

## **Hamar Benson**

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**Question:** We start out, if you could tell me your name and spell it so we have it on videotape itself.

**Answer:** ok. My name is Hamar Benson. H-a-m-a-r- B-e-n-s-o-n, born October 5, 1910.

**Question:** Where were you from originally?

**Answer:** I was born in Canada. Grew up in Minnesota. Been in... ever since. Lived in Auburn the last 22 years, the longest I've lived anyplace.

**Question:** So how long were you in Canada before you moved down here?

**Answer:** I was 4 years old when we, beginning of the first world war when we came back to the states.

**Question:** So why did your parents move like that?

**Answer:** Well, my father only went to the 4<sup>th</sup> grade in school, but when he was 14 years old he started working with steam engines and became a steam engineer and he went to Canada and worked steam engineer and in the wintertime he worked in the Canadian Pacific Railroad, and then my mother inherited some land in Minnesota, so they went back to Minnesota after the world war and borrowed money and built us a place to live. After a few years, the price dropped out of everything, they lost the farm so they left the farm with the shirt on their back.

**Question:** Was that during the Depression?

**Answer:** Well, that was before, yeah. That was in '26 after the First World War, you know.

**Question:** So then you moved from where after the farm?

**Answer:** We moved into town and my father hired out to different jobs and I was in high school. He wanted me to stop high school and get a job. I wasn't ready to do that, so I stuck it out and got high school and went on to college and got my degree.

**Question:** Where did you go to college?

**Answer:** Went to college in Minneapolis.

**Question:** Was that a divinity school?

**Answer:** It was a college, a Lutheran college. Then they also have a seminary there, so after I finished the college I went to the seminary also.

**Question:** So you're a Lutheran pastor?

**Answer:** Yes. I was ordained in '41. I'm in my 61<sup>st</sup> year of ordination this year.

**Question:** Congratulations.

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**Answer:** Thank you.

**Question:** So do you remember when Pearl Harbor happened? Do you remember hearing about that?

**Answer:** I was in my first parish in Wisconsin, and it was after that that I began to feel very un-restful, so I finally applied as a chaplain.

**Question:** Well, if you were in your first parish, you must have been almost at that time, you must have been getting ready to give a sermon I guess.

**Answer:** Yeah.

**Question:** 'cause it was Sunday. What time was it where you were that you heard?

**Answer:** Oh, it was in the evening as I recall that the news came through. It probably happened earlier in the day, but ..

**Question:** Took awhile to get back to the Midwest.

**Answer:** Yeah.

**Question:** Did you know where Pearl Harbor was when you heard about it?

**Answer:** Oh, yeah. I knew it was in Hawaii, you know.

**Question:** Did you think that that was going to happen? Was there any indication that we were headed for war did you think?

**Answer:** Well, I don't know how much I thought about that, but of course, President Roosevelt gave his speech very shortly after that, you know.

**Question:** So now did you volunteer, or how did you get...

**Answer:** Yeah. I had to enlist in or apply to be a chaplain. I worked through the echelons to get accepted.

**Question:** In '41 you were accepted then?

**Answer:** Yeah. Well, no. I didn't actually apply for chaplain until '42. In '43 I got my uniform and was accepted and...

**Question:** Were you married?

**Answer:** Yes, I was.

**Question:** What did your wife think about your wanting to volunteer?

**Answer:** Well, I don't remember that we had much discussion about it. She just accepted that that's what the Lord wanted me to do, so that was it.

**Question:** So now, you went in as an officer then.

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**Answer:** Yes.

**Question:** Were you a second lieutenant or something like that?

**Answer:** hmm hmmm, second lieutenant. I was fortunate. I went over as a casual to Europe. Now first I was assigned to a anti-aircraft outfit in 3<sup>rd</sup> Army and I got up there and their push from the beaches up to (inaudible). you know, that went pretty fast. They'd already got another chaplain, so I was in a replacement depot in Belgium, and a warrant officer came and was ordered to take me back to Paris to join an ordinance outfit which served an anti-aircraft outfit, so I had troops from Marseilles to Belgium, from Verdun To the English Channel. I was traveling about 2,000 miles a month just to visit these companies, you know, on our battalion.

**Question:** So it was you and the driver?

**Answer:** I had a GI, a private, for my driver.

**Question:** So your parish was out in the field, then?

**Answer:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Question:** Did you, were you always on the road, or did you ever have a church somewhere?

**Answer:** Well, when we finally, we got up in Baden-Baden Northeast of Frankfurt, and there I used a church, a German church, and then when the war ended I thought the room to be shipped to the Pacific, but our outfit was deactivated, and I stayed on with occupation troops, and then I stayed in Baden-Baden with the occupation troops then.

**Question:** So earlier when you were based in Paris and driving around, you drove to every battery in your group?

**Answer:** Yes. Well, every company.

**Question:** So what would happen when you would show up at a company? What would you do?

**Answer:** Well, I just get acquainted with the fellas, and on Sunday's I'd have services and I remember one night they were having a party. This one guy, he was pretty heavy, and he had too many drinks, and he fell and he broke his ankle. It was a bad break. We had to load him on a weapons carrier and those roads were in bad shape 'cause of the war and that was the roughest drive I ever had. He had enough alcohol in him I guess it sort of took the pain away, but I visited him afterward in this hospital and he really had a miserable time.

**Question:** So you'd drive out to a group and just sort of made yourself known and available in case someone wanted to talk to you.

**Answer:** Yeah. When I was back in Colorado, we had a motorized ambulance outfit that changed to a mountain ambulance up in the mountains. They were up in the mountains practicing in letting people down in stretchers, and one time one rope

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broke and you had three like that. Fortunately, he was strapped onto the stretcher, so nothing happened to him, but...it was a pretty close call.

**Question:** So were there all sorts of chaplains? Were there Lutheran and Catholic and ...

**Answer:** When I joined the 311<sup>th</sup> Ordinance in Paris, that night the GI's came and Headquarters came to get acquainted, you know. They didn't want to get another pastor. They had two before, I mean chaplains. One of them gambled and took all their money. The other one drank all their whiskey. They didn't want another chaplain, so they had to see what kind of guy I was.

**Question:** Wanted to see if you were a gambler or not, huh?

**Answer:** Yeah.

**Question:** So did the, did you get a good turnout on your Sunday services?

**Answer:** Well, we had thought about that. I suppose it's about like in the average parish in any home community, you know. Certain percentage would come, and the rest of them didn't, so that's about the way it was there, too.

**Question:** So did a lot of people come to you with personal problems?

**Answer:** Well, yeah. They came with different problems, yeah.

**Question:** for like homesickness, or...

**Answer:** I met one guy that came that he was very, when he got in the service his wife found somebody else, so he didn't have a wife.

**Question:** He was pretty hurt, was he?

**Answer:** Yeah.

**Question:** Pretty hard to say anything to somebody that was...

**Answer:** Yeah. When I was in Camp Carson, Colorado, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army training, there was a quartermaster battalion. These guys had been in there for several years, you know. They were aching to get overseas. So they had a lot of fellows that were screen out combat units would come into there, so they would put them through the paces and training and get them ready for overseas. One guy had a heart attack and died in the hospital that night. And when I got my orders, all of a sudden, I'd just been there a month or so, and I got orders to go overseas. Boy, they were really bellyaching. They wanted to go overseas. I heard afterward they did get to go, finally.

**Question:** So, now you're wearing an Army Air Corps patch. Now you were attached to the Army Air Corps to start?

**Answer:** I went out as a casual. I went overseas as a casual, and then I was assigned to an anti-aircraft outfit, and they'd already got that filled so I was taken back to Paris to be part of the ordinance battalion that served the anti-aircraft.

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**Question:** oh, ok.

**Answer:** so I got to the anti-aircraft anyway.

**Question:** So you were still sort of Army Air Corps then.

**Answer:** Yeah. It was under 9<sup>th</sup> Air Defense Command. Under 9<sup>th</sup> Air Force, but they called it 9<sup>th</sup> Air Defense Command.

**Question:** So now you were always based out of Paris when you were moving? In a jeep when you were going around...

**Answer:** No, we went from Paris. I joined them in Paris. From Paris we went to Wiesbaden.

**Question:** Oh, so you were moving.

**Answer:** And from Wiesbaden We went to Baden further out in....

**Question:** So Wiesbaden. What was Wiesbaden like when you got there?

**Answer:** We stayed there. We lived there in a vacated house off of base. And the thing that impressed me about that was German civilians came and they would strip tile off the roof and lumber off the buildings, take them home to repair their own homes. I didn't see that in France. That was the big difference. The French, they just let things go, you know, but the Germans repaired it.

**Question:** Yeah, Wiesbaden, that area was pretty heavily bombed before you got there.

**Answer:** Yeah. All those places. I don't remember Wiesbaden but what I remember about Wiesbaden was a huge garbage dump and we used to drive by there and see returned civilian people fighting over the garbage. When we got to Frankfurt, they had bombs and they had to bulldoze the streets so you could drive there, you know. That was down on the coast, too, had bombed those places. Just leveled everything.

**Question:** There was a lot of things weren't very good, there was a lot of starvation in Germany at that time, too, wasn't there?

**Answer:** Yeah. I remember in Paris I met a French family that said for several months all they had to eat was carrots. Not enough food. I was with one company up toward Hamburg and they ran out of...all we had was grapefruit juice and some vegetable is all we had to eat. They ran out, you know.

**Question:** So were in Europe at the time the Battle of the Bulge occurred?

**Answer:** Yeah.

**Question:** Was that a surprise that the Germans could do that?

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**Answer:** Well, I guess it was kind of a surprise, but we were in Ruan Between Paris and the coast and some of the people got pretty cocky, nudge you off the street, you know. They felt maybe the Nazis would take over again. It's unbelievable.

**Question:** They thought they would turn the tide of the war again, huh?

**Answer:** Yeah. And the strange thing, they used to come with their pails, you know, when we had our chow line and pick up the scraps. One of the fellows talked with to them and asked.. What do you do with that when you get it home? He thought maybe they fed it to their chickens or something. No, they put it on the table to eat. That's what war does.

**Question:** It was pretty devastating, wasn't it, for Europe?

**Answer:** Yeah. Oh, yeah.

**Question:** Was that hard being away from home?

**Answer:** Well, of course I was always pretty busy, traveling and going. I didn't have much time to sit around and be lonesome.

**Question:** Did you get lots of letters from home?

**Answer:** Oh, yeah. I got letters.

**Question:** You write lots?

**Answer:** Yeah.

**Question:** They always find you? Your mail was pretty good at finding you wherever you were?

**Answer:** Well, sometimes it was quite delayed. Then again it would come through pretty quickly.

**Question:** Did you have to ever deal with things with soldiers that was very hard for you to deal with?

**Answer:** No, I really didn't have anything. I had that one guy that broke his leg, you know, and small cases like that. When I was up at replacement depot you could see the fire explosions at night and hear it, you know, but a young GI came and they directed him to my tent, I guess, and he was AWOL, you know, from his outfit. So we talked about that, what he should do, you know. Was actually no place else for him to go. You go back to his outfit and tell them that he just couldn't take it and he took off and asked the Lord to give him strength to stick in there, you know, and we talked about that, and finally he decided Well, that's what he's going to do and he took off again. Went back up there.

**Question:** Did you have a lot of discussions like that with...

**Answer:** No, that's about the only one like that I ever had.

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**Question:** No one ever questioned what they were doing?

**Answer:** Not really. No. Most of them were there. I remember when I joined my outfit in Paris, they said that the chaplain they had in England before they came across the Channel, he got orders, so he got transferred before he crossed the Channel to go over to the foxholes.

**Question:** He avoided it, huh?

**Answer:** Yeah. That's one way to do it, but I don't know how a GI, he can't ask for a transfer. I suppose he could, but it wouldn't work very well.

**Question:** So your driver and you, driving a couple thousand miles like that. Did you ever get lost driving around?

**Answer:** I remember once we went in, drove up to Belgium and to ask for directions and was an MP that gave us directions, and, no he was English, but he gave us the directions and about two sentences and the final words he said, You can't miss it. We took off and we were lost again.

**Question:** It must be pretty hard to find your way around in all that country where war is going on.

**Answer:** Yeah. I was in Europe for a year and a half, sun came up in the west and went down in the east all the time. So I had to figure out where I was going someplace, you know, had to take stock of my thinking and go the opposite.

**Question:** Did you have much to do with the French people when you first got to France?

**Answer:** Well, I met this family. She taught English at the City University of Paris, and their idea was that in the United States you get west of Chicago. All there was out there was wild Indians and savages. Different concept.

**Question:** Yeah, they probably still think that.

**Answer:** Yeah, some of them probably do.

**Question:** When I was back, when I was in the Navy I went back to Rockford, Illinois, and everybody I met in Rockford, Illinois, wanted to know if we really had Indians out here.

**Answer:** Yeah. Yeah. The most surprising thing. We went to Harvard to chaplain orientation for chaplains training, you know, and one of the chaplains was from Vicksburg, Mississippi, and somebody said something one morning, we had the cafeteria to ourselves for breakfast, and boy it bugged him. He said that Lincoln was no better than Hitler. Surprise you, this country has ideas from the Civil War are still in vogue, you know.

**Question:** 80 years after the Civil War?

**Answer:** Yeah.

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**Question:** Yeah, surprising. I think even today they still think that, huh?

**Answer:** Yeah.

**Question:** Speaking of the south, did you have black chaplains for the black troops?

**Answer:** We had a troop at Camp Fort Carson, Colorado. They were all blacks. They had been a motorized, then they went to a mountain rescue outfit, and they had a colored pastor, black pastor, from Colorado Springs come out and preach to their chapel in their service and they had a pretty big attendance at their, using the chapel, but what surprised me was that how they drag the hymns, you know. I'm a Lutheran, you know, and I thought Lutherans dragged stuff, but boy, they, I couldn't even keep up with them.

**Question:** Like Baptist type church?

**Answer:** Yeah. They're usually more lively, you know, but they dragged them.

**Question:** Oh, they weren't that lively?

**Answer:** No, no, they just dragged the hymns. I could hardly sing that slow.

**Question:** Huhh. Did the, the German people. Did you talk to many Germans over there?

**Answer:** Well, we lived in a German house in Baden and the housekeeper was a young lady that took care of the house, you know. And I got acquainted with the family. These were Latvians, but they came from Latvia. This lady's father had been a pretty high official in the czar's regime, and when the Bolsheviks came they fled to Latvia, and he was head of a big hospital in Latvia when the Communists took over there, then they fled and this one young couple had a little child, and another couple that they knew had an infant also, and the parents were killed in a bomb blast, and this young couple took their baby that survived, and walked 300 miles to cross into Germany to refugees. And this doctor and his wife, they were Russian, but they had come from Latvia, and they wanted to go to either the United States or Argentina, and they had morphine stored in their purses. If they were ever captured by the Communists, they'd never go back to Russia alive.

**Question:** It's something to walk all that way to get away from something. Did you, when you had your church in Germany, things were a little more normal, were they?

**Answer:** Yeah. We were kind of stationary there, you know, and...

**Question:** Was it a Lutheran German church, or was it...

**Answer:** I think it was the Orthodox, I supposed you'd call it a state church. It was a neat church. They had electric heat, 'cause there was no heat...on the floor, electric...but there was no heat and it was cold in there.

**Question:** Was the parish, the German priest still at that church?



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**Answer:** I never got acquainted with him for some reason or other.

**Question:** Were they there, or were they gone?

**Answer:** I don't know. This one...on the outside of the church they had a list of missing persons you know. The whole wall of the church, and I remember one young teenager came in there, about 16 years old, I suppose. She was looking for her family. She'd traveled all over looking for her family. Missing people all over, you know.

**Question:** There were a lot of missing people in Germany, wasn't there?

**Answer:** Yeah. We used a machine shop, in fact, I have an old, I have a pistol...22 caliber pistol that was made there, you know. We got the parts and put it together, fashioned it, and uhh.....

**Question:** So what type of sermons did you give over there on Sundays?

**Answer:** Well, I usually, one chaplain said a composite preaching the word of God. That's my limit is what the word of God says and what God's plan is. That's the basic plan. Last week I went to PLU and this man, Norwegian, from Norway, he'd been a Prime Minister. He'd been involved in lots of activities, groups and working, you know, and I gave my personal touch of what the Lord does, and it was interesting, you know. It kind of stumped him. He didn't know how to handle a personal testimony. He's always talkin' about getting together and talking about the plans of what the Lord's doing. That was kind of strange to him. The first time I've run across that. So I usually try to preach from the Bible. You know, the universe belongs to God, the Almighty. He's carrying out his purpose, and he's wanting us to put our trust in him and what he's doing. And I believe that he's the only one big enough to really handle this and straight it out with all the multi-pluralism and all the different ideas raging in the world. Who can bring order and peace out of this chaos.

**Question:** So did you, did you think that in World War II that they were fighting great evil in the world?

**Answer:** No doubt about that. I was in Buchenwald And saw the horror of it, you know, and people living months at a time with hardly anything to eat, you know. That's right in the city of Paris and that was Paris. They never bombed Paris. That was protected. So there was no question about it that there was a terrible scourge that his the world with the Nazis.

**Question:** When were you in Buchenwald, right after it was....

**Answer:** Right after it was liberated, so you could see. They hadn't really cleaned it up yet, you know. Stacks of bodies. Wasn't cleaned up, latrines, it was just filthy.

**Question:** Were you there as a priest or were you there as a...

**Answer:** I was there as a chaplain, as a part of my outfit. Our commanding officer, our executive officer in Buchenwald went in there and visited.

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**Question:** Did anybody turn you for help after seeing those things?

**Answer:** Well, we weren't in a position to really help anybody, you know, uh, in that situation. And of course the victims of the camp were all removed, you know. In fact, one young fellow, Polish fellow had been in there I think since the beginning, so there was no color left in his face, and he went through the camp with us and explained all the different situations, you know. He took us down one little hallway, and there would be a Nazi soldier with a gun, you know, and he'd just club the prisoner over the head and dump him down the shoot. Down there was, next room was the 3 crematoriums and furnaces. Just drag them over there and stick them in the furnace. And the hospital beds, a  $\frac{3}{4}$ -sized bed with 3 patients on it, and stuff like that, you know. Unbelievable! Unbelievable that human beings could treat other human beings like that.

**Question:** So that's something that you never forgot...the things you saw.

**Answer:** You never dreamed anything like that could happen, you know. I had a German professor in this country, and what he thought about Hitler, you know, and to begin with Hitler did some pretty good things. Like for example, he built the super...the autobahn, you know. You could go 60, 80 miles an hour across Germany. And so people in this country they got inviting him to come over there, you know, and visit to see what they're doing. Of course, they only see the good things, you know, not the desperate things that was hidden, you know. So that even the people near Buchenwald, when it was cleaned up and then they got to see it and the results of it, they didn't believe it. It was like people to day don't believe that the Holocaust happened. But there right next to it, they weren't aware of what was going on there, so...

**Question:** Some people try to rewrite history, too, don't they? They try to claim it didn't happen.

**Answer:** Yeah. Yeah. They were doing that. They were over there trying to rewrite our own history, and denigrate the heroes of the past like there was nothing to it. I just. There's a book written about Lincoln that goes against everything he stood for. Somebody digging up stuff to pattern something like that. Can you believe that?

**Question:** So in the, in Germany, how long were you there during the occupation?

**Answer:** Well, I suppose I was there about half of my time. I was there 18 months. I suppose I was there about 9 months in Germany before it got settled down, or maybe a little less than that. It's kind of hazy back then just when I moved.

**Question:** Do remember the day that the A bomb got dropped and ended the war in the Pacific?

**Answer:** Yeah. I remember that, too.

**Question:** That surprising that there could be something that powerful built? Do you think that that was a good thing or a bad thing to use the atomic bomb?

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**Answer:** Well, you know, that's a pretty tough question, but it ended the war. Although we did two of them, didn't we. That's a strange thing, you know, that with all our expertise as human beings, we can't talk ourselves out of something. We have to go to war and destruction. Just like now, we're gonna go down and take out Saddam Hussein. Maybe that's the only way to do it. I don't know, but there should be with the United Nations, there should be the burden of human opinion should almost compel Saddam Hussein to give up his evil way, but we don't seem to be able to do it, do we? So, we've got some pretty big problems.

**Question:** There's no way to avoid a conflict, though, sometimes for us, is there?

**Answer:** Well, that's the way it seems to be, you know. We... it gets to that point and that's the only way to do it. I read this book my Pat Buchanan, you know, right after the 2000 election on the decline of the, the death of the West, and he gives statistics about what's happening in this country. It's depressing to read it. But it's backed by statistics of what's going on. It's kind of scary, you know.

**Question:** You have to have hope for the world, though, don't you?

**Answer:** Well, of course, mine is the Biblical one, that when the Lord Jesus was on the earth, he predicted. He's told before and he's going to Jerusalem, he's going to be crucified and will rise again on the third day. There's no form of any religion that's ever done that. But he also said that at some future date, it came the first time to save the world, he's coming back again at an unknown date. He's going to rule this world and righteous and justice, establish his righteousness and justice across the earth. That's the greatest promise I know. And he's the only one big enough to do it, 'cause he created it in the first place. If we believe the scripture, you know. I was studying the Bible, and I discovered that Jesus was the one that created it in the beginning. Took me 22 years to find that out and see it clearly. So...

**Question:** You're proud of your time in the service?

**Answer:** Oh, I'm thankful for that. You know, it was strange that I really got a tour. I went in as a second lieutenant in August and I was overseas in August. In November, my commanding officer sent in for my promotion to Captain. And I talked to men were over there for two or three years and still second lieutenant, and I got to travel from Marseilles to Belgium, from the Channel to the Coast. All over the place, you know, and most of them were tied down. So I was really fortunate. I was thankful for it. I wouldn't want to repeat it, but I was, unless I had to. I was thankful I didn't have to go to the Pacific.

**Question:** Did the trip over there, was it as bad as the trip home?

**Answer:** Yeah. I was, I wasn't as sick, well I was sick both ways. I was seasick, but coming back on that liberty, I had to write a piece for the ship's paper every day, you know, so that kept me occupied. One day I was walking along in the galley there and they were, had steaks they were preparing for the evening meal. I, Wow! We get a decent meal for a change, but no. All we got's some soup and stuff. That was for the crew.

**Question:** When you see the American flag, what do you think? Are you proud of that?

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**Answer:** Oh, yeah. That's a great symbol, you know. Greatest symbol for probably the greatest nation that's ever been on this earth, and no wonder that Lincoln said that this nation was the last best hope for earth, and I believe it, because we've been a nation for over 200 years, but we've never been able to transplant our democracy anyplace else, have we? We really haven't, so from Palestine to, uh, Pakistan, they were rooting in the streets and praising, shouting, praising for what was happening. In New York, what does that say about this world, you know? If we're going to go off and remake all these nations that hate us today, that's a big job. I don't know if we're equal to it.

**Question:** Yeah, it's hard to see any solution to it, is there?

**Answer:** Yeah.

**Question:** I think that fight's been going on for a long time.

**Answer:** Yeah. It has. Well, it's about 6000 years of recorded history. There, has there been any real peace and prosperity really you know.

**Question:** Even for our country, it seems like we don't go for a long time with total peace.

**Answer:** Yeah. There's more agitating than ever, seems like. Isn't getting any less. People are agitating about all kinds of stuff.

**Question:** Yeah. Hopefully we'll learn how to solve things without conflict. Do you think that's possible?

**Answer:** Well, I think we're just one struggle after another, one mess after another. That's the way it looks like it's been, and I don't see much evidence to say it would be any different. I would like to see it. I've been studying history, especially in, you know, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was Communism and Nazism, tried to wreck the world, and now in these Arab countries, Islam. The only democracy is that country, that part of the world is the Jews. For 50 years they've been trying to destroy them. And now they want to destroy the United States. The United States is the great demon, the great devil. They want to destroy the United States. That's their goal, to make the world an Islamic state with dictatorship, no freedom at all. That to me looks like it discourages the 21st century. I hope I'm wrong.

**Question:** Yeah. I hope so. This looks like there are going to be lots of problems over there, doesn't it?

**Answer:** Yeah.

**Question:** Hopefully, the don't get us too involved.

**Answer:** Yeah.

**Question:** Well, it was nice talking to you.

**Answer:** Yes. Nice to talk to you.