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CLARK M. CLIFFORD ORAL HISTORY, INTERVIEW II

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By Clark M. Clifford

to the

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INTERVIEWEE: CLARK CLIFFORD (Tape 2)

INTERVIEWER: PAIGE MULHOLLAN

July 2, 1969

M: A good a way to start as any, and one that would certainly add insight to Mr. Johnson if you could do so, would be perhaps to recall maybe some of the specific topics that Mr. Johnson and you discussed that first meeting after you saw him as President of the United States. Perhaps some positions he indicated he held at that time, if he did so.

C: Let me think about it a little while now and let's see what I can come up with.

M: It's kind of hard to project yourself back that five years in a few seconds.

C: After the long talk that we had with reference to the presidency and the organization of the White House, President Johnson would ask that I come over from time to time during those early months of his presidency. One subject that we discussed at some length was the operation of the White House and the manner in which President Truman operated it and what we might have learned during the Truman years and how the operation in the White House developed. I think that anyone coming into the presidency new, interested in how it's been done before, would want some detail in indicating how President Eisenhower had organized the White House. He at once was not amenable to that.

M: Any particular part that he wasn't amenable to?

C: Yes. The record would show the White House during President Eisenhower's day was organized very much as a military command is organized. President Eisenhower had a Chief of Staff and that Chief of Staff was almost a solid door between President Eisenhower and the other members of the White House staff. In the Eisenhower years, or during most of them, that man was Sherman Adams. There was a morning staff meeting, but instead of President Eisenhower holding it, Sherman Adams held it, and then matters would go through the organization as they do in a military command, would be looked at with care by the Chief of Staff, the position held by Sherman Adams, then initialed and passed on to President Eisenhower. So that practically all matters that worked up to him went through Sherman Adams. I thought it was a poor way to run the White House. President Johnson certainly thought it was a poor way. President Kennedy had not adopted that way at all, that wasn't at all in accordance with his thinking, and I know of no other instance in which the White House has been run that way because I know of no other instance, certainly in modern political history, that a general has been President of the United States.

M: It used to be pretty common but not much in our time.

C: Not at all, just really not at all. I guess we've not had a general for President in the twentieth century.

M: Eisenhower would be the first one.

C: Teddy Roosevelt had been something of a military man, at least his charge up San Juan Hill. Then I can recall in that early period, the end of '63 and on into the beginning of '64, that President Johnson had me develop a relationship with the men who worked with him. At that time key men were Bill Moyers, Jack Valenti, men like that, Walter Jenkins, and so I did that. Oftentimes matters would come up and President Johnson might say, "I want you to sit down and talk to Bill Moyers about this." I think he was at that period perhaps using the experience that I might have had in five years that I'd spent at the White House in the Truman Administration, sometimes to check the thinking of other men, sometimes to sit in meetings with them so that I might possibly add something to it. There would be individual issues that would come up. Viet Nam was not particularly prominent then; it was there; he carried on with what may have been twelve or fourteen thousand Americans in Viet Nam, that he had inherited from President Kennedy, but I do not recall it as being a major issue at that time.

I would be called in on economic issues a good deal, matters that might involve raises in the price of steel. Then also I would be called in at the time of disputes in important industries when a strike might be threatened, and I would sit in meetings and discuss whether or not the government should insert itself into that certain problem and whether or not we should take advantage of the Taft-Hartley Act and so forth. Also, sometimes there would be occasions that matters would arise that involved the Justice Department. I was used as a general utility man. It seems to me that I remember at one stage in those early months that either President Johnson said it himself or he may have quoted Mr. Sam Rayburn that "you should look to the young men for activity and industry and action; you should look to the older men for judgment and wisdom," something of that kind. So he had a group of younger, very able fellows around him, but I think he wanted to mix it some with the judgment of older men. At that particular time, also, many times I would be called in at the same time Abe Fortas was called in. That was before he went on the bench. Oftentimes the President would submit a matter to both of us to see how we would react to it.

M: Were there ever any hints that maybe Mr. Johnson either didn't know or perhaps had some reason for not fully trusting his official advisers, or was it just that he knew you and Mr. Fortas from so long back that he relied on you heavily?

C: I think to a great extent. Then it is not unusual for Presidents to have outside advisors. I had served a similar function with President Kennedy and he had a very bright younger group around him. But he still reached out from time to time and brought in men who'd had prior experience in government. There is a certain comfort to a President to check the

judgment against the younger men he had working with the man who'd been through a number of problems of this type in a previous administration. Sometimes I might have an entirely different idea about it than the younger man or even the President, and I'm sure a number of times my notion or advice on it would be rejected, but at least the President would have the benefit of hearing a different approach to it. Sometimes I would be called in, sometimes together with Abe Fortas, and the President would present a series of problems which he had pending before him, and then Abe and I would sit and discuss them almost with each other while the President sat and listened to them. He felt that that was valuable. Abe had been in government back in the Franklin Roosevelt Administration whereas I had been in the Truman Administration.

M: Did he worry about the Kennedy people who stayed on with him, worry about their loyalty to him in the early days?

C: Yes, to some extent, and we would talk about that and what ought to be done. The question of bringing in his own men. I think he felt, for instance, with a fellow like Kenny O'Donnell, who had been very close to President Kennedy, that Kenny O'Donnell never transferred any of that loyalty or really any of the respect that he'd shown to President Kennedy to President Johnson. That relationship didn't last very long. The relationship of the man who served as counsel, Ted Sorensen, did not last very long. They just could not adjust themselves, they chose not to adjust themselves, to the personality and manner in which the new President conducted his office. President Johnson extended every courtesy to them and went out of his way to be sympathetic with the sense of loss that they felt. He did all that he could to try to make the work attractive because he thought there was a very real advantage to their staying, particularly those early months. But they did not, they were never satisfied and as soon as they could shake loose, they did so. Then he began to replace them with his own men.

M: Was there already tension with Attorney General Kennedy developing by that time?

C: Oh, I think his developed before then.

M: Even before the assassination?

C: I think so. I think there always was some there; I don't know to what point it goes back, but it is entirely possible that it goes back to the 1960 convention. I'm not sure of this, but President Kennedy, then Senator Kennedy, had the idea that out of a group of a number of bridesmaids who were available to be picked to catch the bouquet for the vice presidency-

M: If it's a bouquet, some people think it might not be--

C: That's right. Senator Kennedy while in Los Angeles began to feel that Senator Johnson was the best choice for that position. It is my understanding that Bobby Kennedy opposed

it and opposed it strenuously, and as a result I think then these two men, President Johnson and Bobby Kennedy, began to go down different roads. They were very unlike, anyway; I doubt under the best circumstances they would ever have developed much of a friendship. But also Bobby Kennedy seemed at the beginning very much to resent President Johnson. It was a curious attitude, completely illogical, wholly emotional. It seemed to irritate Bobby Kennedy when he saw President Johnson as President. His attitude was almost--and I think to a certain extent the attitude of the Kennedy family--was that President Johnson was an interloper of some kind.

M: No business being there.

C: Yes. Of course, what they did was just happen to overlook the way our system operates. It wasn't President Johnson's fault, he couldn't help it, but their attitude was in part the shock, the traumatic experience and the emotional difficulty the whole family went through in that period. I think that includes Bobby Kennedy, Mrs. John F. Kennedy, and I think less Teddy Kennedy--I don't know that he experienced it much--but this was generally the attitude and it was difficult for the President. He'd had a good relationship with President Kennedy and he wanted to continue to get along with the family and it was really made extremely difficult for him.

Then I believe we get on over into those last few months of '63 and the early months of '64, and then I began to see him a good deal in reference to the political campaign.

M: Of '64?

C: That's right, '64. You see, he would have the convention coming up, I guess, June or July of that year, and the election in November, so you always have to start early. I remember going through some sessions toward the end of '63 and working on the State of the Union Message. We wanted to be sure the State of the Union Message was taking into consideration the importance of the year 1964, which it had always done, and I'd gone through I guess five State of the Union Messages with President Truman. Then we had meetings over there, and as we got into March and April they were quite regular, discussing different possibilities, making suggestions regarding the kind of organization that ought to be set up for the campaign, different types of persons that could be brought into it. I never got into the money-raising end of it fortunately; I wasn't drafted for that. I was used more in the capacity of advising on the campaign and how the issues in the campaign would be handled, and so forth.

M: Was it assumed that Mr. Goldwater would be the opposition during those months?

C: I think not. I believe we considered Mr. Goldwater, and I recall we considered at considerable length Governor Rockefeller of New York. We gave quite a lot of attention

to Governor Scranton of Pennsylvania. It seems to me those were the three men we talked about most and analyzed the different types of campaigns. I've some recollection of at least part of the time being with him as we watched the Republican National Convention, and I remember from a political standpoint I got a great lift out of that because you could just see the Goldwater forces running roughshod over all opposition. You could sense the disenchantment of the Rockefeller group as a result of the manner in which the convention delegates treated Governor Rockefeller. As he tried to make his speech, they would interrupt him with boos and hisses and the cameras would then shift over to Mrs. Rockefeller; she would be right on the verge of tears. This was a most humiliating experience for a prominent Republican to endure at his own convention. So you could get the feeling that the Republican party was splitting badly; I've always had the feeling that the Republican Convention of 1964 did about as much damage to the Republicans' chances as the Democratic Convention of '68 did to the Democrats' chances.

M: Much the same thing.

C: Yes, in each instance it got the particular party off to a very bad start. It took--jumping quickly to '68--it took weeks and weeks before people got over the Democratic Convention and during that time candidate Humphrey made practically no progress at all. As the recollection of it faded, he began to gather steam.

M: Sort of the same thing that happened to Goldwater four years earlier.

C: I believe it did.

M: I believe you were involved in consideration of the vice presidential nominee with Mr. Johnson in '64 to some extent. Was there consideration of others than Mr. Humphrey during the final months before the convention?

C: The one most dramatic incident through that period in the spring of 1964, that I recall, was caused by a newspaper campaign that was put on supporting Robert Kennedy for the vice presidential nomination on the Democratic ticket. There was quite a stir about it, and the President wanted no part of that. It never would have worked, and I agreed with him 100 percent on that, and we had talked from time to time, and I remember we had one important conference about it. And in the course of that conference we discussed the fact that perhaps the best way to get around this problem without alienating Kennedy supporters, who were all through the country, was to make the decision that it would be best not to select any member of the cabinet as the vice presidential nominee.

And I remember after we had discussed that one time, he said--I had come back to my office after talking that over with him--and he phoned and said, "Why don't you get up a suggested release in that regard, a presidential statement." I remember sitting down, and I probably have in my files the handwritten release that I got up and sent over to him that

was used as the basis for a presidential statement in this regard. Changes were made, of course, he made his own changes and some he adopted and some he didn't, but I recall that part distinctly and it took care of the problem very well. It was not so pointed as just to say flatly, "The President is announcing that Robert Kennedy is not going to be the Vice President and you might as well stop trying to pressure me into it." It just broadly said, "I have considered with great care the possibility of recommending a member of my Cabinet, and for good and sufficient reason I have concluded that it would not be in the public interest to do so. These are very busy men, they are engaged in running their departments and so forth, and therefore I wish to announce that I will not recommend for the vice presidency any member of my Cabinet." And when people came and said, "Well, all that meant was Bobby Kennedy, isn't it?" It included Robert McNamara, who had been mentioned for it; and it included Orville Freeman, who had quite a following, he was Secretary of Agriculture. So it did help provide a background for the President, I thought, emerging almost unscathed from a very difficult problem.

- M: Was there serious consideration later on of Eugene McCarthy and/or Senator Dodd who were the other two besides Humphrey who were rumored in the press as under consideration?
- C: Much of what I have to say is obviously just the expression of a personal opinion. It is my opinion that Senator Dodd was never seriously considered for a minute by President Johnson. I think he did not have the prestige, he did not have the standing, it wasn't the right state. I honestly do not know of any persuasive arguments that could be utilized to support Senator Dodd's candidacy. I might say it is a great stroke of good fortune he was not selected in view of all the difficulties that later came up that you're familiar with. I believe that the President at one stage went through a period of the most careful consideration regarding Senator McCarthy and Senator Humphrey. I believe that with all the other names that were mentioned, and it was a job that was eagerly sought, it was very much in the minds of candidates that President Johnson had succeeded President Kennedy on President Kennedy's death. To put it coldly and bluntly, it was well known that President Johnson had had a serious coronary attack years before, so I think the job was eagerly sought.
- M: And that he was going to win was fairly clear.
- C: Yes. I think it looked as though the odds were with him. You could come home a winner. And I believe Senator McCarthy wanted it very much, as did Senator Humphrey. At one time, it must have been March or April, along in there, I had the feeling that for a short period of time Senator McCarthy might have gotten slightly in the lead in the contest as far as President Johnson was concerned. I think at one stage there, and to a great extent this is supposition on my part, I believe Mrs. Johnson leaned a bit toward Senator McCarthy in the early spring. As time went on, however, it began to become clearer to me all the time. I doubt the President ever said specifically to me, "It's going to be

Senator Humphrey" because I think he was keeping his own counsel very much then. I believe that weeks and weeks before the convention I believe he'd reached the conclusion.

Now people have been asking me, "What do you make of the Dodd business?" The day before, I believe, or the day President Johnson went to the convention, maybe it was the day before, he had Senator Dodd fly down from Connecticut, have a conference with him, and, my God, the tongues wagged all over the country. This was supposed to be very significant. Again, I'm merely going to speculate, I think that they had been friends, I believe that Senator Dodd felt that he was in for a tough race, and I think that President Johnson felt that it would be very valuable to Senator Dodd if it were generally accepted in Connecticut that the President of the United States had considered him very carefully for the office of Vice President. It hit headlines all over Connecticut. It got him the kind of spread that he couldn't have gotten any other way. The radio and the TV were filled with it for two or three days or so, and it was a marvelous boost, and as you know he went on and won. Now I could be wrong on it, but as I understand the purpose of this kind of inquiry, you want conjecture, even speculation, for whatever it adds to the historic value.

I recall the President phoning me, maybe it was the morning of the day he was going into the convention in Atlantic City, and saying in effect, "Well, we've worked together very closely during this period; would it interest you to go to the convention?" And I said, "Oh, it certainly would." "Well," he said, "you be over here at a certain time, and we're going to come over to my office, and we'll fly up to the convention." So I went over there, and I think we took a helicopter out to the plane and then flew up there and then got another helicopter. And I sat with President and Mrs. Johnson and the girls, I think both girls were there, and it was a very interesting and of course exciting way to see the convention. I guess I've been to the last five or six or something of that kind, but this was certainly the most interesting way to attend one.

And my recollection is that--we got up there in the late afternoon and then he'd already been nominated, my recollection is, and then the time came and he spoke to the convention on that occasion. I believe also Bobby Kennedy spoke, and when he finished, a great surge of emotion came up and it was also there during the speech, and it made me recall very clearly the President's wisdom in getting that particular problem settled and disposed of before the convention, because the convention could have run away at that time and have nominated Robert Kennedy because of the emotional reaction with reference to his brother. But that had been settled beforehand, and I think very wisely so. Then I saw a good deal of the President between then and November of 1964. There were meetings at least weekly, and long luncheons. As it worked out, it was the biggest win, I guess, any President has ever had.

M: Was there ever any fear that there wouldn't be a victory?

- C: Curiously enough there was. This is the point I wanted to make. You can look back on it now and you think, Good Lord, that was like shooting fish in a barrel, but you don't know that too well at the time. I believe that some of us sensed it pretty strongly, and I think that the President sensed it, but at the same time the President wanted to be sure that we didn't miss a bet. Incidents would happen sometime that would cause him to worry and wonder whether we were headed the right way. So we were quite close during that period in '64.
- M: Right before the election, of course, the crisis of Walter Jenkins came, too. Did you have a chance to see the President's response to that?
- C: I've never been particularly clear on that part of it. Briefly, Abe Fortas called me here at my office one morning and said that Walter Jenkins had come to see him and that a real crisis had occurred in Walter Jenkins' life and the fellow was faced with the most incredible problem and a story was about to break on it, and Abe wondered if he might come over and talk to me about it. I said all right, why didn't he come on over, and he said, well, he had a cab, and why didn't I come down and meet him downstairs because we might decide maybe to go the papers about it. So I went down and got in the cab with him and--or maybe somebody was driving him, maybe it wasn't a cab--or he was driving himself, I guess that was it, so we could talk. I think we stopped and talked about it. And this incident had come up maybe as much as a week before but then was just being known publicly, and we felt that here was a possibility that a man who had made this enormous contribution to the President for something like twenty-five years was faced with what just could be ruination, and we went to the Star and talked to them about it, and the presentation we made was that we hoped every effort would be used on their part to be sure that they had the facts of the story because if they printed it one way and then it turned out to be another way, he'd never catch up.
- M: You can't retract a story like that.
- C: Right. And I remember the Star was quite good about it. Then we went to the News, and then we went to the Washington Post, and then we went back to his house, and Walter was there. We'd had a doctor come see him and give him a sedative, and Walter was terribly confused, couldn't remember very well the incident before--he'd been to a cocktail party and had really quite a lot to drink. Then we got on the phone that evening wherever the President was and gave a report to the President on the incident, and I believe I never talked to the President again about that particular situation. It was just as though the book was closed on it.
- M: It's so important, because I've gotten the impression talking to so many people on this project, that without anybody that I know of saying so, that the President really never replaced Mr. Jenkins--never could replace with somebody as loyal and knowledgeable about him as Mr. Jenkins was.

- C: Well, he had just given his life to President Johnson. He used to get down in his office at eight o'clock in the morning and he'd eat luncheon at his desk and then his wife would bring him his dinner, and God, I just wondered how long he could keep at it, and I think it was getting him to some extent. You just can't do it forever. And he was also the recipient of changes in the President's mood from time to time and he just took it all, and you're right, he was never replaced. He rendered a unique service to the President and was never replaced. As it all turned out, it seemed to me we got through it about as well as you can get through those difficult times. It didn't become a great big issue; Walter was able to go in the hospital and get psychiatric help and reporters couldn't get to him and all, because we had arranged for him to be placed in the hospital. After awhile it had faded off and then by the time it had faded a good deal he slipped on back to Texas and I think--as far as I know, I've not seen him since--but I think he has made a meaningful life down there for himself and his family.
- M: It's during the campaign that Viet Nam also became important. You said it hadn't been in the first few months there. Do you recall when you first had a really full-scale serious discussion with the President about the Viet Nam problem?
- C: I'm not sure at that time we ever had serious full-scale talks about it. It was there, it was an issue, but it had not become a really sharp issue as it later was to become the transcendent issue because we didn't have very many men there then. It was in '65, the spring of '65, that the decision was made to start sending forces in substantial number there. While it constituted an issue in '64, I don't know that it was one of our great issues. The President was being very cautious about Viet Nam, and Goldwater was being very incautious about Viet Nam. He scared a lot of people to death, he had some comments to make about detonating nuclear weapons possibly, and then he wanted to clear out areas in South Viet Nam---
- M: Defoliate. That word got to be a scare word very quickly.
- C: Oh, hell, my God! I remember one fellow came up with a slogan that within the Republican party there'd been two great figures, Lincoln was the great emancipator and Goldwater was the great defoliator. That took hold and that frightened people a good deal, and I thought the President handled the whole Vietnamese question quite adroitly in 1964.
- M: Were you involved in the Tonkin consideration?
- C: I don't have a very clear recollection about Tonkin which came in '64 also. I don't have too clear a recollection. I know the President, through this period, wanted a measure of congressional support and finally obtained it from the Tonkin Resolution which is, as you may remember, in very stern language, and gave the President far-reaching powers to face up to the situation in Southeast Asia. I think the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was passed by

a total vote of something like 504 to 2; it was almost unanimous.

- M: That's an important point, I think. Do you recall anybody of importance in the President's council who was giving him conflicting advice on Viet Nam; that is, that he shouldn't continue the commitment that he inherited, or was it pretty well unanimous?
- C: I think this is a very important part of it. There are a great many people who would blame President Johnson for the extent of the involvement in Viet Nam. I think what they overlook is that President Johnson inherited a situation that almost inevitably dictated a continuation of the policy. First it had been set by President Eisenhower, and there are some statements by President Eisenhower that just go right down the line on the importance of Southeast Asia and the significance of Viet Nam. At one point President Eisenhower said, "If Viet Nam should become Communist, the Free World would have lost some twelve million souls, and then the spread of Communism throughout that part of the world would be almost inevitable," some such language as that.
- M: Can't say it any stronger really than that.
- C: President Kennedy came along, and he had similar comments to make on Viet Nam, telling about how important it was, and he made a comment one time, I think in 1963, in which he said, "We are in Viet Nam, and let me assure you we intend to stay in Viet Nam." So the President inherited that and what was even more important, he inherited his senior advisers from President Kennedy. He had Secretary of State Rusk, and he had Secretary of Defense McNamara, he had General Maxwell Taylor who was a separate consultant and adviser, he had the Joint Chiefs of Staff who remained substantially the same, and these senior advisers to President Kennedy all felt that we were headed correctly in Viet Nam. And then when President Johnson inherited them he encountered a practically unanimous sentiment among his senior advisers. And they all said, this is the issue that is important, the domino theory is unquestionably so. You will remember if we'd known then what we know now, we never would have permitted Hitler to get started when Hitler went into the Low Countries and into Czechoslovakia and Austria; if he'd been stopped then we might have prevented World War II and the death of practically millions of young men in the world, so all of this was very much in their minds. And I must say at that time I accepted the policy of assisting the South Vietnamese to defend themselves against the Communist aggression. As time went on and some years later, as you may now know, I've arrived at a rather different conclusion, but the President proceeded at that time on the basis of a solid phalanx of advice from the main advisers in that field, that this is what we had to do.
- M: Is that true in senatorial leadership at that time, too? Of course I know that Fulbright even sponsored the Tonkin Resolution, but is it also true of the other Senate--
- C: Practically. When you think of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, I don't remember who the

other was; it seems to me that maybe Senator Wayne Morse and Gruening of Alaska, I guess those were the two who voted against it, they both had the reputation of being mavericks, so nobody paid too much attention. The rest of the Legislative Branch of the government was absolutely solid. They said, "We've got to face up to this." It wasn't until quite a long time later that some of them began to backtrack and then when they backtracked an effort was made to break down the background of the facts that led to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. My own view is that those in Congress who attempted to do that were never successful at it, but they made a real effort to try to prove to the public that they had been misled in the facts regarding the attack on some of our naval vessels in the Gulf of Tonkin and that having been misled they passed the Tonkin Resolution, whereas if they had not been misled they wouldn't have passed it. But I don't believe they ever quite sold that. So that as you look at '64, the support for our involvement in Viet Nam in the Executive Branch was solid and the support in the Legislative Branch was solid. It was rare to find a voice that counselled caution or advised that we not do it. The support for our involvement there was really overwhelming.

M: It might be a good idea in this process of taking a subject like this, particularly this one that became preeminent, and kind of running it chronologically forward and then taking another one rather than skipping around, if that's acceptable to you, why don't we take Viet Nam and continue with your relation to it, say in early '65 when the decision to bomb the North was taken. Were you involved closely in the background to that, the consideration of doing that?

C: I believe we bombed the North in '64; I can't recall.

M: February of '65 was the first regular bombing after the Pleiku attack.

C: Oh, yes, but we did do some bombing, it seems to me, in '64.

M: Retaliatory types, yes, sir.

C: Now I've thought a good deal about that, and I will take that subject and then that will finish me off for today and then we can agree on another meeting, or whatever meetings that are needed.

M: Fine.

C: I was not intimately involved in the Viet Nam question in those early days. When the election was over in November, then there was kind of a period where there wasn't as much to do, I began to resume greater activity in my law firm and on into '65 occasionally I would be called into a meeting. But there was no particular need, as I look back at it later, for the President to call on me or Abe Fortas during that period, because he usually called on us when there was some question in his mind, or when there was divided opinion

within his staff. On this, as I look back, it seems to me, the support was so substantial at that time and the pressure for our participation was so widespread and so almost unanimous that I don't remember being at any of the meetings, for instance, that led up to the decision in the spring of '65, to send in the 75,000 marines. And in '65 and in '66 I don't recall any specific meeting; I'm sure I sat in on some meetings when maybe some issues might have arisen.

But I played no real part in the Vietnamese question in '65 and '66. I think, again, the reason for it was there was no particular issue involved. The policy was quite clear and the only issues involved were those taken up with the Secretaries of State and Defense about when was the time to send men and which men ought to be sent and how did you build up your logistic force and then the decision to put airfields in, different procedures of that kind on which I would have no expertise. I wouldn't be of any help to the President. And I don't think he used Abe Fortas or me in '65 or '66 to any particular extent on Viet Nam. I do remember one time, it seems to me it may have been toward the end of '66, there was a suggestion being made that he should halt the bombing.

M: The Christmas pause of '65? The thirty-seven day pause?

C: That's right. I do remember being called in on that, but on that alone. I remember there was a meeting at the Cabinet table on it, and it came up for discussion, and Rusk and McNamara, Bundy, all of them were there--McGeorge Bundy, that is--and I remember taking the position at that time of being opposed to the thirty-seven day pause. My reasoning at that time was that we had not received any indication of any kind from the enemy that we would get any reciprocal action from them. The going had been pretty hard for both sides; I was still proceeding on the basis that what we needed to do was present a very firm, unyielding front to the enemy in Viet Nam, and I felt it would be construed as a sign of weakness on our part if we just arbitrarily declared a bombing halt without getting any reciprocal action from the enemy, without any prior understanding of any sort and so for that reason I opposed it. After some thirty-seven days it was completely unproductive. The fact is, to use that bureaucratic, governmental word, it was counterproductive. It gave them a chance to repair bridges, and roads, and one thing and another, and the stuff just poured down there during those thirty-seven days. And it placed an additional burden upon President Johnson to start the bombing again after having stopped it. And the whole question of the bombing all through that period and of course continued to be an emotional issue.

M: Did the failure of that pause leave kind of a mark on Mr. Johnson in the sense that he didn't ever quite forget the people that had advised him to institute the pause--trusted them less in the future maybe?

C: I think it had some such effect of that kind; I think he felt that he had been kind of suckered into it and nothing had come from it and that he'd gotten bad advice on it.

M: Where was the main pressure for the pause? What parts of government had it come from or individuals? Do you recall?

C: I believe I don't know. I think I don't know.

M: Secretary McNamara, for example?

C: It's possible that Secretary McNamara at that stage--I attended so few meetings on Viet Nam that I do not know the answer to that. Now the other men, obviously, the ones you will see, will know the answer to that.

M: There was some division on that or he wouldn't have called you in, as you indicated.

C: Well, yes, but at that particular time as I remember being at a meeting I think there was support for it at that meeting. I can't remember just who it was who supported it. And then there were some opposed to it. If I had to remember in a little more detail, I think there was rather general support for it at the meeting I attended; I think that was the reason the President decided to go ahead with it.

M: I see. That makes sense.

C: But when it flopped, then there was quite a long time before anyone came up with that suggestion again, because he was less than happy over the result.

M: Did it make you a more trusted adviser because he thought you'd given him good advice during then?

C: Oh, I thought he indicated a couple of times after that that some of them had gotten off the track and some of the people whose judgment he trusted hadn't gotten off the track, something of that kind. It seemed awfully important at the time but now in the whole mosaic of the Vietnamese problem it's relatively inconsequential now, but it seemed awfully important at the time. That took us through '65 and into '66.

'66 as far as Viet Nam is concerned is not particularly clear. Here again I went along with what the Administration was doing, believing in the wisdom of our course of action through '66. I'd been to Viet Nam in '65 as a member of--as chairman, I guess, of the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board and spent a good deal of time there and some other countries of Southeast Asia and was generally comforted by what I saw and heard, and in 1966 he asked me to go to the Manila Conference as an adviser, and Secretary Rusk and I flew out. He was going to the Philippines via New Zealand and Australia and then we met him in Manila and we were there maybe about four days or so. I was generally comforted by the agreement that existed between heads of government and chiefs of state that gathered there, and there was a good deal of camaraderie between the

United States and its allies and fighting the war and we'd gotten right optimistic briefings on the war from General Westmoreland and so forth.

M: That's interesting. One of the points you mention in your recent article about rising questions in your '67 visit was the apathy of the heads of state of our allies. You didn't find that in late '66, though?

C: I think maybe I wasn't--my mission was entirely different in '66. It may have been there but--

M: You weren't trying to sell anything.

C: Exactly, that's right. So I didn't encounter it because I was not engaged in any mission that involved that kind of contact with our allies. In '67, the whole problem became more complex and more serious. People in important places, some of them were turning against the war, Senators Fulbright and others, were turning against it; some of the principal papers in the country were turning against it; it was becoming a very real issue. But I again was not participating in the decision-making process in '67 any more than I had in '66. Then in the summer of '67 he asked General Maxwell Taylor and me to go on this trip, and from then on I have told the story about as completely and about as forthrightly as I can in the article in Foreign Affairs. And I'm sure some people don't agree with it, but I've not yet heard anybody say they didn't understand it, because I hope it's written clearly and simply. I worked hard on it and wrote it all out carefully in longhand and then worked it and reworked it so that it could be the kind of document that not only I hoped would be a public service at this time but be of service to historians who were looking back at this particular period.

Now I'm sure there are any number of persons who disagree with it; there are some I'm sure who don't like it. But at the same time it was my hope that the recounting of the personal, painful, and agonizing experience that one man went through would help make for a clearer understanding of our whole Vietnamese involvement. If my mail is any indication in that regard, certainly at least I've been partially successful in that regard, and also I think it has resulted in substantially more public attention than I had anticipated. Part of that would be due to the manner in which President Nixon chose to treat the article; of course that added a good deal of the attention given to it by the public. But that accounting there would represent the most completely honest, forthright, and candid exposition of my views on Viet Nam from--particularly 1967 and 1968 and down to the present day to early May when I sent the article on in to the editor of Foreign Affairs.

M: There are a couple of questions about it connected with the President that I think might be useful if you could fill them in sort of. When did you first express your increasing doubts about the policy to Mr. Johnson; do you recall that?

C: Yes. The first time--it seems to me that I indicated my disappointment and concern at the attitude of our allies after returning in what may have been September of 1967. I did not make a major point out of it, I certainly didn't make a federal case out of it. My hope was that they were going to do more and some of them did do more. I believe I could have made more out of it with the President than I did. I know I came back with this uneasy feeling that these countries were not looking at the Vietnamese problem in the same way we were and it obviously made me wonder a little about our judgment when it apparently was not consistent with the judgment of these countries out in Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific who'd lived with this kind of problem for a good deal longer than we had. But I did not make much of a point on that. The record will show and I came back and submitted a report to the President--this was more of a nagging, uneasy, vague feeling within me. I just kind of wondered a little about it. But I continued to be a full supporter of our policy, and I think the doubt would arise and I'd push it on back. Max Taylor had a rationalization of their attitude--this is the kind of thing you run into and will run into ad infinitum--as soon as Uncle Sam gets in a situation, everybody sits back and says "let Uncle Sam do it." Of course there is an answer to that, I thought of it later, I don't suppose I made it at the time, I certainly didn't make it forcefully enough. In the second World War they didn't let Uncle Sam do it.

M: Your figures on what New Zealand and Australia did compared to what they now do pretty well answered that question.

C: They're really dramatic, when they really believe that a danger exists those two countries--I just used them as illustration--boy, they stepped right up to the gun on that, you see. They sent a lot of men over and they had a lot of men killed and a lot of men wounded and they felt it was right, and it was right, just the way we did. The fact is the Free World was fighting for survival at that time.

M: You organized a meeting not too long after that, what some have called the First Wisemen's Meeting, in October, wasn't it, or early November, the same group that met again in March?

C: Yes, that was not my idea that time.

M: Oh, that was not your idea?

C: That was not my idea the first time. I must confess to you, it was sure my idea the second time, but it was not my idea the first time. I think--it seems to me very likely it was the President's idea. That we'd been carrying on a certain course of action in '65, '66, '67, the whole issue was becoming more controversial, and he called them together I think toward the end of '67--

M: It was either late October or early November--

- C: It was in the end then. I think it was after Ambassador Bunker and General Westmoreland had made their visit back to Washington and had said, well, there's light at the end of the tunnel now and it looks like in possibly 1968 or 1969 we'll begin to start some of our boys back. And with this whole climate that existed the President had this group meet together, talk together first, and then he met with them and there was very broad and general support for his policy.
- M: Still no basic conflict?
- C: I think George Ball was the only one who raised the question. I know I went along with it and Dean Acheson, Douglas Dillon, and Bob Murphy--you can get the names--were called in. So it was greatly comforting to the President that he had this kind of solid support and that this was the thinking of men who had taken part of this kind of activity for a great many years, men like Acheson who'd been Secretary of State twenty years before.
- M: But this was not an attempt by you, an early attempt, to get a change of direction initiated?
- C: No. The first one was his idea, now the second one--when it came along-- you say when did my mind begin to change, the first doubts that came into my mind that were serious were after that trip in '67 and then it didn't amount to much, and I think I pushed them back into my consciousness and then I came into the Pentagon job on March 1, 1968. In that task force inquiry which I describe at considerable length, that's when really-- brother! all of the concerns that I might have felt before all began to come to the surface and I'd push them down here and they'd pop up there--
- M: Like trying to push down dough that wants to come back up around your hand.
- C: And I'd go home at night and be uneasy and disturbed and we'd start again the next day and we'd grind through this business, and I gave a fair amount of attention to that in the article.
- M: Was it the fact that there was so unquestioning an acceptance by everyone else that was bothersome, or was it the facts of the case itself--the optimism that seemed unjustified?
- C: It was the latter, it was the fact--to use a quick illustration--that I for instance said now I want to know all about it--what is the military plan for a victory in South Viet Nam. Well, that's a year and a half ago and I have never gotten an answer to that question. There was no military plan for victory. The fact is within the political limitations laid down by President Johnson, and very properly laid down, I wouldn't have changed one of them in any respect--he was as right as rain--but within those political limitations the Joint Chiefs said there really can be no plan for military victory. What we must do is just continue to carry on as we are and we believe that the attrition ultimately will become unbearable from

the enemy standpoint. So I say, "How long?" "We don't know."

M: No World War I answer--15 more minutes--

C: So I say, "Six months?" "Oh, no, it can't be done in that period." "A year?" "Well, no." "Two years?" "Well, we'll have made a good deal of progress in two years." "Well, is that the date that we're aiming for?" "Oh, no." "Well, how much longer than two?" "Well, nobody knows." "Three years, four years?" "Well, nobody knows." Well, here's this kind of bottomless pit, you see. We could just be there year after year after year sacrificing tens of thousands of American boys a year, and it just didn't add up. Now it might be I'm running out of steam now; I got started at an eight o'clock breakfast this morning and--what I had in mind is--this obviously is an important part of it, and we can set another time, and if you think it has some value to make a record on this, then you can come and ask me questions about my view on Viet Nam.

M: No, your article was perfectly clear. I was just trying to fill in a gap or two that might occur--

C: Well, it may leave some questions. I attended a meeting this morning at eight o'clock with a group of twenty persons or so, and they had plenty of questions, wanting to know where it was going to lead us and so forth, so unquestionably the paramount question in the four-year term of President Johnson was Viet Nam. It built up every month, every year it became more preeminent; it finally resulted in his decision that he should not run again; that had perhaps more to do with his decision than any other one factor; his concept was that the country was so deeply and bitterly divided over the issue that he thought it was in the public interest that he not conduct the race in '68. I would let you decide how much attention you want to give to that issue. I'm steeped in it, I'm saturated with it, as of now, so there's hardly any facet of it that I don't have an idea about.

(End of Tape 2)

