery, the same graves.

A. Hart: Every time, there are fresh graves, and we meet other families there, and we show each other pictures.

B. Hart: There was a Vietnamese family that we met.

A. Hart: It was their only child. Bless their heart.

B. Hart: Their only son. They were burning incense and flowers all over. I think they came on the boat. I think they were boat people who made it to the U.S.

Heininger: And to lose their only child.

Well, this has been a privilege. I want to thank both of you for what you've done and for being willing to tell your story.

A. Hart: What I admire about Senator Kennedy is that he gets it. He's there to take care of people. His constituents matter.

B. Hart: Even the ones who didn't vote for him.

Heininger: Yes, because he represents all of them.

B. Hart: At some point in his life, he decided that he wasn't going to be President and that he wanted to be a great Senator. That's not necessarily a bad thing.

Heininger: He has gotten a lot done.

B. Hart: Right. I've often thought of confronting our relatives about the Medicare and Medicaid benefits they receive, and whether they might have had those without him, but there are only so many—

Heininger: On the subject of relatives therefore— *[laughter]*