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BROMLEY SMITH ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW II

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By Bromley Smith

to the

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78705

ACCESSION NUMBER 75-14

## INTERVIEW II

DATE: September 25, 1969

INTERVIEWEE: BROMLEY SMITH

INTERVIEWER: PAIGE E. MULHOLLAN

PLACE: Mr. Smith's office, Department of State, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

M: I know you don't have any means or necessity of recalling what we talked about last time, but we talked almost exclusively about the organization of your operation in the White House and the personal relationships and the jobs and the various functions. I want to talk some today about some of the substantive issues that you've mentioned as you've gone along.

You're one of the few people who--you were a State Department hand for many years and then you were a White House hand for probably longer consecutively than anybody else. During the Johnson Administration what really was the relation between the White House shop and the State Department insofar as initiatives in foreign policy were concerned? Had the balance really shifted to the White House during that period?

S: I don't think so. That's a very hard question to answer. The way it evolved under President Johnson presupposed that there would be an easy, working, respectful arrangement between the White House and the State Department. I'm not at all certain that if there's an adversary relationship any system will work. It's fair to say that during both Mac Bundy's and Walt Rostow's time the White House staff, or the National Security Council staff as run by these two White House men, aimed at facilitating the job of the President, while not seizing the initiative or alienating the State Department. The aim was to use the State Department for what it could be used for and not expect it to do things that it couldn't do.

Secretary Rusk decided early on that there were certain things he could do and certain things he couldn't do. The system didn't work equally well on all problems. But on the major one, Vietnam, it worked very well.

M: Was that because all the parties basically agreed to start with, that it worked there, and maybe they didn't agree on other of the areas of concern?

S: President Johnson understood that he had to be the coordinator on Vietnam. I don't think he thought of it in these terms, but he knew that on that problem the decisions he would make would have to be discussed in his presence by the people who actually carried them

out. I'll go back to what I said before about the Tuesday luncheon. You knew that every single week Vietnam was going to be looked at by the President and the people who implemented that program--Defense, JCS, State, and to a lesser extent CIA.

M: So, on Vietnam, to use Truman's old phrase, the buck really did stop at the President?

S: He listened to the arguments and the presentations and the papers. And on occasion, out of that Tuesday lunch he'd go to the bigger group--the Security Council meeting. But there was never any doubt that on that major problem there was informal, intimate, off-the-record, nonreportable conversation, and give-and-take exchange.

You can say that this didn't come free. It did mean that the President consciously let, say, the State Department or the Defense Department more or less take the leadership in other areas of policy that were not brought to him on a weekly basis, or even on a monthly basis. The President can't run everything from the White House. He has to give guidance and direction and leadership. But on the crucial problem, Vietnam, he was what we used to call the desk officer.

This is hard on a president. It takes a tremendous amount of time and a tremendous amount of nervous energy. But he had a unique combination--a Secretary of State and a Secretary of Defense who worked well and easily together. They were pros. They'd been at this problem for years. They didn't need to be educated. We always worried a little bit, that if you got a change, this harmonious relationship of the President and the President's advisers on Vietnam might come apart. After McNamara left, and as Secretary Clifford fitted into his role, you saw a bit of this manifest itself.

M: Certainly the press reported some of that.

S: That's right. The President felt very strongly about that. There was a different element introduced into the Vietnam discussions when Secretary Clifford made his policy recommendations.

M: You talk about this--and I'm not sure whether you mean it this way or not, but I'll find out if you do--as if the decisions, say, on Vietnam were made in a fairly regularized procedural way in the sense that--take any of the major decisions, to bomb the North or to send troops in or to stop the bombing on Christmas 1965, or what have you--that the advice would come in and then it would go to the Tuesday lunch and it would be discussed. Then at some point the President would make a decision, and that decision would then be administered by your staff and by the State Department or whoever was concerned. Was it really that procedurally clean, or did decisions sometimes kind of get slid into or informally made or perhaps not always agreed upon?

S: The big decisions were studied and reviewed and discussed and hammered out until

sometimes you had the impression that you just couldn't do anything more to add to the understanding of the situation prior to making the decision. But all the major ones, and even the minor ones, were dealt with in an orderly fashion by conveying necessary decisions from this group to the bureaucracy.

There has been a lot of criticism of this and it's sheer nonsense. For example, the JCS made recommendations of what targets to hit. The recommendations would be discussed by General Wheeler with Secretary McNamara. They would agree or disagree or reserve their positions, and then go to the White House. Then the presentation would be made. Secretary McNamara would make his recommendation; Secretary Rusk would have his say, and the President would make the decision.

The staffs very rarely got in on these discussions at this level. One, there wasn't enough time; two, I don't know whether McNamara just preferred to deal with it this way or General Wheeler preferred to do it this way. The staffs were not really a part of this. Therefore, they said it was fuzzy and confused and wasn't handled right, which is the normal bureaucratic reaction.

To get the answer to the question you've asked, you'll have to ask McNamara and Wheeler and Rusk and the others that were there. I don't mean that this was perfect, far from that!

- M: Really, what I'm thinking of is, you get reports--pundits particularly--about disagreement as to what the goals of a particular policy are at any given time. Take the bombing of the North, for example. Somebody or other thinks that we're doing it for one purpose, somebody else thinks we're doing it for another purpose, and somebody else still a third purpose, which would sort of indicate not a very cleanly made decision somewhere back in the background. Is there any substance in that, or is that imagination?
- S: It's very difficult to analyze because with the tremendous amount of attention of the press to everything that everybody said, and the need to write a new story every eight hours, they look at the words and draw their own conclusions. Now, as you know, policy is affected by the reaction of the press in Washington. An advocate of a certain thing can give it a bent or a direction. This is in part the essence of making public policy. The President is the representative of the people and mass reaction is an element in his decision--not the crucial one but it is a factor. So at various times, various arguments would be used for and against bombing.

There's no doubt that there was an honest difference of opinion as to the value of the bombing. A man who doesn't think it's valuable is going to downgrade it, and is going to deal with it in a policy statement in a different way than a man who says that "the bombing is advancing our policy, and it is helping, and we will slip back if it's halted." So the argument of whether to continue or halt the bombing never appears cleanly in the

press or even in the speeches of some of the participants, because it can't be just pulled out in isolation and dealt with as if it were an end in itself.

It is conceivable that the government created part of this problem for itself by emphasizing the bombing. When the wash-back against it came, the government justified the bombing. The pressure is to prove how much you're accomplishing, so you got far greater emphasis put on bombing than it merited in terms of the whole problem. The President doesn't have the ability to say, "All I have to do is to deal with the bombing." He has to deal with Vietnam. In a substantive discussion, bombing is one factor. If it gets overemphasized, then some other part of the policy suffers.

President Johnson kept constantly in mind the ace-in-the-hole argument. In other words, if everything goes wrong, everything goes wrong, all your expectations are against you, don't get yourself in a position where you haven't any course of action open to you.

Suppose you get a tragic over-run of our forces in the DMZ. The reaction in the United States will be tremendous, but I doubt very seriously whether it will be such as to say, "Let's send more men and more forces and more military strength to Vietnam to solve this problem." I think when you historians get through analyzing the Johnson policy, you'll find there was always an element in that policy that if everything went wrong--if they didn't negotiate, if they didn't withdraw, if they didn't give up, if they displayed greater strength and put greater pressure on our forces and the South Vietnamese forces--there was always a way in which the President could have said: "Okay, in the U.S. national interest this is what we have to do."

This type of analysis doesn't come out too clearly in discussions of policy, and that isn't a criticism of the decision-making machinery. It's that a lot of this is hindsight. You're weighing judgments that were made. A very important thing in analyzing decision-making is to know what the participants knew at the time the decision was made.

M: To analyze the decision to send 75,000 troops from the time when you know there are 500,000 there is not exactly the same.

S: To go back and say the decision-making process was wrong because this was the wrong decision is unfair criticism unless you're in a position to say, well, the estimate was this, the facts were these, et cetera, at the time that decision was made.

M: But now there is the element that gets in here--and you mentioned this in passing--that once a policy is determined and the wash-back comes, then the administration hastens to defend it and justify it and prove that it has been worthwhile. Does that mean that after something like the decision to bomb the North, as an example, that it becomes a closed issue? The opportunity for rearguing the case with the President, in Johnson's case, ends? It's no longer possible to rethink it and maybe to decide that it was, in fact, wrong?



- S: Well, it really isn't particularly helpful to do that. Suppose after the bombing was halted--and nobody really has the time that's necessary at that moment to go back and review all of the past. The present is such a tremendous burden that this is left to other people who don't make decisions. Now, it isn't a question of whether you couldn't reargue it or rethink it. Every time one of these actions took place there was this argument again: "Are you giving up a lot or a little?" There was continuing difference of view as to what bombing was accomplishing.
- M: And they were not blocked off by the President's refusal to hear that point of view, or by part of the bureaucracy who didn't let that point of view get up to the President so far as you know?
- S: How one could prove that, I really don't know. I think that the CIA did some studies showing how little good the bombing really did. I think Rostow tried to get something started to show exactly what had happened. And there were different answers as to whether an action taken by the North Vietnamese was the result of their incapacity or because the bombers had taken out the petroleum sources. Again, a man just can't comprehend all of this and get all of the information together to make a perfect case.
- M: But those people who, say, were sympathetic with the bombing when it began and later changed their mind--there was, at least by public releases, some of these type of people--they did have a chance to make their change of view known? Is it true that Johnson allowed them to keep on coming in and giving their case, if they wanted to make it?
- S: It was made all over town. You don't come in and say, "Mr. President, look how right I was! A year has gone by, and you made the wrong decision." But there was no effort to say, "You can't review this." Now, there'll be plenty of people in the bureaucracy who will say this. I don't think it's true.
- M: That's what I wanted to get. You're in a position to know this naturally.
- S: I think it's an alibi. A man who believes something strongly and thinks he has a case can present it in the bureaucracy. I don't mean you wake the President in the morning and start reeling it off. His problem is to figure out ways in the bureaucracy to get himself heard. And if he can't figure them out and then says, "Well, they never asked me," this is an alibi. Whenever you hear a man say, "Well, I thought this and I concluded that, and here's my memorandum that was sent over, but nobody would listen to me," just back off and look at him very carefully. Sure, there may be resistance and all kinds of things, but if he has a point of view and can document it and move it forward, then the test of his ability comes in how he works it into the bureaucracy--in not being defeated.

Some people just want to know for the sake of knowing. They sit there with

information and do nothing about it. There are a lot of people in the bureaucracy who make their lives tolerable by saying, "Well, if I'd been listened to," or "The boss said I couldn't do this."

(Interruption)

M: You mentioned one time, I think maybe in our first meeting, about the MLF. Here's a case where they did get their view. What happened then when they turned out to be on the wrong side? If you argued a case properly, as you said, in the bureaucratic sense--that is, you got your view heard--and you turned out to be on the wrong side, during the Johnson Administration did this mean that you had lost what the bureaucrats call "effectiveness," because you'd been wrong?

S: Of the people that were involved in the MLF, only one resigned. The others were shifted to other work. All of them now are active in the foreign policy field--some in and out of government, et cetera. But it didn't destroy them at all, one of them is an ambassador now.

M: One of them is director of the Arms Control Agency, too, as a matter of fact.

S: Yes, that's right, and another one is at Brookings writing pieces for the press. One is a highly successful lawyer.

M: In other words, Mr. Johnson, as president, didn't say to Mac Bundy, or later to Rostow, "Get the jobs of so-and-so because they have been on the wrong side of too many issues," something of this nature?

S: A decision might well have been made that this group should be engaged in some other activities, but it wasn't "off with their heads."

How do you know whether the MLF decision was right or wrong? I think it was right, but I suppose it will be many years before we can say that with absolute certainty.

M: And what you were doing in that case was not making the decision, but letting him make the decision?

S: Letting him make a decision. The bureaucratic machinery nearly took the decision out of the President's hands. They arranged meetings and they presented this thing so that the minority practically couldn't stick its head above the basement.

The problem there was to protect the President so that he saw all sides of this--and to reinforce his own judgment. In this case he was being deferential to a lot of people in the sense of saying, "Well, they're experts and I've not worked with this as long as they

have." You must think of the President as a man standing up to this tremendous force, all of this argument and articulate explanation, and he still doesn't think it's right. A staff doesn't go out and drum up opposition, but it makes it easier for him at least to hear that there is an opposition so that he doesn't doubt his own judgment.

M: Was there ever this type of professional onslaught on the Vietnam issue--that is, a more or less united front on the part of people in behalf of a certain policy?

S: I don't think it ever came down to as specific an issue as the Multilateral Force. There were so many pieces of the Vietnam policy, and so many people who had ideas that no one up until almost the very end had a solution in which he said, "If you will do this, it will solve the whole problem." I think toward the end probably some knowledgeable people did think that if certain actions were taken the whole thing would be solved. The Vietnam issue was so complex that you did not get a large group concentrating on one aspect of the problem until the very end when you got the group that believed that we should not increase our commitment.

M: What about the people who had questions about what were we doing in Vietnam all along? Was there ever any purge or, in polite terms, was there ever any reshuffling to other positions of opposition within the government on a substantial scale?

S: I don't know of any, but I'm sure that some people thought that this might well have been true when it may well have been for a totally different reason. I mentioned to you before the session in which the President asked the opponents of the Vietnam program to state their case, and George Ball stated it. This was just the reverse.

M: You know, George Ball's opposition, at least from his books and what I know about him, is a kind of a tactical opposition as opposed to strategic opposition. Was that the way most of the opponents in the government were? In other words, was there ever anybody who was saying, "We ought to really think whether we had any business doing any of this in the past or not?" That's what the outside critics have said all along, and I wondered whether that view ever got into the government, or ever got into the White House, at least.

S: You have to answer that in terms of when. In 1963 there was one point of view. The whole criticism of the Vietnam policy changes as you move through time. There is a sizable element of "I told you so" in it. A man in 1969 may redefine his position of 1965. That's where historians are going to have to work this out. You have to march a man back. And if he says nothing and he just has reservations inside of 1965, and then in 1969 says, "Well, I've thought from 1965 on," that's not particularly helpful. It may help his ego, but it's not very helpful when he did not speak out.

M: And you think there's a lot of that in some of these people?

- S: I can't help but think that there is, but then that's a rather cynical approach.
- M: It's based on a good deal of experience in watching it. One thing that has confused me, and it's one of the great mysteries, I guess that you might be able to shed considerable light on, being more or less in charge of the paper over there for so long, is the famous or infamous--depending on your point of view--U Thant peace initiative of 1964-65 that may or may not have gotten to the White House and may or may not have been considered. Do you have any knowledge of that coming there and getting into the White House operation, or any recollection of it at all?
- S: I have a certain recollection of it, but it ought to be all clear in the documents that are now in Texas.
- M: It may not be. I've talked to most of the principals, and they're not at all sure that it is clear in the documents--Ambassador Cleveland, for example, and others who were close to it. They're afraid that it may not be clear in the documents.
- S: There is in the record a memorandum from Secretary Rusk to the President discussing this whole question as of the time the position was made public by U Thant, reviewing the past. And without actually looking at the dates, I couldn't reconstruct it completely. That document did go to the President, but it was not, as far as I know, the subject of major discussion until after U Thant made his statement in New York. Then the President asked for the file. It was sent to him again so that he could read exactly the dates. I think much too much has been made of the issue.
- M: Certainly by Norman Cousins and Severeid and everybody else.
- S: I think this is just nonsense. You have to look back at the situation as it existed at the time. If you now look at it from 1969--you know, people can make themselves look pretty good when they forget all the cons and remember all the pros. There's a lot of after-thinking. Cousins rules out everything except his "participation" in the events, and then says, "We didn't do that, we didn't do the other." The premise is, we should have done something. Built into it is a policy decision, a policy that he wanted to undertake at that time. Also built into that is the assumption that Hanoi was just waiting for an opportunity, and they would have grabbed it. His argument makes no sense when you line up all the other opportunities that were given Hanoi which they turned down. The particular one he's referring to has to be looked at in the light of what happened to all of the others. The assumption is wrong that the Hanoi policy machine was anxious to grab onto any willingness of the United States to negotiate on terms other than full surrender.
- M: But as far as you're concerned there's not any chance that this proposal would have been lost somewhere in the bureaucracy, so to speak, so that it would be blocked out from the President?

S: That's just naive. This is a major issue.

M: Yes, it is. Of course!

S: Vietnam is a major issue. You do not deal with it as if it were a casual affair that could be basically affected by a bureaucratic inadequacy. This is the assumption that goes into all of this criticism. It's our fault because our government didn't respond properly to initiatives that Hanoi allegedly was taking. The argument that they were just using Cousins to extend the bombing pause, he can't accept obviously. But the government must look at it as a feasible assumption that an enemy would try to use our own people to get a bombing pause. Of course, that argument is affected by people who say the bombing didn't help you much anyway.

M: Sure, everything enters into it at that point.

S: You have to reconstruct the whole fabric of the policy at that moment. You cannot isolate one particular point.

How will one know unless the Hanoi leaders leave diaries--and they will try to falsify the record in any event. The argument is on the side of those who say we have to assume that they will act in a consistent manner. The thought that they were just dying to negotiate and that we did or didn't talk to a certain man, I really think is naive.

M: It certainly hasn't been borne out by the subsequent course of events.

S: It makes a good case. Somebody has to disprove these various allegations that, "if we'd just responded to U Thant" or "if we'd let Cousins talk" then something would have happened.

M: I'm interested in that in relation to Cousins, particularly. In that article that you mentioned, he talks about his relations in the White House with, I think it's Moyers and Valenti. Neither of those people were in the national security shop, at least by position. Is this an example of some people muddling around you shouldn't have been in the first place? Did that happen frequently?

S: You can't say they shouldn't have been. And the liaison was reasonably close with Bundy during that period. But it is an illustration of the complexity of operating in the White House. You can't cut the president off from people. But part of the staff problem, instead of just bitching about somebody's doing this, was to figure out a way, short of the president, in which adequate consideration is given to all the suggestions that reach the White House. This is not an argument for saying that nobody can take anything to the president on foreign policy that doesn't go through one shop. This is not what I'm saying. It does mean that if an idea does go in, that on the rebound the people who have been

dealing with the problem ought to have a shot at it.

M: For example, something like the alleged willingness of Hanoi to move is going to look different to somebody in the national security shop than it might look to somebody like, say, Valenti, who hasn't been dealing with the problem.

S: I think that's fair. I'm not saying that is the wrong channel. What I'm saying is that some evaluation needs to be made. There is no ideal organizational structure in the White House, but I go back to what I've said over and over again, it ought to be organized to help the president. I do not think that you should try to force a president to use a system in a certain way.

What one does in a very sophisticated fashion is to see how the president works best from your point of view, which is subjective, and then try to build a system to meet his requirements. Bureaucracy ought to be kept out of the White House in that sense--the hierarchy and everything else--but the president should not be made captive by the system. I don't think that President Johnson ever was.

A senator can come in and talk to him and say, "This is crazy." Now, the president doesn't have to say, "I agree with you. I hadn't thought of that. I have a lot of stupid people working for me." That isn't his reaction. He will listen. Then he'll get the reaction of the people around him, or the government, or his secretary of state.

President Johnson wanted to hear from the people at the top. This made their lives pretty much hell. But in any event, when you said the Department of State says this, his answer was, "Who in the Department of State?" He wanted Dean Rusk signed on. He was dealing with people, not with an amorphous bureaucracy.

M: Was part of that his preoccupation with keeping the team small, as far as security was concerned--secrecy?

S: No, I don't think so. It was that these were the responsible men. The way to insure that they carry out their responsibility is that they know, even if the President has to remind them, that the Department of State is recommending to him this certain action. On numerous occasions the President would get an important decision about a visit or something, and the paper would say, "The Department of State" because they didn't have Dean Rusk's signature on it. The President would pick up the phone and say, "Mr. Secretary," or, "Dean, do you think I really have to see this Arab leader that the State Department says I must see?" He'd wash it back that way.

In an ideal world that wouldn't happen, because the President's staff would know that he would want Secretary Rusk signed on to a thing as small as whether he must see an Arab leader. Therefore, the paper wouldn't have gotten to him without Rusk's

clearance.

M: In the first place.

S: But you can't get perfection.

M: What about the problem of secrecy? Some of the critics have made a lot of the fact that people who needed to know things, such as negotiating positions--I think particularly of the Marigold episode that was publicized so highly--that the proper people didn't know what they needed to know in order to carry the policy out. Do you think that's a valid criticism in some cases?

S: I really don't. Again, I think this is a staff criticism. I think it's fair to say that some people in the bureaucracy around the principals didn't know as much as they thought they ought to know. So they would, in their dealings with the press--with reporters--would say they didn't know.

I am very sympathetic with the theory that the people who hold the responsibility should make the decision as to who else knows the various factors that went into a decision. How do you read back what took place at a meeting? Everybody wants to know. They want to know all the ins and outs--that's what the press wants to know and the staff wants to know.

M: Don't get any prestige involved in the decision.

S: There must be a place where things can be worked out.

M: Was one of your responsibilities security in the White House operation, preventing leaks and so on?

S: Leaks are not really a security problem. Seeing that papers are locked up is not much of a problem in the White House.

M: I really meant in secrecy terms, leaked--

S: The problem of leaks is a very difficult one. It worried the President no end. There's the fellow who just wants to let somebody else know that he knows. Then there is the leak which is an effort of a conscious man to influence policy. These are the ones that hurt the President. I mean hurt him mentally in the sense that he just can't believe that the people would do this or that they would try to force his hand or put him in a box, so to speak, publicly through unauthorized disclosure of policy positions. An awful lot of reporters wander around Washington whose livelihood depends on their writing the kind of information that purports to be a full report of the various points of view that were made

known to the President.

Actually, President Johnson on numerous occasions would have an investigation of a leak. We'd call everybody and say, "When was the last time you saw so-and-so?" I've never known whether the President ever expected to get anything from this, or whether it was just a device to remind people that every time there was an unfortunate leak there would be an investigation.

Most people who don't have a great deal of authority apparently enjoy reliving a tense circumstance in which they won or even if they lost.

M: Of a war story type.

S: At the cabinet-secretary level, there's a decision an hour, much more work than can possibly be done. There's real reluctance to sit back and relive the past, even though it's only a few hours away. With the tension that there is in Washington with these tremendous problems, a cabinet secretary doesn't have time to go back to his staff and sit down and replay the discussion with the president on a policy issue. Therefore, the staff is going to get a very narrow briefing and they're going to complain to other people, "Well, he never tells me anything," instead of getting at their job of trying to get what they can and what they must have to move forward. It's a challenge rather than grounds to complain.

Now by and large, the people who have talked to the press about decision-making are the second echelon, and they're going to complain--I repeat for the twenty-ninth time, the only people whose judgment really should be listened to on this are the ones who were actually at the meeting.

I can think of some cases where a cabinet secretary felt called upon to advance his policy position in the press. I can't speak about the disloyalty of any of the President's cabinet officers because I don't know the whole picture.

M: How much evidence, if any, did you ever see that there were Kennedy loyalists in the press or even in the government who used leaks consciously to damage the Johnson Administration? Was there any of this at all?

S: Yes, there was.

M: All the way through, or only right at the beginning?

S: I just can't reconstruct that. You would have to take each story and check it. Sometimes it was an emotionally involved, policy-oriented officer using the press to advance his own judgments or his own perceptions or his own criticism. You always get that in



Washington. Sometimes it's organized around a man and a group, sometimes it's around an idea like the Multilateral Force; sometimes it's around a specific decision like bombing North Vietnam. So you get each of these issues that could be looked at in the light of who was trying to influence the press.

M: But the suspicion that the Johnson Administration inner group always had that there was some of this Kennedyite feeling that led to some of the leaks is probably accurate, don't you think?

S: Consider Rusk and McNamara. They were chosen by Kennedy. You have to think in these terms. They were not going to the press, trying to destroy themselves and their President and their administration.

M: So it works both ways.

S: It may well be that you had correspondents in the press who were emotionally involved with the Kennedy group, and they sought out this information.

M: And they knew who to go to?

S: And they knew who to go to. It's an impossible picture to paint precisely.

(Interruption)

M: One of the points that gets a lot of press, after Mr. Clifford became secretary of defense, particularly after the bombing halt in March of 1968--the Wise Men meetings of late November of 1967 and again in early 1968. Did you organize those from your staff position? Was that carried through in the normal way, or were things like this done outside of the normal channels and chain?

S: Walt Rostow was involved in the organization of it.

M: This would be at the second of the two meetings, I assume now--the one in February or early March of 1968, just before the president stopped the bombing?

S: I'd have to check the dates. But you'd probably have to talk to everybody there and then add them all up to see exactly how this happened.

M: I have almost done that.

S: The briefing they received was one which would have thrown gasoline on the fire. I haven't read the text of the briefing and I wasn't there, but my feeling was that, as happens occasionally on briefings, you need a discussion by people who really know the subject

matter of a briefing, immediately following to put it into perspective. It's very hard to sum up neutrally, particularly on Vietnam and particularly on the bombing, because you had men of great competence arguing from both sides of that fence. They were citing information and figures which they evaluated differently and weighted differently to reach a generalized conclusion.

M: When you said add fuel to the fire, you mean fuel to the fire in favor of a partial bombing halt in this case?

S: The evaluation of the Tet offensive. That was a very good case in point. People simply divided. Some panicked and said, "The whole South Vietnamese structure is coming apart." Others said, "The Viet Cong failed miserably to accomplish their purpose." I don't know whether you ever could come to a firm conclusion that would completely destroy the other argument. You're looking at it from two different points of view.

History after the Tet offensive comes down on the side of those who said that Hanoi really expected to win quickly. They didn't. The South Vietnamese suddenly realized that the communists would come into the cities, that they were no longer safe there, that they couldn't live in quiet isolation and just let the war go on in the countryside. My feeling has always been that by coincidence, this group was in Washington at a time when the government had not really honed down its view of the effect of the Tet offensive.

M: I wonder, was it really a coincidence?

S: You probably know more about that than I do.

M: What you are saying is that calling in this kind of group has a lot of automatic dangers in it at any time.

S: It very definitely does, particularly in a situation where no one knows that he's right but has to act. Now, people without responsibility can enjoy the luxury of taking one side or the other.

M: Did Johnson do that more, say, than Kennedy, under whom you also served throughout his term?

S: There were various attempts to do it. I really don't know whether there was more or less. Some of it was done rather informally. Sometimes the group itself would get into the act. They'd be called for one purpose, like disarmament, and they'd get into other subjects.

The real problem here is that you really don't want their advice on policy; what you want is, "This is what we're planning to do. Now, as reasonable men, do you think we've

looked at the whole situation, or is there a gap?" But "wise men" want to affect policy. Consulting "wise men" is not all plus. It may reassure the president that his bureaucracy is performing normally. It may lead to a result, which it did in this case, in which men of great ability and great conviction differed among themselves, and, in effect, confronted the President.

M: Do you know if fairly full records were kept of those meetings?

S: I would doubt it very much, but I just don't know.

M: They weren't kept through your shop, at least.

S: No, they weren't.

M: So it may be really impossible to reconstruct everything everybody said in those circumstances.

S: There are summaries, I believe. But the informal meetings, for example, where they just sat down and argued among themselves, would be difficult to reconstruct. But the briefings ought to be available.

M: Yes, they're probably available.

S: So you could see what really caused the discussion.

M: There was no sense of that group being stacked in one direction or another in a policy sense that you ever--?

S: Oh, I think everybody had a view about it.

M: But they weren't all people who had favored the bombing strongly, or the people who had opposed it in the past, or anything of this nature? They weren't chosen for the past views?

S: No. There's a kind of club--

M: The Establishment, as Richard Rovere once called it.

S: And I think one of the reasons--

M: But the president of the Establishment wasn't there. That's what made me ask. John McCloy wasn't there, and certainly he would be in an Establishment meeting normally. That's what led me to wonder if you thought there might have been a stacking in some way.

- S: No, I don't think this was done consciously. If these people are called in, the President's staff ought to really sit on top of everything that goes to them--not with the view of attacking it, not with the view of keeping opposition points of view from being expressed, not from inhibiting the discussion, but to insure that there is a rounded picture so that the group neither comes apart or has a great battle.
- M: Right. In line with that, you mentioned at the very beginning about the President being more or less the desk officer for Vietnam. And you probably know more about staffing the President for crises situations than anybody. Does that mean that in likelihood when something not related to the chief problem comes up, that he's not going to be adequately staffed for it probably? Take the Dominican episode that rises all of a sudden in 1965 or in the June War in 1967. Does this mean then that really when the critics say the government can't handle two crises at the same time that there's substance in this?
- S: No, I really think this is nonsensical. Most of the analyses of these crises situations are premised on information from staff officers and not principals. And, yes, I am sure that things can be handled better than they have been.

But basically it turns on the role of the president. Now if you try to keep him informed on every critical situation, he's going to do nothing else but read. Somebody along the line has got to make a judgment. The president has a feel for what he considers vital. The system should be adjusted so that when he sees something that he's going to be involved in, or if it comes as a surprise, he can react very promptly. The president can bring in the people he wishes whose judgment he trusts without the bureaucracy saying, "The President doesn't trust us; he has got so-and-so to do this." It ought to be handled in a very flexible way to meet the president's requirements.

The Department of State has never, in my view, really understood its relationship to the president--its agency relationship. There are many problems which if handled properly could be resolved by the secretary of state and the secretary of defense. State can run things that don't need to be sent to the president other than to say, "Mr. President, this is an awkward thing. You'll see on page one. What we've done is so-and-so," almost in a reporting sense so that a president is reassured that it's in someone's hands. The departments ought to be very responsive to his questions. They ought to say, "We haven't made enough information available to him," on the rationale of the policy or "there is uncertainty and he ought to be reassured."

As to crisis management, you don't manage a crisis.

- M: If you could manage it, it wouldn't be a crisis any more.
- S: Exactly. You cannot keep a president informed on every possible situation that may blow up in his face. When one does, the bureaucracy ought to help him understand the situation

and try to convince him of the bureaucracy's judgment that the problem is not one that he has to get into. He may disagree. When he does, then the government ought to organize itself to let him participate.

M: In Johnson's case, what happened, say, when suddenly the Operations Room reported that "the situation in the Dominican Republic is deteriorating badly; we have to do something." What then would occur? If the President had been concentrating on Vietnam so hard and fully, where would he get his staff work--from the [State] Department, or from the White House, or from the group of private advisers like the Wise Men?

S: In the Dominican case, it came from the [State] Department. Tom Mann and--

M: The State Department there then really was the chief agency.

S: They had been following things. The decision on the intervention of the Dominican Republic was a relatively easy one, because as presented to the President, it involved the lives of a large number of American citizens. You protect American citizens. If you get into a study of how the crisis was run, you have to find out what the policy orientation is of the guy who's making the analysis because very often the fellow who thought the Dominican intervention was wrong will seek to explain it in terms of the inadequacies of the machinery.

M: Yes, on the same type of thing, right.

S: But in a very fast moving situation--frankly, I think it will be some years before you can do a study on Dominican intervention. I think the documentation is now in Texas.

It cannot be done on the basis of what appears in the press, because they are sometimes way behind events.

But basically it turns on what kind of a staff does the president want around him, and who in his administration is really dedicated to helping him do his job. It may be that the secretary of state has many, many qualities and competences in one area and doesn't in some others. So instead of saying, "Let's get a new secretary of state," one deals with the players who are involved. The responsibility of people around the principals is to make the whole thing work. The problems are just too important to be dealt with as if they were the prerogative of one guy or one department.

M: It's not a bureaucratic game after all.

S: The problem cannot be dealt with if the players are part of the problem.

M: That's a pretty good summary of your comments, your thesis.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview II]