

**Rachel Maddow presents: Burn Order**

Dec. 1, 2025, 2:31 AM EST

Episode 1: Safecracker

A document that is not supposed to exist

*The bombshell discovery of a report that U.S. government officials had ordered burned has the potential to expose the truth about one of the most radical policy decisions in all of American history. A policy that one young Naval intelligence officer desperately tried to warn his superiors was unwarranted and unnecessary.*

**TRANSCRIPT**

**Rachel Maddow:** The summer of 1982.

**Bryant Gumbel:** Good morning, this is “Today.” It’s Tuesday, Aug. 17. I’m Bryant Gumbel.

**Rachel Maddow:** Year two of the presidency of Ronald Reagan.

**Bryant Gumbel:** That was President Reagan in a nationally televised speech last night from the White House making a sober plea to Americans.

**Rachel Maddow:** The No. 1 song in the country is “Eye of the Tiger.” (MUSIC PLAYING: “EYE OF THE TIGER”) The summer’s smash hit movie is “E.T.” (MOVIE DIALOGUE: “E.T. phone home”) And in Washington, Democrats and Republicans are at each other’s throats over a big controversial bill to raise taxes.

**Ronald Reagan:** What we need now is an end to the bickering.

**Rachel Maddow:** In that summer of 1982, there is a researcher posted up inside the National Archives, which is just a few blocks from the White House. This researcher has been coming to the Archives for years. It’s basically her second home. On a typical day, she’s at the Archives right up until closing time.

She’s maybe five feet tall. She’s got big glasses. She’s usually got a brown-bag lunch with her, and also her own personal copy machine that she lugs to and from the Archives every day. But she’s not a professor or an author who’s there doing research for a book. She’s not a 20-something student, either.

Quite the opposite, in fact. She is a retiree. She’s a retired housewife living in suburban Washington, D.C., and she started coming to the Archives basically as a hobby.

**Lori Bannai:** It started just out of her own interest to do research in the National Archives.

**Rachel Maddow:** This hobbyist researcher, this retiree — her name is Aiko. Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga.

**Peter Irons:** One of the great blessings in my life was meeting and getting to know Aiko.

**Rachel Maddow:** Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga hasn't had any formal research training at all, but in her own way, with her own methods, she's developed an almost uniquely encyclopedic understanding of what's in the parts of the archives where she has been spending all of this time.

**Lori Bannai:** She knew the archives like the back of her hand. She would go there every single day, look at all of the government documents. Her husband would join her.

**Rachel Maddow:** When Aiko's husband, Jack, gets off work in Washington, he often heads straight to the National Archives himself. He finds Aiko in there. He rolls up his sleeves to work alongside her. It's a passion they share — to the point that it has ended up kind of taking over their lives a little bit. Or at least, it has taken over parts of their house.

**Peter Irons:** Her files that she'd accumulated over the years took up the whole inside of their condo. Even in the bathroom, there were boxes. Aiko was the most dogged researcher that I have ever met, and I've been praised as a dogged researcher, and she was way, way ahead of me.

**Rachel Maddow:** Part of what makes Aiko so effective in her work in the Archives is that she's developed her own very specific, very detailed filing system. She uses that portable copy machine to make her own copies of some important documents, but she also creates her own sorting system — her own index, basically — of where every document is and how each of those documents connects to every other document.

**Peter Irons:** She took such meticulous notes. Every piece of paper that she saw was given a number so that she could keep track of them. And this was way before computers. This was all hand done.

**Kenneth Ringle:** I mean, she is like your dream researcher. God, you talk about somebody who can find anything. And what was it she found? She found a document.

**Rachel Maddow:** One afternoon, in that summer of 1982, Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga is at her usual perch inside the National Archives. And she does spot this one document sitting on the corner of a desk. It's a document that is not supposed to exist.

And because it's not supposed to exist, Aiko has not been looking for this thing. Nobody has been looking for it. But when she sees it, Aiko — of all people — she knows exactly what it is.

**Lori Bannai:** She was talking to someone and then noticed this document on the desk of somebody else, and kind of looked at it and just kind of thought, *Wow*.

**Frank Abe:** And she opens it up and she finds these handwritten notes in the margins, and she realizes, *Oh boy*.

**Lori Bannai:** She talked about it with her eyes getting really large and just saying, "Wow, this is — do you know what this is?"

**Peter Irons:** When Aiko picked it up and started leafing through, she immediately — her expression — “Oh my goodness, look what I found.”

**Rachel Maddow:** The document that Aiko found that day, it’s a government report. But it is also a ghost. There’s a good reason she never would have looked for it: It’s because there’s no file, no record anywhere, no index card, no catalog that would have ever pointed her to it.

The only record anyone has found — the only record Aiko has ever found about this document — explicitly says that every single copy of this document has been destroyed. Every single copy of this government report was officially certified to have been incinerated. Destroyed on purpose. By fire.

But here it is — not even singed, not even smoky — sitting right in front of her.

**Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga:** As soon as I opened it, wow. I said, “Pow, this is it!” And it was luck. It was luck. If I hadn’t walked in that day, it might not have been there.

**Rachel Maddow:** It wasn’t really luck.

Aiko was there that day because she was there basically every day. And because of that, because of her dogged persistence, she has made this find. She has spotted this document that the U.S. government never wanted anyone to see — this document they insisted must be destroyed because of what it had the potential to reveal about one of the most disturbing chapters in American history.

**Peter Irons:** We all instantly understood that if this gets out, the government is going to look really, really bad. This was something that nobody could have foreseen in their entire life. I, I still get a little choked up about that, because it changed my life.

**Rachel Maddow:** Ultimately, it would change a lot of lives. This retiree, this self-described “little old housewife,” she was about to change the course of American history.

I’m your host, Rachel Maddow, and this is “Rachel Maddow Presents: Burn Order.”

**Imiko Madokoro:** I never believed that America would be doing this.

**Kenneth Ringle:** When he told me about it, I was astounded.

**Lori Bannai:** It was that classic smoking-gun evidence that every lawyer wants to find.

**Gordon Hirabayashi:** If I believe in a constitution, I’ve got to object to this.

**Peter Irons:** This is about all of us. It’s about all Americans. Why did this happen? What can we do to make sure it doesn’t happen again?

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**Rachel Maddow:** Episode 1: Safecracker.

**Kenneth Ringle:** I think he won a Spanish prize in high school or something. He was very fluent in Spanish. He was very good with languages.

**Rachel Maddow:** That's Kenneth Ringle. He's talking about his dad, who was an intelligence officer in the United States Navy.

**Kenneth Ringle:** He was on a destroyer that went to Spain. And my father loved the Navy, and he loved being at sea and he loved ships, but he didn't like shore duty. So he looked for a way to make shore duty less of a chore. And while he was in Madrid, he sees the naval attaché to the embassy there going around, seeing a lot of beautiful women and drinking whiskey. And this was during Prohibition, right?

**Rachel Maddow:** This *is* during Prohibition — it's the early 1920s. And Ken Ringle is a newly minted officer in the U.S. Navy.

**Kenneth Ringle:** My father, he wasn't a flake exactly, but he was 21, 22, and, you know, you're thinking booze and beautiful women — if I'm being paid to do that, that would be good. So he came back and applied for that job in Madrid. And the guy said, the duty officer said, "Dream on. Many people senior to you have that."

"However, we know you're good at languages, and if you want a position overseas during your shore duty, we have this program opening up in Japan."

**Rachel Maddow:** Imperial Japan had started a war with China in 1894. Japan beat China in that war.

Then 10 years later, Imperial Japan had started a war with Russia — and Japan beat Russia in that war.

And then 10 years after that, Imperial Japan joined World War I and set out to take for itself every island north of the equator that Germany claimed as a colony. There were a whole bunch of them. It took Japan's Imperial Navy all of two weeks to seize every one of those islands for itself.

In military terms, Imperial Japan was just a behemoth. It was the second-largest empire in the world.

And it had an escalating habit of invading its neighbors and waging wars to conquer new territory — wars which it generally won.

A country like that — it makes sense that it would be important for the U.S. to have eyes and ears on what they might do next. At least, that is what the U.S. Navy definitely thought at the time.

**Kenneth Ringle:** They sent my father there, and he learned — it was a very interesting program because they had very intensive training in Tokyo, language training. And then for the next two years, they were assigned to go someplace where they would never see another Anglo or anybody who spoke English. They wanted total immersion in Japanese.

**Rachel Maddow:** Ken Ringle didn't speak a word of Japanese before he went to that country. He was one of a handful of young officers placed by the U.S. Navy in that country, technically as language students. But it wasn't hard to see that once they were there, they were expected to do a little more than just learn the language.

**Kenneth Ringle:** I guess it was understood that he would be in intelligence there because that's why they were teaching him this stuff. He hadn't been interested in intelligence before that, I don't think. He really wanted a place where he could drink and see beautiful women, you know?

**Rachel Maddow:** Ken Ringle was good with languages, and he also really was interested in having a good time. But both of those things would end up serving him well — and serving his country well — while he spent these crucial years in Japan.

**Kenneth Ringle:** My father was extremely good looking — and I can show you a picture of him — and he would go to the geishas' houses. Well, the Japanese militarists were starting to take over there. And new officers in the Japanese Navy would go in there and have a couple of hits of sake, and start saying, "We're gonna take over the fucking world, man. We're gonna conquer America" and do all this stuff. And the geishas just hated them. And so they would tell my father everything these guys said, and then he would tell his superiors, "This is what the Japanese guys are saying."

**Rachel Maddow:** Lieutenant Commander Ken Ringle would quickly become one of the preeminent intelligence experts inside the U.S. Navy on issues related to Japan. His years in Japan, his language skills — it was all just invaluable at a time when Imperial Japan was beginning to have global military ambitions. Ambitions that, of course, would soon focus on America.

All of this would ultimately culminate in the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941.

But in the years leading up to that attack, there was a concerted American effort to understand Japanese intentions and capabilities, both at home and abroad.

In the United States, there was an effort to identify and locate anyone in this country who might be spying here — for them, against us.

**Franklin D. Roosevelt:** Today's threat to our national security is not a matter of military weapons alone. We know of other methods, new methods of attack. The Trojan Horse. The Fifth Column that betrays a nation unprepared for treachery.

**Rachel Maddow:** At Japan's U.S. embassy in Washington, U.S. Naval Intelligence suspected a military attaché at the embassy of running a whole ring of spies for Japan inside the United States. One U.S. Navy intelligence officer made friends with that attaché.

He made sure to learn his favorite cocktails — and the favorite drinks of everyone on the attaché's staff.

He invited the attaché and his whole staff to his own house for a dinner party, whereupon he kept them happy for hours, having round after round after round of drinks.

While that excessively long, excessively boozy dinner party was underway, Naval Intelligence meanwhile had a technical team doing an inch-by-inch search of every nook and cranny of that spy master's office. That's how Naval Intelligence busted that spy ring, which had infiltrated the Washington Navy Yard and other U.S. military installations on the East Coast.

But it wasn't only the spies that Japan sent over to the country's embassy and consulates here.

Inside the United States, Japan had a surprisingly large cast of Americans — notably native-born U.S. citizens, not people of Japanese descent — who were either spying for Japan or secretly working for them as paid agents.

**Announcer:** Mr. Ralph Townsend, a career officer of our consular service, vice-consul at Shanghai and Fuzhou for two years, author of "Asia Answers" and "Ways That Are Dark," whose recent testimony before the Foreign Affairs Committee of the United States Senate attracted wide attention.

**Rachel Maddow:** Ralph Townsend was an avowed American fascist. He said that Japan and Germany were the last great-nation national cultures which, on a racial basis, presented an effective defense against Jewish Bolshevism.

**Ralph Townsend:** The Tokyo government is the only one among major powers never to default on a single dollar of debt to us.

**Rachel Maddow:** Ralph Townsend was an activist with the America First movement. His books and pamphlets praised the Japanese military, defended Japanese and German fascism. He advocated that the U.S. should either ally itself with Japan and Germany in the Axis, or stay out of the burgeoning world war altogether.

**Ralph Townsend:** All of us are aware of conditions which make war for the United States a possibility. Let us not, as a nation, commit suicide for a fiction.

**Rachel Maddow:** Federal agents ultimately came to suspect that the magazine that Ralph Townsend worked for was secretly funded by the Nazis. They also discovered that Townsend was being paid by Japan to spread propaganda on its half. Townsend was arrested for being a Japanese agent. He was prosecuted and put in prison. He was soon indicted for sedition.

But Ralph Townsend wasn't alone — and he wasn't even the weirdest character who they recruited.

There was also the owner of an antique doll shop in New York City. In what the FBI called a "doll code," she would send letters out of the country that appeared, on the surface, to be about her doll business. But they were really coded messages to Japan about U.S. Navy ships.

When she wrote about dolls in hula skirts, that was code for U.S. ships in Hawaii.

When she wrote about dolls spending time in the “doll hospital,” that was code for ships in dry dock, being repaired.

The doll-shop spy was ultimately caught red-handed. Serial numbers on cash in her possession were traced to the Japanese consulate. She, too, was convicted and sentenced to federal prison. She only narrowly avoided the death penalty for espionage.

**Franklin D. Roosevelt:** Spies, saboteurs, and traitors are the actors in this new strategy. With all of these, we must and will deal vigorously.

**Rachel Maddow:** While Japan ran this weird crew of spies and agents in the United States, the U.S. government turned to Naval Intelligence — and its young Japan-specialist officers like Kenneth Ringle — to help root out spies working for Japan. And to help the U.S. government assess whether Japanese Americans, people of Japanese descent living here, posed any threat, particularly on the Pacific Coast.

**Kenneth Ringle:** They say, “We want you to be in California, and we want you to go around and assess the loyalty of the Japanese Americans because nobody knows. FDR wants to know this.”

**Rachel Maddow:** FDR wants to know. The American government — the American president — wants to know about Japanese Americans living on the U.S. West Coast. Are they loyal? If war with Japan does come, will they be with the U.S.? Or with Japan?

**Kenneth Ringle:** There was a lot of suspicion of the Japanese Americans. So the head of the Fifth Naval District told my father, “You go do this.”

**Rachel Maddow:** You go do this. You, Ken Ringle, go immerse yourself in the Japanese American community on the West Coast of the United States. Go assess their loyalty, and report back on what you find. And so in early 1941, months before the Pearl Harbor attack, Ken Ringle got to work on this highly sensitive mission.

**Kenneth Ringle:** People think of intelligence people as sneaking around. My father would go to the Japanese American events, speak Japanese, and say, “I’m an intelligence officer with the United States.”

**Rachel Maddow:** Ken Ringle spent months gathering intelligence in Japanese American circles. But he wasn’t undercover — he was introducing himself, building relationships, attending meetings. Almost everything he did was right out in the open. Almost everything.

**Kenneth Ringle:** I knew that he did secret stuff. Most of what he did was not, you know — the break-in was really unusual.

**Rachel Maddow:** “The break-in.” That’s next.

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**Rachel Maddow:** Lieutenant Commander Kenneth Ringle came home from work early that day, right around lunchtime. His wife, Margaret, knew that something was different, something was off.

**Kenneth Ringle:** She said, “Your father always told me never to ask him about his work ‘cause he couldn’t tell me anything about it.” But she said, “When he came home and took a nap, and then got up at sunset and dressed in black and put on his sneakers and went out for the evening, I knew something was up.”

**Rachel Maddow:** It was the spring of 1941. And Ken Ringle was heading out at dusk to conduct a burglary. Ringle’s son did not learn about this episode in his father’s life until decades later.

**Kenneth Ringle:** I never asked him in detail anything that he did. One day I just asked him, I said, “What did you do?” And he said, “Well, one thing we did was we broke into the Japanese consulate.” And I said, “Ohhh, Christ.”

**Rachel Maddow:** Naval Intelligence officer Ken Ringle planned and carried out a break-in at the Japanese consulate in Los Angeles.

**Kenneth Ringle:** When he told me about it, I was astounded. And I said, “Jesus Christ, that was a big deal. Suppose you’d been caught.” And he said, “We couldn’t have been caught. We had the Los Angeles police outside. We had the FBI with us. We had everything. We’d even checked our own safecracker out of San Quentin.”

**Rachel Maddow:** Ringle knew that the consulate had a locked safe. He was pretty certain that’s where the most sensitive documents would be held. Who better to help with that than a real pro?

**Kenneth Ringle:** I can just imagine how amused the safecracker would have been. “Hot damn, I get back to work!”

**Rachel Maddow:** With the safecracker they had sprung from San Quentin, with the LAPD keeping watch outside, with a small group of FBI agents, Ken Ringle broke into that consulate.

**Kenneth Ringle:** He told me that they went in there, cracked the safe, and then took everything out and photographed it, and then put it back exactly where it was. And then went and then nobody ever discovered it.

**Rachel Maddow:** They got in. Cracked the safe. They took photos of every document and every piece of evidence that they found. And then they replaced it all exactly as it had been.

**Kenneth Ringle:** I knew if he had done this, there was a good reason for it and that he found what he wanted. The big thing was the list of their spies. He pretty much knew that he would find those.

**Rachel Maddow:** Ken Ringle did find those — detailed lists of all of the Japanese government’s spies and intelligence assets operating up and down the West Coast. They were spying not just on military installations and U.S. Navy ships but also on things like oil infrastructure. There were lists of agents, and codes, and contact points for Japan’s whole West Coast spy network.

But Ken Ringle also found something else in those documents — something equally important. Maybe more important.

**Kenneth Ringle:** He went there for two reasons: to find out the list of Japanese spies, and the second thing that he learned there, that he valued even more, was the fact that the Japanese did not trust Japanese Americans.

**Rachel Maddow:** Japan really had been recruiting and running spies all over the country, particularly on the West Coast — including a whole bunch of native-born Americans. But not Japanese Americans. And not immigrants from Japan.

The records and the documents on Japan's spying operation — that were stolen by U.S. Naval Intelligence in that insane break-in involving a San Quentin safecracker furloughed just for that day — those records showed that the Tokyo government was adamant, they were even annoyed, that Japanese Americans were of no help to them.

**Kenneth Ringle:** They wrote to their agents, "If you're coming in here and we're, you know, trying to get people loyal to the emperor, don't trust the American Japanese."

**Rachel Maddow:** For Ken Ringle, this was not only an enormously important intelligence haul for the U.S. government — this was also something of a personal validation for what he himself had come to believe.

**Kenneth Ringle:** My father believed that most of the Japanese Americans were loyal, and he wanted proof of that. But he, I don't think he realized that they would have in there as many statements about "Don't trust the Japanese Americans."

**Rachel Maddow:** Ken Ringle knew that war with Japan was very likely to come. And he knew, from his own experiences in Japanese American circles, that they were intensely loyal to this country.

**Kenneth Ringle:** The break-in — that was his proof of this loyalty.

**Rachel Maddow:** Lots of people in this country were indicted as Japanese agents at the start of World War II. A bunch of guys who wrote for right-wing newspapers and publications like the then-conservative New York Daily News, and the Washington Herald, and the Chicago Tribune, and the American Mercury magazine.

There was a big blustery Klansman — the Kleagle of Camden, New Jersey — whose lectures on what he called "100% Americanism" turned out to be secretly paid for by the government of Japan. Just before Pearl Harbor, Naval Intelligence described that Klansman flat-out as a, quote, "espionage agent" working for Japan.

There was that prolific American fascist, Ralph Townsend. And the doll lady — her name was Velvaley Dickinson. There was a famous, very rich, very well-connected British pilot. There was a well-known silent-film star. There was a guy who wrote soft-core porn novels about nudist colonies. There were a

couple of hard-drinking ex-U.S.-sailors who'd been kicked out of the U.S. Navy, including one guy everybody called Dodo.

There were so many weirdos that Japan had on their payroll inside the United States.

But what American officials never found during this entire time — what Ken Ringle never found during his work — was a single Japanese American living in this country who was involved with espionage for Japan.

And more than that: What Ken Ringle did discover, over his months of investigating and gathering intelligence in California, was that Japanese Americans on America's West Coast not only posed no danger to America in the form of spying or sabotage. What he discovered was that they were so loyal, they were actually the best asset we had — the best defense we had against those types of threats from Japan.

**Kenneth Ringle:** He had so much evidence, through all these months, of the intense loyalty of these people. They were not just loyal to the U.S., but they were actively working against the militarists.

**Rachel Maddow:** And now Ringle had this new, pretty incontrovertible proof — hard evidence from the Japanese government's own files — that they were totally unable to recruit Japanese Americans to work against the United States. Japan had done its best, but found them to be unerringly loyal to the U.S., totally uninterested in helping Japan.

**Kenneth Ringle:** My father always said to me, "The best Americans are those who haven't come here yet, who understand the promise of America, and that's what motivates them to come here and to be good citizens." And he felt that the Japanese Americans exemplified this a hundred percent.

**Rachel Maddow:** Ken Ringle would take this information that he'd uncovered; he would eventually run it up the chain of command inside the U.S. military, all the way up to the president himself.

If war does come with Japan, there is no problem with this immigrant population. They are loyal to this country. They are good American citizens. They can be helpful in this fight.

At the time, there were reportedly only about a dozen people in the whole U.S. military who spoke Japanese. Ken Ringle was fluent in multiple variants of Japanese. He had immersed himself in Japanese American communities on the West Coast. He was one of the — if not *the* — premier intelligence expert in the whole U.S. government on this issue.

But Ken Ringle would be pushed aside.

Despite what he had learned, despite what he had begun reporting up the chain, as a country we decided to go down a darker path.

And to do that, a new story had to be created to replace the truth that Ken Ringle had uncovered, and corroborated, and documented.

We would need a false story, ginned up by some of the highest-ranking officials in the U.S. government, who knowingly suppressed the real intelligence and replaced it with their own made-up lie.

The fight Ken Ringle was about to be in would result in a stain on this country that would last for decades: one minority group singled out for mass removal, mass detention — arrest and imprisonment based purely on race.

The construction of huge camps in the middle of nowhere, without access to legal help. The U.S. military deployed on the streets.

And all of it done at the stroke of a president's pen, and with a Supreme Court's quiet acquiescence.

**Satsuki Ina:** There was tremendous anxiety as they saw neighbors and friends being taken. Farmers would be taken right out of the field. There was just a lot of fear.

**Imiko Madokoro:** They told my father to get dressed and come with them. I didn't know what they were trying to do.

**Frank Abe:** Everything was done on the fly. America had never incarcerated, you know, a mass body of its citizens before.

**Imiko Madokoro:** I couldn't — I never believed that America would be doing this.

**Norman Mineta:** Reading it, it almost seems like reading a movie story. It's not reading the story of your family. That couldn't be.

**Satsuki Ina:** He was told that if you try to escape, this is the bull's-eye that we'll use to shoot you.

**Rachel Maddow:** This is the story of one of the most shocking U.S. government decisions in our nation's history — and the strange and very specific reason that decision was made.

But it's also the story of what it took to stop it. What it took to stand up against it. To undo it. To break its back. And in a quiet moment — when persistence met providence — to find the evidence in that archive. To dig up the real story, and to finally expose it all.

Our government has been down some terrible roads before. We have done some terrible things.

But the Americans who stopped those things from happening — who put themselves on the line to try to fix it when we went wrong before — they have stories to tell, too.

**Gordon Hirabayashi:** If the American Constitution means anything at all, this is wrong. And if I believe in the Constitution, I've got to object to this.

**Frank Abe:** She said no to the government. No. I will do what's right for everyone.

**Peter Irons:** Those documents made it clear the decisions of the Supreme Court were tainted — tainted with illegal and unethical conduct by our own government.

**Lori Bannai:** It was that classic smoking-gun evidence that every lawyer wants to find.

**Peter Irons:** In every era in American history, there have been people who take a stand and say, “This is what I’m going to do, regardless of the consequences.”

**Rachel Maddow:** That’s all ahead on “Rachel Maddow Presents: Burn Order.”

“Rachel Maddow Presents: Burn Order” is a production of MS NOW. This episode was written by myself and Mike Yarvitz.

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An enormous thanks to the organization Densho for providing archival material for this series and for everything that they do.

You can find out much more about this series at our website: [MS.NOW/burnorder](https://www.msnow.org/burnorder).

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**Kenneth Ringle:** He was a very rational guy, and he was a winning sort of a guy. I do have to show you this picture.

**Mike Yarvitz:** Yeah, let me see it.

**Kenneth Ringle:** My father — as a — you don't think of your parents as being good-looking. They're just your parents, all right? But whenever I had girlfriends or anybody else came and saw the Naval Academy yearbook and saw a picture of my father, they went, "Good God."