

Mr. Bill Parsons'
Oral History
Kennedy Space Center
Held on December 3, 2008

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1 Gregg Buckingham: OK. We're here today at the KSC Press Site with William Parsons,
2 the 9th center director of Kennedy Space Center. And you served in that position from
3 January of 2007 to October of 2008. Also with me today, is Joe Dowdy, a senior manager
4 here at KSC and long time friend of Mr. Parsons. My name is Gregg Buckingham, also a
5 KSC employee.

6 Just a starting note to our readers: the Johnson Space Center has done an Oral
7 History (Project) with Mr. Parsons for a portion of his career. So that's available to
8 readers on the Web, also. So we won't be covering a portion of his career in as much
9 depth. We'll focus on his early years, and then his center director time, and then take a
10 look at the future.

11 So, why don't we start? Bill if you could just state your name, where you were
12 born, and when. And maybe talk a little bit about your early family life.

13

14 Bill Parsons: I'm Bill Parsons. I was born in Magnolia, Mississippi back in 1957,
15 January. My dad was in the Air Force and so he was enlisted in the Air Force. And so
16 during my early years we moved all over the country -- spent some time in Turkey, Izmir,
17 some time in the Philippines, Clark Air Force Base, we were stationed there for a couple
18 years -- Montana, Colorado, Alaska, Louisiana, South Carolina. We really moved about
19 every, I don't know, couple years. Then, when dad would go to Vietnam or
20 unaccompanied tours, which he did a couple of those, then we'd move back with my

21 grandparents back in Mississippi. We'd stay there, wait for his tour to end, and then we
22 would join him wherever we were going to next.

23 About the seventh grade, I moved back to Mississippi more permanently. Even
24 though I moved around in Mississippi, that's when my dad went to Vietnam so we came
25 back to Mississippi. I went to the seventh grade in Mississippi, in my hometown. Then he
26 was transferred when he came back to Keesler Air Force Base on the Mississippi Golf
27 Coast. So I lived on the Mississippi Golf Coast for the eighth- and ninth-grade. Then he
28 was getting close to retirement, we built a home in our hometown in Magnolia
29 Mississippi. I moved back there. I went to the 10th-, 11th- and 12th- grade there. Really,
30 most of my final high-school years and all were in my hometown.

31

32 Buckingham: Right there in Mississippi?

33

34 Parsons: Right there in Mississippi. I got a scholarship -- NROTC (Naval Reserve
35 Officers Training Corps) Marine option scholarship to the University of Mississippi. So
36 when I graduated, I went up to Ole Miss and spent the next four years there. Then after
37 that, I was commissioned to second lieutenant in the Marine Corps.

38

39 Buckingham: OK. And you got your degree is in engineering.

40

41 Parsons: Yes.

42

43 Buckingham: So what led you to that, to engineering versus business or some other? Did
44 you take apart lawn mowers as a kid?

45

46 Parsons: You really want to know the story don't you? Well, it's actually a pretty good
47 story. And it's true -- most of it is, anyway -- most of it is. When I went up to Ole Miss,
48 most of the Marine Options who were there majored in political science or history. That
49 was just kind of the background that they needed to be infantry officers and things like
50 that. You really wanted to have a good basis in history, political science, leadership, and
51 things like that. The Navy ROTC folks all majored in engineering. So, I started out in
52 liberal arts. Probably going to major in political science or history, but hadn't really made
53 a decision, just kind of started out in that direction.

54 The summer before I had been working in a hardware store and met this young
55 lady at the McDonald's (Corporation). Decided to ask her out -- I did -- she went out with
56 me. Turned out she was dating another guy at the same time. He was a sophomore at the
57 University of Mississippi and was on the Ole Miss football team. He was a middle
58 linebacker for the football team and he took exception to that during that summer and
59 kind of tracked me down. So I spent the summer kind of hiding out from him.

60 So when I got up to Ole Miss, I went into liberal arts. My first class was Spanish
61 class. So I went to Spanish class, walked in -- I was the first one there and I sat in the
62 front row. A beautiful professor walks in and I thought, well, this is pretty good. Then the
63 class filled up with about, I don't know, 12-15 coeds -- young ladies. And I thought, well
64 this is pretty good. Course, they all sat behind me -- none of them sat up in the front row.
65 Then he walked in -- the guy who I had been hiding from -- and he sat down next to me.

66 You have to understand, this is the early '70s, so I had long hair, but now that I
67 was in ROTC, I had short hair. So he kept looking at me. Finally, he said, don't I know
68 you? And I said, I don't think so. Eventually he figured out who I was and he actually
69 grabbed me around the head in the class and, you know, kind of basically gave me a
70 noogie -- is what I call them. Then he said, we're going to have a lot of fun this semester.

71 The class was over -- he left -- I just sat there. I went up to the teacher and I said, I
72 need to drop this class. She said, I understand. You have to go get this signed by your
73 counselor. So I went to my counselor and I said, I'd like to drop Spanish. She said, I'm
74 sorry, you can't. You're a liberal arts major. Foreign language is required. You signed up
75 for it and I can't allow you to drop it. And I said, well what can I do? She said, well, you
76 could probably change your major. I said, well, what major doesn't require a foreign
77 language? She says, I only know one -- engineering.

78

79 Buckingham: There you go.

80

81 Parsons: So that's how I got into engineering.

82

83 Buckingham: That's quite a story.

84

85 Parsons: It's mostly true. Luckily I had been good in math and science and everything in
86 high school. So that was really something I was interested in anyway, but that really was
87 the nail in the coffin that changed my mind.

88

89 Buckingham: OK. And I know later, just to finish your education; you went on to UCF
90 and got a master's in engineering management.

91

92 Parsons: That was 13 years later. That was when I was working for NASA. It was really
93 a good program within the NASA Kennedy Space Center. I think, I don't know exactly
94 who started it, but they were bringing the professors to Kennedy Space Center. They
95 were doing a master's in engineering management. They had put the program together
96 specifically for the kinds of things that we needed to do here at KSC -- program and
97 project management. I was in the second class of those master's classes. So I was able to
98 get my master's while I was working here at KSC.

99

100 Buckingham: And then obviously, while you're in college, you had expected to follow
101 that with military service. So let's talk a little bit about that.

102

103 Parsons: Well, you know, the expectation was that I would probably go in the military.
104 My goal was to be an infantry officer and really stay in the Marine Corps for 20 plus
105 years and retire. Didn't really think, I thought that was the course of my life as I could see
106 it from that point forward. But I always in the back of your mind -- you have this
107 engineering degree and you're kind of thinking, well, what are you going to do with that
108 really?

109 So I went in the Marine Corps. I went to 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines. I was a
110 platoon commander. I went overseas -- deployed to Okinawa, then to Japan. I spent some
111 time on a ship down in Korea. I rotated back and then was assigned to a marine barracks
112 in Concord, Calif. And I was a limited area guard officer, which really is an area in the
113 Navy and Marine Corps vernacular that's really an area where they stored weapons of
114 national security. So it's 24/7 and the guards, you know, have live ammunition -- have the
115 right to really use that, those firearms.

116

117 Buckingham: Defend on need?

118

119 Parsons: Yeah, if someone was to violate certain rules and things like that. So I was there
120 for about a year and a half. Then during that time, Granada kind of sparked up and a few
121 other things were going on in the world. My second son was born and I just realized that
122 the next thing I was going to do when I left the marine barracks was go back overseas --
123 be away from my family. I had been away from them for almost two years, and the first
124 four years because of all the deployments and the time out in the field and everything.

125 And I thought, well, maybe I'll look into what's available on the outside. See what
126 kind of job I might could get and consider leaving the Marine Corps. So a went through a
127 place called career seminars, which was a group of retired officers who had put together
128 this organization to where you could go as a junior officer -- they were looking to place
129 junior officers in private industry. So they prepare you with how to dress, how to do
130 interviews and they go through a whole process with you, prepare your resume and all
131 this. Then they actually bring companies in for you to interview with. I had, I interviewed
132 with probably 10 separate, different companies: Texas Instruments (Incorporated),
133 Applied Materials (Incorporated), Pfizer Pharmaceuticals (Incorporated) and Johnson and
134 Johnson (Services Incorporated).

135 I got a number of offers, chose to go to work for Johnson and Johnson because of
136 a couple of reasons: Johnson and Johnson was number three in Fortune 500 companies
137 for training supervisors. I thought, well, that's pretty important to me, is to get that
138 leadership and training. Something I thought that I was going to be pretty good at from
139 being in the Marine Corps -- and I thought that might help. The second thing was it was
140 right there in the general area where we were already living and that kind of helped. Then

141 the third thing was there were two former Marine officers who worked there, who I knew
142 very, very well. So with those connections and everything, I ended up going and
143 becoming a manufacturing supervisor for Johnson and Johnson.

144

145 Buckingham: Oh, OK. And how long did you stay there?

146

147 Parsons: That was in Sunnyvale, Calif., and it was right before, right in the middle of
148 when the Silicon Valley was just getting ready to explode -- it's about 1983. It was
149 already cranking up, but it was really just exploding right about then. So I went there, and
150 then in 1983, in late 1984, Johnson and Johnson decided -- they had had that plant for 25
151 years -- they decided to close that plant and sell the real estate, because it was so, they
152 could make so much money. They could move their manufacturing operations back to
153 Illinois and ship the product to the West Coast cheaper than they could actually make it
154 because the cost of the work force and everything else was just going out the roof. So
155 they said I can move back to Illinois, which was just south of Chicago, or I could move to
156 Milltown, N.J. And I visited both places -- one around Dec. 15 and one around Jan. 15. --
157 I decide that I couldn't work at either place. It was just way too cold.

158 So I decided to leave Johnson and Johnson and I moved my family back to
159 Mississippi and I took a job with Crown Zellerbach (Corporation). A brand new saw mill
160 in my hometown had just been built. It was state-of-the-art. It had not started up yet.
161 They were still collecting up the core group of people to start the saw mill up. What I

162 mean by state-of-the-art: it was all automated, optimization type of equipment in it,
163 lasers, and you know, they cut the boards within 1/1000 of an inch, the best of quality and
164 all this other stuff. So it was really high tech -- run by PLCs (programmable logic
165 controllers). Again, everything was computerized. It was a fairly neat experience for me.
166 So I helped start that plant up and then I was working there for about the next two, two-
167 and-a-half years.

168

169 Buckingham: So to this point, the aerospace industry -- NASA -- not on the horizon?

170

171 Parsons: Hadn't even thought about it.

172

173 Buckingham: So the next question has to be, how do we get from the saw mill to NASA?

174

175 Parsons: My, I was married, I've been married twice, but I was married to my first wife
176 and her family lived here in Cocoa Beach (Fla.). So that Thanksgiving, 1985, we decided
177 to come down and stay with her family for that week. We were going to take that week
178 off and spend Thanksgiving with her family. When we got down here, my father-in-law
179 mentioned that he had some passes to go out on the causeway -- and it wasn't the
180 causeway as we know it today -- it was the ITL (integrate transfer launch) causeway.

181 They used to allow Air Force visitors -- would go out on the ITL Causeway, which goes
182 out to the Complex 40 and 41. That causeway -- they would put folks there. So we had
183 passes to that causeway. I, to be honest, wasn't really interested in coming out to see the
184 launch. I said, you know, I'll see it from the beach. I was on vacation, didn't want to get in
185 a long line waiting.

186 Buckingham: Traffic.

187 Parsons: In traffic, and you know, all that. They kept, you know, encouraging me to
188 come out and go with them. He had a big old van. So we piled the whole family in there
189 and we came out. It was STS-61B, I believe, I think, 23rd launch of the space shuttle.
190 What probably is interesting for me is, I believe, Bryan O'Conner was the commander
191 and Brewster Shaw was the pilot -- so two people who I'm very good friends with today
192 and have worked with for many, many, many years. Course I didn't know them then, but
193 they were on that flight.

194 It was sort of a DOD (Department of Defense) flight, I can't remember exactly. It
195 was an evening launch, which it was right at dusk. The sun went down and then it
196 launched right as the sun went down. My recollection is, I was sitting there, the
197 countdown was going, and it just sort of started drawing me in. At first I was just like,
198 well, OK come on get this thing off. You know? Get it out of here. Then as I just, as I
199 listened to it, I started getting excited about it. I started kind of getting drawn into the
200 crowd -- the crowd was getting excited.

201 Of course, the bright lights had lit up the orbiter and was just white sitting out
202 there against the dark sky. Before it was over with, I was into it completely. This thing lit
203 off and, I mean, the roar of those engines just came across the water. You could just see
204 the water rippling as it came at me and hit me in the chest. It just started vibrating and
205 before it was over, I mean, I'm jumping up and down and I'm yelling, go Atlantis! Go
206 Atlantis! To be honest with you, I even had tears in my eyes. I was so overwhelmed by
207 the power of the space shuttle.

208 So, just came away thinking, I've got to work somewhere close to this.
209 Somewhere, I've got to find a way to work out here. So I asked my father-in-law at the
210 time, I said, you know, do you have any connections? And he said, well, yeah, I know a
211 few people -- we could send a few resumes out. So I went back home -- put resumes out.
212 Was even called back in, in early, no actually, well then, as you know January Challenger
213 occurred.

214 Of course, I had left the saw mill early to watch the countdown because I was in
215 Central time -- this is Eastern time. So I had left a little early for lunch and come in to
216 watch it on the TV. Of course, we know the outcome of that.

217

218 Buckingham: Right.

219

220 Parsons: Then about two months later, I got a call to come interview with Pan Am World
221 Services (Incorporated) on the Cape Canaveral Air Force Station side. I came in,
222 interviewed with four managers. Went great -- I mean the interviews went great and then
223 nothing -- dead silence. And what, so I finally, about October, I mean, I just let it go. I
224 just didn't know, I figured they didn't need anybody, or whatever. Somewhere in late
225 summer, maybe early September, I called and they said, well, I thought so and so hired
226 you. -- well, no I thought so and so hired you -- well I. And so, turned out, they had
227 meant to give me an offer and they hadn't. They made be an offer and I became Complex
228 40 and 41 Pan Am World Services supervisor in November of 1986. That's when I got
229 here. Of course, when that offer came I knew exactly, there was no doubt about it, I was
230 going to get out of the saw mill business and come down here.

231

232 Buckingham: That was the direction. OK. So you worked for McDonnell Douglas
233 (Corporation) for I guess about four years and then?

234

235 Parsons: I'm sorry?

236

237 Buckingham: You worked about four years and then joined NASA around 1990, right?

238

239 Parsons: Yes. I was with Pan Am World Services.

240

241 Buckingham: Pan Am -- I'm sorry.

242

243 Parsons: On Complex 40 and 41 for about two years. Then the SPIF, which is there, out
244 there by Complex 40, it's where the SMAB -- where they stack the solid motors for the
245 Titan. On one side they processed IUSs, inertial upper stages, on the other side was the
246 SPIF, which is the Spacecraft Processing and Integration Facility, and that's where they
247 process DOD, Department of Defense, spacecraft. So I went past it everyday. Of course,
248 we did work in that building for the Air Force. And I met a manager with McDonnell
249 Douglas -- gentleman named Eddie Cardenas. He was a Mississippian. He had played
250 football at the University of Southern Mississippi. He was an Army officer, retired
251 colonel. I don't remember how we met exactly. We were coming in or out the building
252 and we stopped and started talking. By the end of the conversation he said, can you, you
253 want to come work for McDonnell Douglas? And I said, no sir. I've got a great job and I
254 really like what I'm doing. I love working on Complex 40 and 41. My recollection is he
255 offered me, he made an offer I couldn't refuse.

256 So I moved over to McDonnell Douglas -- worked for them for two years
257 processing Department or Defense spacecraft that flew on shuttle and on Titans,
258 expendables. Then, to make a long story short, it required very specific clearances to be
259 able to do that kind of work. I had all of the clearances, first from my Marine Corps time,

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260 working with weapons of national security. So I had had all a lot of the clearances
261 already. Then I got my clearances really quickly with McDonnell Douglas for some
262 further-type clearances that were required. What happened is NASA contacted the Air
263 Force and basically said, all our people who are cleared have moved on and accepted
264 other jobs and we're really looking for somebody we can pick up with the proper
265 clearances. And the Air Force apparently passed my name on to NASA. They contacted
266 me. I said, I wasn't interested, loved what I was doing. They were fairly persistent. And I
267 think that the -- and the Air Force because they had passed my name on, had said it might
268 be a good thing for you to do, is go check it out. In 1990, February of 1990, I accepted a
269 position. Back, really should go back to say, Roy Tharpe was the guy looking for the
270 people. Roy Tharpe was the one who contacted me and I came over to work for Roy
271 Tharpe.

272

273 Buckingham: Roy was a senior manager in the shuttle program, correct?

274

275 Parsons: Senior manager of the shuttle program. Did payload processing and was really
276 looking for those key personnel with the right kind of clearances. So I came to work in
277 what they call TP-POD, which was payload operations for shuttle, in February of 1990.

278

279 Buckingham: So this is sort of where JSC picks up. Let's at least briefly talk about the
280 '90s. I know that you have a lot of experience at many centers. So could we run through
281 the '90s, your work at Stennis, your work at Johnson and the shuttle program?

282

283 Parsons: I was in shuttle processing and shuttle operations until about 1994. Then in
284 1994, they needed people to come over to the station. Of course, all of us went and hid
285 under our desks because none of wanted -- none of us who were in shuttle processing
286 really wanted to go over and work on station because they really didn't have any
287 hardware. They were still, you know, still a long way from having hardware. We were
288 really into hardware, not into development or manufacturing -- we were reluctant to do
289 that.

290 Jay Honeycutt put together an organization that he was going to send out to the
291 manufacturing facilities to kind of pull the hardware toward the Kennedy Space Center.
292 Apparently it was something that was done during the Apollo era. So in about 1994-95
293 timeframe, I started working with Tip Talone to put together a space station processing
294 group. We did that. I worked with him until 1998, when we brought the first piece of
295 hardware to the Kennedy Space Center, which was the Node, which is now called Unity.
296 It was brought from Huntsville, Ala., and the two PMAs, pressurized mating adapters,
297 were brought from Hunting Beach, Calif., to Kennedy Space Center, that was about 1996.

298 Then in 1996, when that hardware got here, that's when I went to Stennis to be the
299 chief of operations for propulsion tests. Stennis was, again Mississippi's my hometown --

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16

300 grew up some of my time on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. I had met Roy Estes, who was
301 the center director. He had said, anytime you want to come home to Mississippi, come
302 home. In 1996, after we got all that hardware to Kennedy Space Center, and it was being
303 processed here and getting ready to launch, which it didn't launch until 1998, then I went
304 to Stennis. I spent two years there.

305 Then one day in the middle of the morning, I received a phone call from a
306 gentleman named George Abbey and he just said, Bill I have an opening here at the
307 Johnson Space Center. It's a SES (senior executive service) and I'd like for you to apply.
308 I, once again, said I wasn't interested. But through the powers of persuasion that both
309 George Abbey and Jay Honeycutt, who was a very strong mentor of mine, I decided to
310 apply for the position. I was selected and then I moved to Johnson in 1998. I was about
311 two months the deputy director of center operations. They knew the gentleman was going
312 to retire -- he retired -- and I took over as the director of center operations in 1998.

313

314 Buckingham: So responsible for all activities?

315

316 Parsons: Base operations for all of -- and security -- base operations for all of Johnson
317 Space Center. I did that for a couple of years. Then George asked me to come up and be
318 the deputy director at Johnson -- so I did that. I was there for almost two years. Then
319 somewhere in there, he left NASA, or he left Johnson and Roy Estes came in and was the
320 acting center director. We worked together closely. As we knew, he was not going to stay

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321 there. So it was between the two of us, we decided I would go back to Stennis Space
322 Center where my home -- you know, we were very happy there. So, sometime in 2000, I
323 moved -- end of 2000, early 2001 -- I moved back to Stennis Space Center. I was the
324 director of center operations for a short while. Then later became the director. Then, of
325 course, I was the director for about a year. In 2003, Columbia occurred and then I became
326 the shuttle program manager right after that.

327

328 Buckingham: Shuttle program manager. Basically in that role, you led the Return to
329 Flight effort?

330

331 Parsons: Return to Flight. Then when we, when we accomplished that in July of 2005 -- I
332 returned in September, August, September 2005 -- I returned to Stennis Space Center to
333 be the director again. Course, right at that time is when Katrina hit, so I spent the next
334 eight or nine -- actually Joe and I -- Joe Dowdy joined me down there, and we spent the
335 next eight months or so, doing recovery operations at the Stennis Space Center.

336

337 Buckingham: Tell us a little bit about that. That's one of the things Johnson didn't cover -
338 - is the Katrina activity when you returned to Stennis. So tell us a little bit about that.

339

340 Parsons: Well, since we had just returned to flight and we'd had a few issues with Return
341 to Flight, I mean we had lost a PAL ramp, which was a protuberance air load ramp, on
342 the external tank.

343

344 Buckingham: External tank.

345

346 Parsons: A piece of foam had come off. So we knew we were going to have to do some
347 repairs and fix that. So we knew we were going to be down for a little while. But we also
348 knew that without Michoud, which is where they build the external tank, and Stennis,
349 where they test the main engines -- without those two facilities being brought up and
350 operating at 100 percent, it was going to be hard to do what you might call the second
351 Return to Flight.

352 I was sent in because of my background both at Stennis and Michoud, with the
353 shuttle program. I was sent into help do the recovery so that we could support the shuttle
354 program and its effort to get up to the flight rate that we needed to get up to complete the
355 International Space Station, move on to retiring the shuttle at some point in 2010. Really
356 it was, you know, I was going back to Stennis to be the director but more importantly
357 because of Katrina and the shuttle program. It was really trying to get the facilities back
358 up to support the shuttle program so that they could, they could continue flying and
359 completing the International Space Station.

360

361 Buckingham: What was the level of damage? What was the recovery strategy for Stennis
362 and Michoud?

363

364 Parsons: Michoud had a great deal more damage. They had lost sewer systems, water
365 systems, electrical systems. They were surrounded by water. They had some facility
366 damage, where roofs had been torn up or opened a little bit. Things had fallen on some of
367 the external tanks that were in production. They also had water intrusion and things like
368 that. So they had a lot more facilities issues and things to take care of. Really the first
369 thing we needed to do was just get into the facility because they were cut off from the
370 world. The only way we could get there initially was by helicopter. Eventually, Joe took a
371 convoy and kind of found a way to get in there as the water receded. We were able to get
372 in there and then it was really just, you know, just hard work, just getting them back up to
373 speed. I can say that NASA, the administrator and all the assets NASA had were put
374 toward that.

375 From Stennis stand point, damage to the facilities was limited -- very, very small.
376 Tornado hit some of the office areas, but again, nothing that you couldn't recover from.
377 As far as the engine test facilities, steel structures like the pads, not much damage at all
378 there. So overall some power loss and some things like that. They had backup generators,
379 so did Michoud -- so we were on backup generators. Having to get fuel was a bit of a
380 problem.

381 Probably the biggest problem with both facilities was just the loss of homes and
382 the displacement of the families and displacement of the work force. To be honest with
383 you, that's what we dealt with probably for the first four months at Stennis and probably
384 two years at Michoud. I mean, they're still, they're still recovering from it. But two years
385 of dealing with the work force issues were prevalent at Michoud. Stennis we probably got
386 them back in -- people weren't living in their homes -- but they were in a place that they
387 could come to work and do things within, you know, three or four months. The biggest
388 issues were just the displacement of the work force and trying to find places for them to
389 live and getting them back to some normalcy so that they could get back to work and
390 support the program.

391

392 Buckingham: Were there any problems communicating with the work force afterward?

393 And how do we overcome that?

394

395 Parsons: We manned a 24 hour, seven day a week call-in desk. We sent out as much
396 information over the internet. We just had all kinds of people. We had people going out
397 looking for people. You know, they'd say, well I know that they live out here and they
398 don't have any power or anything like that. So we'd go find them. You know, it took
399 weeks and weeks to really come up and say we found everyone. To be honest with you,
400 we were very lucky. We didn't lose any employees. Unfortunately, there were some
401 employees who lost family members -- that was pretty devastating. Not only did you

402 have about 50 percent of the employees who either lost their house or couldn't live in
403 their house -- there was an additional part of, because the people in Mississippi live there
404 in that area, their families had lost their houses. So people were living with, you know, a
405 four-person home all the sudden became a 12-person home. So you had 12 people trying
406 to live in this three-bedroom.

407

408 Buckingham: One bath.

409

410 Parsons: Yeah, 1,700-square-foot house. It was tough. Those are the kinds of things you
411 had to deal with. A lot of EAP support, employee assistance program. We had people
412 come in from every (NASA) center working with other folks. We had a great relationship
413 with FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency). We had a great relationship with
414 a lot of the clinic and nursing staff and doctor staff that NASA has at their disposal.
415 Again, probably if you look back on it, you couldn't have had a better response from
416 NASA in this tragedy. I don't think another government agency could have responded as
417 well as NASA. In fact, NAVY is half the population. You know, the Department of
418 Defense and the military responds extremely well to disasters and takes care of their
419 people and I don't think that they even did as well as how NASA responded to taking care
420 of the people. That was really a conversation with Mike Griffin and Rex Geveden.
421 Basically they said you have full -- use all your judgment. You make all the decisions.
422 You decide what's right, what's wrong. Taking care of the people is No. 1. Every decision

423 you make, we'll back it up 100 percent. They never questioned anything I did. They
424 supported everything we did. I'll be honest with you; I think we recovered very, very well
425 and very fast. And I think we gained the loyalty, of not only our NASA employees, but
426 our contractor work force and resident-agency work force at Stennis -- we gained the
427 confidence of them. They believe NASA walks the walk.

428

429 Buckingham: A real team effort.

430

431 Parsons: Right. Absolutely. Everybody pulled together -- it was unbelievable. It's hard to
432 explain it in words. You had to be there and watch it happen, just day-in and day-out, just
433 amazing things. Amazing things.

434

435 Buckingham: We had a little taste of that in 2004 here when we got hit with several and
436 it is amazing what comes out. So OK, so then, about 2006, January, you are?

437

438 Parsons: Well, I had every intention to stay at the Stennis Space Center. My wife is from
439 Cocoa, Fla. When I went off to do the shuttle program, her mother was in her 80s and she
440 decided to come here and stay close to her mom, while I, you know, was working 18
441 hours a day, seven days a week doing shuttle program stuff. She was here in the local

442 area. So we, we were living a part. When I went to Stennis, the intention was that she
443 would move from here to Stennis and join me. Then I realized after you spend that much
444 time on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, there just wasn't any housing, the schools are still
445 pretty messed up, the economy was pretty messed up. I thought, well, I can't ask her to
446 move here. So after long discussions, we decided that we'd probably leave NASA. That's
447 what our thoughts were -- well, this is my assignment. I'm not going to be able to do this
448 because she's not going to move here and I can't live a part from my family any longer.
449 We'd almost been a part for three years at that point. And I decided that I might leave
450 NASA. So I contacted Rex Geveden and Mike Griffin and talked about it. They basically
451 said, well what would you think about going and being the deputy at Kennedy Space
452 Center? Honestly it was just the right thing to go do. Jim Kennedy and I had been friends
453 when I worked in Huntsville, Ala., working on space station back in '95. In '94, Bernie
454 Kennedy, his wife, had been my secretary.

455

456 Buckingham: Oh, OK.

457

458 Parsons: I had gone over to Bernie's house and Jim with hamburger cookouts. You
459 know, we've known each other quite some time. So when Mike and Jim Kennedy
460 approached me on that, I said, sure, I'd love too. So I came to be the deputy in January of
461 2006.

462

463 Buckingham: Right at that time, I think we were in the middle of preparing for the
464 second Return to Flight, as you mentioned, which was STS-121. So you arrived and were
465 in the middle of fixing this problem. So what was your role with the work force and with
466 Mr. Kennedy as we got toward Return to Flight (No.) 2?

467

468 Parsons: Well, I was probably more focused on institutional-type things. We have to
469 back up just a little bit -- as I was doing Return to Flight, about four months before we
470 launched in July, Sean O'Keefe left about six months before that.

471

472 Buckingham: The administrator.

473

474 Parsons: Right. The administrator. Mike Griffin, the new administrator, came on a
475 couple months after that. So his focus was Return to Flight. He had spent four solid
476 months very closely attached to me as the shuttle program manager. We had spent a lot of
477 time together getting ready to launch in July of 2005. I had a lot of opportunities to listen
478 to a lot of Mike's thoughts on the CAIB, Columbia Accident Investigation Board, and
479 their findings, recommendations and opinions. I had a great deal of time to sit around and
480 really just to talk about how NASA was approaching the changes and culture that the
481 CAIB thought we needed to do and the changes in the program and how we were
482 approaching all that.

483 I think I had a very good idea of what Mike Griffin expected and I had spent a lot
484 of time with Rex Geveden, as well. But I think I had a good idea of what Mike Griffin
485 expected from the centers and the cultural change that he felt was necessary to allow us
486 to, you know, not have another Columbia or Challenger. Really, basically, he said we've
487 got to go back to the NASA we were during the Apollo era. And what that meant was
488 strong engineering, matrix to programs, with two lines of authority, not only the
489 programmatic authority, but the institutional authority -- and a healthy tension between
490 the two. He saw that with strong engineering organizations reporting up through the
491 center director and strong programmatic reporting up through AAs, mission directors,
492 which he located at Headquarters.

493 So I came to Kennedy and Kennedy has a history -- we were very different from
494 Johnson and Marshall -- probably Stennis and Kennedy were a little more a like.
495 Engineering was embedded in the programs and projects and not separate. There was a
496 separate engineering organization, but it was a design organization. It wasn't the people
497 who dealt with the programs and projects on a day-to-day basis. I was focused on the
498 institution as the deputy. One of the things that came out pretty quick and one of the
499 things that I passed on to Jim Kennedy was I don't believe we're organized the way Mike
500 Griffin would like us to organize. Now, you have to understand that we'd been organized
501 like that for 20 plus years, 25 years. Really honed it -- it's not like it wasn't working -- it
502 was working. But the way Mike Griffin said is if we're going to have one organization do
503 it we're going to have, you know, we're all going to be the same. We're not going to have
504 somebody be a little different and somebody be a lot different.

505 So that began a period of time when we were really trying to find exactly how
506 would we organize engineering to have that independent authority that we required from
507 the programs and projects located here at Kennedy Space Center? I spent a lot of time
508 working with a number of people and trying to find out exactly what that would look like.
509 I would say met with a lot of resistance within the center. Nobody really embraced the
510 change in the beginning. Probably didn't even embrace the change even after we
511 implemented it. But I would say as I have left KSC, I think it is working. I think the
512 people understand it. I think, I think it's been, I wouldn't say totally embraced, but it's
513 been accepted as a way of doing business that works.

514

515 Buckingham: Essentially, that philosophy builds in an extra safety step, right? Because
516 you've got engineering that can comment on what the program's doing instead of being
517 part of the program.

518

519 Parsons: It's supposed to do that. I would go to tell you KSC always had the ability to do
520 that. It was something I was taught when I was here -- is speak up and never, you know,
521 don't let someone railroad you down a particular path. You know if you think it's wrong,
522 stand up and say so. On the other hand, there was a point where that would stop -- I mean
523 and it would stop within the program. It didn't have a way of -- a communication chain
524 outside of the program or project. So yes, this separation gave a communication chain
525 outside of the program and project. Now would I say it has to be used? Very, very, very

526 few times, but it is there and available when a descending opinion needs to be brought
527 forward. There is a process set forth on how that descending opinion will be brought
528 forward.

529

530 Buckingham: To effect a change like that, as you alluded to, that was a big change for
531 Kennedy. What were some of the steps you took to work with the work force and the
532 senior managers to actually pull everybody in this direction? Because that's a big change.

533

534 Parsons: Well, Jim Kennedy and others here at Kennedy Space Center had started a
535 process called ODT, organizational development teams, where they pulled together teams
536 to look at the organization and then bring forward recommendations. And so we decided
537 that -- eventually came to the conclusion that Pat (Patrick) Simpkins was going to be the
538 director of engineering. So he would help lead the organizational development team with
539 a number of other folks on the team. And then they would pull together with what they,
540 you know, the philosophy and the thought process of how we were going to do this. And
541 they would bring forward recommendations on what organizations needed to be a part of
542 the Engineering Directorate, what organizations would be a part of the applied
543 engineering portion -- KT (Applied Technology Directorate) -- you know, applied
544 science.

545

546 Buckingham: Applied technology development?

547

548 Parsons: Applied technology things, where the labs would be and things like that. So
549 they went off and worked on that. And then what they would do -- the deputy director,
550 the role I was playing early on -- was they would come and bounce their ideas off me. I
551 would provide, you know, guidance and thoughts. They would go off and go work those
552 some more. Then of course, as you know, we decided to implement it in like January of
553 2007, maybe a little bit before that. That's about the time Jim Kennedy had announced he
554 was leaving and I was going to be taking over as the center director. So we worked very
555 closely in making that organizational change. And really what we decided to do and I
556 think that the whole senior staff decided to do is they would give -- we agreed on an, on
557 an organization. We agreed that we would give it a couple years to see how it would
558 work, that we would revisit it, that if we had made a mistake, we would stop, go back,
559 and change things. That if we felt like there were some necessary changes to be made, we
560 wouldn't hesitate to make those changes, but we would give it its time to gel.

561 So that's what we've done over the last couple of years is let that organization
562 mature. Let the projects and programs mature. There are some more changes, and in Bill
563 Parsons' opinion, there are some more that will need to occur to mature this whole
564 process, not only within the programs and projects but within the Engineering
565 Directorate. You know, as long as people are looking at it and making those decisions
566 methodically and putting the right thought into that -- that will occur in the next, you

567 know, few years as we make the change from retiring the shuttle and going on to the
568 Constellation Program.

569

570 Buckingham: OK. And that's sort of my next -- I have a series of topics, which some of
571 them began while Jim was center director and you were deputy but you, the rubber begins
572 to hit the road for the new programs.

573

574 Parsons: Well, what people don't realize is that when I came on in January of 2006,
575 probably in February of 2006, Jim came to me and said I'm going to retire at the end of
576 the year. Then within a day Rex called me and said that Mike Griffin says he would like
577 for you to take over as the center director, but we're not going to announce this until
578 much, much later. So Jim Kennedy and I knew that I was going to be the center director
579 very early in 2006. But Jim and I, and Rex and Mike Griffin, were the only four people
580 who knew that and we weren't going to talk about it. So I was still in a deputy role but
581 Jim and I behind closed doors, you know, we knew that that change was coming and
582 where we were headed. Now Jim was totally engaged and all but I can honestly tell you
583 that, you know, I became a lot more engaged realizing that I was going to be the center
584 director.

585

586 Buckingham: You were inheriting it?

587

588 Parsons: In the next eight to nine months, you know?

589

590 Buckingham: Yeah, OK. So the president (George W. Bush), just to put things in
591 perspective, in 2004 announced the Vision for Space Exploration -- finish the space
592 station, retire the shuttle, develop the next vehicle for the moon and Mars. So I think at
593 the same time we were reorganizing with NE (Engineering Directorate) we began to, we
594 set up a Constellation Project Office to begin to handle the ground activity for the new
595 vehicle and so kind of talk about that.

596

597 Parsons: Right. Well, I think Jim set that up before I got here. And that was Tip Talone
598 took that over and he populated it with some strong folks -- probably some of the best
599 people we have available here at the Kennedy Space Center. But I think that they
600 populated it with the thought, and initially you had to, the thought it was going to be a
601 small project office and it would grow accordingly. And probably didn't, you know, the
602 hard part was: how do you grow it, how fast do you grow it and where do those people
603 come from? Because we didn't get any work taken off our plate and yet we had work put
604 on our plate. So we were going to have to find people within spacecraft, ISS, and within
605 shuttle and try to migrate them over to Constellation. And how were going to find the
606 right balance? So that's been a constant struggle, I think, within, within the Kennedy
607 Space Center is -- with the retiring shuttle in 2010, with ISS work probably at its peak,

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608 you know, it's as, it's as strong as its ever been, shuttles launches, you know, one after the
609 other after we got back to flying in 2006 at a steady rate. We have been fairly steady and
610 fairly constant with being able to launch. So with all that work going on and then to stand
611 up Constellation, which had to ramp up really, really fast. How was the Kennedy Space
612 Center going to be able to do all of that work and not grow in size? And one of the
613 mandates we had is we weren't going to have any more civil servants and we weren't
614 going to grow in our contractor work force. So that's been a real challenge for the whole
615 organization to do that.

616

617 Buckingham: Did it turn out, from your point of view, that having the engineering
618 organization matrix gave us more flexibility to accommodate?

619

620 Parsons: I think that the engineering organization will tell you that. Of course the
621 programs and projects would like their, you know, I want my belly button to work on my
622 particular issue.

623

624 Buckingham: Sure.

625

626 Parsons: But what we found is, and I use examples materials or structures, a structures'
627 guy who's working in ISS has the capability to go work in shuttle or go work in
628 Constellation. And so what we found is when a person wasn't 100 percent totally taken
629 up by a particular issue, such as a structures issue in Constellation or a structure issues in
630 shuttle, then they could go work on another program or project. So what they've been
631 able to do is share resources. That's probably been the biggest goal that Pat Simpkins has
632 had is how can I share these resources, become more efficient, do more with less? And
633 he's been doing a -- I think the Engineering Directorate has done a great job. Now again,
634 there are bumps in the road and little, you know, things that don't go as well as you'd
635 like? Absolutely. But overall we've become much better at that. And it was something
636 that I think, that was the vision Mike Griffin had. That was the vision Rex had, was the
637 vision I had is we have got to find a way to use this work force more efficiently because
638 all we're getting is more work and not anymore people.

639

640 Buckingham. OK. Talk a little bit about -- I'm not sure the timing on this so you can help
641 me, but talk a little about the state partnership as far as Constellation goes. And
642 refurbishing the O&C (Operations and Checkout Building) and sort of how we have led
643 into that future activity.

644

645 Parsons: Well, you know, the station was moving out of the O&C. It was getting ready to
646 turn back over to the Kennedy Space Center. It was not, you know, you were either going

647 to have to shut it down, get out of it because you couldn't afford to keep it open or find
648 another use for it. And so some really smart folks started looking at could we process the
649 Orion spacecraft in that facility? And they laid out some preliminary designs and
650 thoughts. They went and sold that to the state of Florida and, you know, eventually Space
651 Florida was that entity, but it was really the state of Florida. And what the state of Florida
652 did was they put up \$35 million and basically said whoever wins the Orion contract, if
653 they bring that production work here to the Kennedy Space Center in the O&C, we will
654 provide them \$35 million for the refurbishment to get the O&C in a configuration to do
655 that work. The companies were running off deciding, you know, trying to figure out who
656 was going to win that contract -- eventually it was Lockheed Martin that won that
657 contract. And they chose to use the O&C and accept the state's money of \$35 million.
658 That's a big win for Kennedy Space Center -- a big win in that we had a facility that was
659 available. There wasn't a use for it. It was really going to create some issues if we had to
660 just eat it and not, and either walk away from it or try to find ways to use it that we hadn't
661 thought of at that particular moment.

662 To have a major customer come in and to have the state come in and offer up \$35
663 million to be able to bring that work to the Kennedy Space Center, it really has been a
664 huge accomplishment. And I would say that that mostly happened during Jim's tenure as
665 the center director. The implementation part of it was probably under me. The idea and
666 the selling of it was under Jim. But the fact is, it's been just a win-win for everybody -- I
667 think for Lockheed Martin, I think for the work force, I think for the Constellation
668 Program. There's just nothing I can see that's not a win-win. And what it is, is a great
669 model for things that we can do in the future here at the Kennedy Space Center.

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670 We're going to have many facilities that get vacated here as the shuttle retires and
671 those facilities have numerous ways that they would be used. And the state of Florida has
672 a good example of how they can invest money and keep jobs. The contractor has a good
673 model that they see. Kennedy has a good model. It can only serve as, you know, a
674 catalyst for some other things to happen here at KSC.

675

676 Buckingham: Great. OK. So let's talk just for a second about, sort of about two -- just
677 your impressions because I know there's a lot of detail -- but two aspects to this large
678 change we're going from shuttle to Constellation. One is the work force and how have
679 you communicated with the work force and tried to accommodate the changes that are
680 coming? And one is the institution -- all the facilities, all the labs and everything, how
681 have we approached the transition from the shuttle to the new Constellation?

682

683 Parsons: Let me do the facilities first and what I would say is that in 2004 while I was
684 still a shuttle program manager we started doing transition planning within the shuttle
685 program. We kept it pretty low-key and small because we didn't want people to get
686 focused on that. But we started thinking about how we would do it and board (review)
687 structures and how we would make decisions. So what I would say is although there's
688 been a lot of guidance from Headquarters as this thing grew over time, the shuttle
689 program and Headquarters has really driven the transition of facilities. And what I mean
690 by that is we're not the only (NASA) center affected -- we are the biggest center affected

691 -- but what they have driven is identifying those facilities that Constellation needs,
692 identifying those facilities that no one, that anybody else might need, and identifying
693 those facilities that have no customers.

694 So Kennedy's gone through a very rigorous process of mapping out the facilities
695 and what they could be used for, where they're not going to be used and so on and so
696 forth. And they provided that in great detail to a, you know, Headquarters group that has
697 that information. So I mean Kennedy knows exactly what Constellation is going to use,
698 what facilities will not have a customer, what facilities could be used in other ways.
699 They've laid it out, they've planned it out. It's very, very clear on where we stand on that.

700 There will be a number of facilities that you'll want to demolish. They're old.
701 There's no need for them in the foreseeable future and you just need to get rid of them.
702 There are some facilities that you kind of want to keep in a mothball state that you might
703 need in a couple of years. You don't want to put a lot of money into them but you at least
704 want to leave your options open. And then there are these facilities that are, what I would
705 consider world-class facilities, that you need to go out and shop a little bit and see if there
706 are customers out there and people who might want to use them. An example of that kind
707 of facility might be the Shuttle Landing Facility. You won't need that afterward but it's a
708 unique runway with some unique buildings around it and there might be some great uses
709 for that -- that companies or aerospace companies or even other entities may want to use.
710 So you may, you want to keep that available out there.

711 Now from the people aspect, I mean, I think what we've done is we've just been as
712 honest with the work force as we possibly could. We've not pulled any punches. I went

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713 and basically talked to Mike Griffin and just said look, you know, we've got to tell the
714 people what the data tells us. At first NASA is reluctant to do that because it's early and
715 we know that we don't have all the data and we know that things will change, and so it's
716 hard to go say, you know -- 5,000 fewer people at the Kennedy Space Center because
717 that's what the data says because we know it will change. But that's what we did. I finally
718 convinced Mike that we just need to go and tell them what we know. And we said there's
719 going to be 6,000 fewer jobs by the way the budget is laid out right now, but we're going
720 to go work on that. And we think it's going to be less people than that, but here's where
721 we are at today. And we've been steadily doing that here at the Kennedy Space Center.

722 As things have changed, we've brought the information to the work force, we've
723 held all-hands, we've communicated with them, Mike Griffin has communicated with
724 them, Bill Parsons has, Bob Cabana now that he's on board has. Everybody has
725 communicated very, very well with the Kennedy Space Center work force. Does that
726 make it any better? I always say, you know, if you're in a room with three people and one
727 of you is going to be laid off, well, two of you there's not a problem. The one that's
728 getting laid off is a pretty big problem there, you know.

729

730 Buckingham: There's a problem.

731

732 Parsons: So a lot of times you don't know exactly how that is going to play out. But what
733 we have to do is -- people can deal with bad news if you're honest with them and you're

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734 up front with them and they can plan for it and at least have their destiny somewhat in
735 their hands. So I believe that that's what we've done with the Kennedy Space Center work
736 force.

737 I think that all of the opportunities have not been explored. We've reduced that
738 lay off, you know, of the 15,000-person-work force. It started out being 6 or 7,000
739 people. It's down to 3 or 4,000 people. And it's probably going to be some other number
740 before it's over. There are a large number of those who will leave because they retire.
741 They finished out the shuttle program and they did their duty to guide the country and
742 they move on and retire from there. There's another group -- and there's a lot of people
743 who worked their whole career in shuttle program -- there's a number of people who will
744 move on to other things in aerospace business and they will leave this area and they'll go
745 find other good jobs somewhere else. And we've trained them and made them ready to go
746 do those other good jobs. And then there will be those who stick around and hopefully
747 get the Constellation jobs and support the program. Or pick up SpaceX (Space
748 Exploration Technologies Corporation) jobs, or PlanetX jobs, or Orbital Science (Orbital
749 Sciences Corporation) jobs, or whatever other things, commercial entities may come here
750 and so you just have to let that play out. But I believe the impact of this area and this
751 work force, it won't go unnoticed, but it will not be, it will not be the impact that we felt
752 after Apollo -- between Apollo and shuttle. It will be much less. Some of that is because
753 this community is much more diverse. Some of that is because of the planning and the
754 knowledge of a change in the program direction and people being able to decide how
755 they want to go deal with that.

756

757 Buckingham: You know I was just going to ask -- it occurred to me the Apollo transition
758 to shuttle is what people look back to. Have you called on the gray-beards, if you will, or
759 our older folks to kind of give you perspective from that era?

760

761 Parsons: We've, you know, we've talked to them. But, I mean, there's just not a real good
762 comparison because they just canceled Apollo and they just didn't have another program.
763 And KSC just took it squarely in the nose as far as lay offs go. I mean other design
764 centers may have had some work, but Kennedy Space Center just didn't have anything to
765 do and people lost their homes and so on and so forth. We've made a much better plan.
766 Even though there is a five-year-gap currently between shuttle and Constellation -- during
767 those five years there's a lot of work going on here at KSC to get ready for. There's some
768 test flights. There's some other things going on. There will not be a dramatic end to the
769 shuttle program with a huge number of people leaving. It'll taper off slowly. And again, I
770 think the planning part of this and the communication part of this, there's just very little
771 comparison between Apollo and the end of shuttle. Now as I said, probably if you are the
772 one person or the hundreds of people getting laid off it's going to be a big impact. But it's
773 not going to be the thousands and thousands and the loss of homes and the ghost-town
774 atmosphere that we had here after Apollo.

775

776 Buckingham: OK. Couple more questions and then we'll turn to leadership. And Joe I
777 think that's where you, with your long history, could ask a couple great questions. Two
778 other things, or one other thing going on that we haven't talked about is the Launch
779 Services Program (LSP). A number of payloads were launched while you were here: the
780 Phoenix (Mars Lander) mission, the CALISPO (Cloud-Aerosol Lidar and Infrared
781 Pathfinder Satellite Observation), the STEREO (Solar Terrestrial Relations Observatory).
782 Talk a little bit about how that fits into the Kennedy Space Center. I don't want to -- that's
783 a large part of what we do -- I don't want to leave that out.

784

785 Parsons: Well, and that's a program not a project that's located here. So the program
786 manager is located here at the Kennedy Space Center reporting up to a mission director
787 up at Headquarters. And Steve Francois, you know, he has a tremendous amount of
788 experience working with the ELVs (expendable launch vehicles) and within the program.
789 What's, what people don't quite understand about the LSP program is they are the people
790 who go out and contractually buy the vehicles that the NASA spacecraft will fly on. So
791 they, they're a huge procurement organization -- technical procurement organization that
792 goes out and sets the requirements of what the spacecraft has to do, where it has to be, all
793 the different requirements and they match a launch vehicle to those requirements. That's a
794 big part of their job. That's the most important part of their job.

795 Then the next part of their job is, since we can't have Lloyds of London insure our
796 spacecraft, they are our insurance policy. That organization is the group that ensures that
797 when the launch vehicle comes, that it is ready to go launch and that it will put our

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798 spacecraft that we spent hundreds of millions of dollars on -- that it will put that
799 spacecraft in the appropriate orbit and ready to go do the job that it was built to do.

800 So what we really do here at the Kennedy Space Center with the LSP program is
801 we procure the right vehicle to match up with that spacecraft. So we have to understand
802 the spacecraft extremely well and understand the vehicle extremely well. Then once that
803 occurs, then we make sure that the vehicle, as it's processed and getting ready to go fly,
804 that it is going to be as good as it possibly can be and will meet the standards
805 requirements that we've put forth and therefore we look over from an engineering and
806 technical standpoint. We do kind of this oversight on that vehicle to ensure that the ULA
807 (United Launch Alliance LLC) in the past, Boeing (The Boeing Company), Lockheed
808 (Lockheed Martin Corporation), whoever it was, that they were covering all the bases and
809 that they had a good quality program, a good safety program and that they were
810 technically taking care of those issues that might cause our spacecraft not to be also to be
811 placed in the orbit that it was intended to.

812 In all of that too, I mean, you know, you just, putting that all together, there's this
813 dependence again on LSP for even more than that as things go along. I mean, the
814 spacecraft community starts depending on this group of people to ensure that they
815 communicate with them and understand what's going on. The vehicle people make sure --
816 they're kind of the go-between between the spacecraft and the vehicle. So they end up
817 doing a lot of the communication and hand-holding along the way, as well. Fantastic job.
818 They've just had great success since they've been moved here 10, 12 years ago.

819

820 Buckingham: I think we celebrated 50 successful launches.

821

822 Parsons: Right.

823

824 Buckingham: While you were here and they've had several since.

825

826 Parsons: Right.

827

828 Buckingham: The last programs issue -- we've talked about organization a little, but also

829 during your tenure launched some very significant pieces to the space station; the

830 Japanese module, the Columbus module. It occurred to me that while you were traveling

831 in the military and your international exposure there that maybe you were very well-

832 suited to working with space station since it has so many international partners. Talk a

833 little bit about Kennedy's interaction with those partners and pulling all that together.

834

835 Parsons: Well, in the early days it was mostly because of (Russian Space Station) Mir,

836 you know -- Mir shuttle, shuttle Mir. We were working directly with the Russians and I

837 was at Johnson Space Center when we were doing that. I was the deputy director when

838 we were doing that. So my first encounters were with the Russians and working with the
839 Russians on shuttle Mir. Then of course as we got ready to launch the station parts it was
840 again directly associated with the Russians. But as, you know, as time has gone on our
841 European partners and our Japanese partners and other partners have started to play a
842 bigger and bigger role. What's amazing to me is how well Johnson Space Center,
843 Marshall Space Flight Center, the Kennedy Space Center have worked with their
844 international partners to ensure that we integrated. We first of all, we processed and we
845 tested and then we integrated that space station without any issues whatsoever, hardly,
846 when you really get to thinking about it. Especially not with the integration. I mean
847 maybe parts and pieces haven't worked as well as we'd like them to or things had gone,
848 you know haven't worked exactly like we expected. But the integration of those pieces
849 has been amazing and to me that's a direct reflection on the work that's been done here at
850 the Kennedy Space Center and their relationship -- and strong relationship with the
851 Johnson Space Center and the station program, again, playing very closely with the
852 Marshall Space Flight Center and our international partners.

853 We brought them in, integrated our international partners into the Kennedy Space
854 Center and they have felt a part of this work force. I think, my interaction with them, is
855 they felt honored to be here and honored to work with the folks at the Kennedy Space
856 Center and it's just been amazing to watch. Amazing. This last one with the Japanese, I
857 mean, the Japanese could not be more proud of their accomplishments. The Europeans, I
858 think, are a little bit, maybe a little bit, played down a little bit because they've done more
859 in this arena and they've launched more spacecraft and they've been a part of the station
860 for a little bit longer. But the Japanese just launched their first piece of hardware, you

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861 know, just last year, or just this year, I guess. And I mean, you couldn't, the pride that
862 they felt is just unbelievable -- been great.

863

864 Buckingham: Very good. OK. So let's sort of turn a wrap up to leadership style,
865 philosophy. Joe, would you have?

866

867 Joe Dowdy: Yeah, thank you. You know, I kind of look at these Oral Histories, as we all
868 do, as certainly a life and career well led. But also as, in some respects, most importantly
869 perhaps, as the legacy that you leave for the young folks who are going to take over the
870 (NASA) agency. Seems like your generation is what I'd almost call the transitional
871 generation. You joined NASA when you still had a lot of the legacy guys from Apollo,
872 Mercury, Gemini and now you leave the agency and you've got the folks who are going
873 to take us back to the moon, on to Mars and beyond. What changes have you seen at the
874 Kennedy Space Center -- organizationally, culturally and physically?

875

876 Parsons: Well, probably the biggest thing that as you mentioned -- the fact that when I
877 first came to work with NASA and came to work in this aerospace business there were
878 just all kinds of folks who you would run into who had worked on Gemini, Mercury,
879 Apollo, had been with the shuttle since the very beginning, helped design the shuttle. And
880 what's really interesting, now as I look up, I'm the gray-beard. I'm the guy who has the

881 gray hair. And I don't remember -- you, know, when did that happen? When did I wake
882 up? And where are the Leonard Nicholson's? And the Max Francois'? And where are the
883 Jay Honeycutt's? And all these people who I worked so closely with and I could name
884 hundreds and hundreds of others, Frank Buzzard, and so many others who I worked
885 closely with, who I depended on. You know, because of their knowledge and their
886 experience -- and they've been there, done that. They'd share with me the lessons that
887 they had learned. And then you look around and the Tip Talone's, you know? I mean,
888 they're gone and they've retired. Some of them have retired, retired -- they're not even
889 with the contractors anymore. They're retired and gone from our business. And it's the, as
890 you said, it's my generation, our generation, that's now in the leadership roles.

891 I have to say that it's a little scary, but I think that what they have done is passed
892 that, pass on the skills, the knowledge that's required for the people to carry on, build
893 Constellation, take us back to the moon and Mars. I mean, there's not very much room for
894 error in this business. You know? So we will have to be methodical and very careful
895 about how we do this. I will have to say that having Mike Griffin at the helm of NASA at
896 a time when this kind of thing was going on was extremely comforting because of his
897 great breadth of knowledge and his great engineering experience and everything. I mean,
898 you could go and say with the leadership roles with Mike Griffin and Bill Gerstenmaier
899 and now Doug Cook in Constellation, I mean, you know, those are the gray-beards who
900 we have to depend on.

901 It's going to be extremely important as we change, go through this transition of
902 administrations, get a new administrator most likely, that we hang on to a few of these

903 folks who have all these experiences, who can help us get through these next few years.
904 These next few years are going to be so critical to the success of Constellation. And it's
905 going to require people like I've named to be in those key positions -- Mike Coats now at
906 the Johnson Space Center, Robert Lightfoot and Dave King at the Marshall Space Flight
907 Center, and so on and so forth.

908 I will say that, that hopefully people like myself, who have left NASA and work
909 with a contractor -- hopefully I'll be able to find a way to provide some support back to
910 NASA in a way that will be helpful, as well. So many of us now under new
911 circumstances will leave, be part of the contractor work force. And by the way, I would
912 mention Mike Griffin has said to me, when my, when we talked about me leaving -- is
913 Bill we need good people with NASA, we need good people with our contractors, as
914 well. So it's a combined work force. We need them on both sides and hopefully we are
915 going to be able to bring together that work force that's going to take us back to the moon
916 and on to Mars.

917

918 Dowdy: There's been a lot of discussion both within the agency and throughout society
919 in general about what you blissfully call Generation Y sort of folks. Do you think they
920 are capable of doing the mighty things that NASA's done in the past?

921

922 Parsons: They're different, but they're not -- they're smarter than most of us were. So I
923 would say that absolutely. I have total confidence that they can be a part of this. In fact,

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924 when you go back and think about Apollo and going to the moon the first time, I
925 remember Chris Kraft telling me a story and he said, you know I was the old guy and I
926 was 32-years-old. You know, there were a lot of young people in that control center
927 taking us back to the moon, I mean taking us to the moon the first time. These folks are
928 more than capable of doing that. They've been given great educations in our engineering
929 schools throughout. The people we hire are the best and the brightest. These folks have a
930 great work ethic. But are they exactly like us? Well, no, I'm not like my dad and they're
931 not going to be like us. But they are more than capable of accomplishing this.

932

933 Dowdy: Do you think?

934

935 Parsons: They may even find new tools and things that we couldn't think of.
936 Collaboration tools that'll just, you know, we would be -- they would be hard for us to
937 deal with yet they would just smoothly work with them because they're used to it, you
938 know? Used to internet, used to e-mail, used to, you know, all kinds of different
939 collaborative tools that we're not used to.

940

941

942 Dowdy: Do you think that -- you said they're a little different, just as we were different
943 from our parents -- but do you think your leadership-style philosophy is still operative
944 with that generation?

945

946 Parsons: Oh, absolutely. You know, I've always -- my leadership style has been you find
947 really good people, really smart people and you give them responsibility, you hold them
948 accountable and you let them go do their job. Yeah, you go back and communicate with
949 them and you give them some guidance and hopefully provide them with some leadership
950 along the way. But leadership is sometimes pushing them out and letting them go get the
951 job done. These folks are more than willing to stand up and be accountable. They want
952 the responsibility. They may work a little different than we work. We like to go to work
953 at 7 a.m. get off at 4 p.m. Well, they like to work, you know, from midnight to, you
954 know, seven in the morning and sleep for a few hours and then they want to, you know --
955 I'm just saying that they may have a different approach as how they work hours and how
956 they do all that. But as far as responsibility, accountability and capability, they're more
957 than qualified to go take this on.

958

959 Dowdy: Perhaps the toughest question of the day would be what is your greatest
960 contribution? You personally to Kennedy Space Center and NASA?

961

962 Parsons: That one is very hard. You know I, probably to NASA I would say that the
963 toughest thing I did and the thing that I will probably be most proud of, two things that
964 I'm most proud of are -- shuttle Return to Flight and my work during Katrina for the
965 recovery. Those two things were just the most rewarding experience -- the hardest things
966 I've ever done, but the most rewarding things I've ever done.

967 There are so many other things, but from the Kennedy Space Center standpoint,
968 you know, hopefully I allowed people to do their job and I gave them the tools and I gave
969 them the things that they needed and the cover. I call that, you know, I kept the wolves
970 outside the gate and I gave the cover so that they could go get their jobs done.

971 You know, this is such a team effort. It's hard to pinpoint any one thing. You
972 know, to have been a part of the shuttle program is just unbelievable. To have been a part
973 of the station program -- unbelievable. To have a part in the Constellation -- to be a part
974 of the Kennedy Space Center, the Johnson Space Center, the Stennis Space Center. I just
975 feel like people have let me live a dream that I could have never ever thought of and yet it
976 all came true and I was able to be a part of it. It's my contribution, is hopefully I was a
977 good team member, you know, to the other folks who were here.

978

979 Dowdy: Well, I've got one more question unless you've got something else.

980

981 Buckingham: OK. No. I'll just ask you did you miss anything that you wanted to
982 comment on from your time?

983

984 Parsons: No.

985

986 Buckingham: OK. I'll turn it over to Joe for the last question.

987

988 Dowdy: It's an easy one. If you could do it all again, would you do it?

989

990 Parsons: Oh, heck -- I'd do it. And I, you know, the hardest decision is to leave and go
991 try something different. And I've made that decision and we're going to go do that. Again,
992 I think I can be a part of helping NASA accomplish its goals. But if I could turn back the
993 time I would try to get with NASA sooner and stay longer because it's been the greatest
994 experience of my life. No doubt about it.

995

996 Buckingham: Well, we certainly appreciate your time today. I know you are very busy
997 and we appreciate all you've done for the nation's space program.

998

999 Parsons: Thank you.

1000

1001 Buckingham: Thank you, Bill.

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