

INTERVIEWEE: CHARLES F. BAIRD

INTERVIEWER: DOROTHY PIERCE

December 9, 1968

P: Today is Monday, December 9, 1968. It's 10:30 in the morning.

This interview will be with Charles F. Baird, Under Secretary of the Navy. We are in his offices in the Pentagon. This is Dorothy Pierce.

Mr. Baird, you were nominated and confirmed as Under Secretary of the Navy in July 1967. From March 1966 until 1967 you served as Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Financial Management. Prior to that your career has been with private business in financial management and policy. Is this background information correct?

B: That's correct.

P: On what occasions have you met Mr. Johnson, both the first time and subsequent meetings?

B: I did not know the President at the time I was appointed. The arrangements that the President had in the Defense Department with Mr. McNamara were, I think, rather special and gave Mr. McNamara rather wide latitude in choosing men to come work in the Pentagon. I was asked to come down here in the autumn of 1965 and did not meet Mr. Johnson until after, in fact, I had been sworn in. I think one of the most interesting things about that selection process that Mr. McNamara arranged with the President was a meeting that the President had with a group of Assistant Secretaries of Defense and the services in the summer of 1966 at which he called us--and there must have been twelve or fifteen of us--over to the Cabinet Room in the White House. He came in and shook hands with each one of us,

sat us down, and said, "Gentlemen, I don't know whether you're Republicans or Democrats; frankly, I don't give a damn. You're here because you're professionals. I want you to understand that you don't owe a thing to me personally, I don't owe a thing to you, but we both are here to serve our country and for the job you're doing, you can be very proud," and so on. Since I am a Republican, I took this perhaps even more to heart than some of the Democrats in the room, and it's one of the points that I've made to a good many of my Republican friends who at times have criticized the President, because I think this was one of the best things he did in collecting talent wherever he could find it and the best kind of talent available. That's a long answer to your question.

P: I hope you answer all of them that way.

How would you describe your present relations with the President?

B: I see the President rather infrequently; I'm an Under Secretary of a military department. Since the Executive Department is Defense, it's Mr. Clifford and Mr. Nitze who have the primary relations with the President. I see the President from time to time, sometimes once a month, more often less frequently, generally at more ceremonial occasions. I don't go to the White House to discuss policy with him. At the time of awards of medals of honor and things of that type I see the President, changes of command of one kind or another; but the Under Secretary of a military department is not called to the White House to discuss policy. To the extent that Defense policy is involved, it's the Secretary of Defense, the Deputy Secretary, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and the Chiefs themselves.

P: Have you been called into the White House on occasions of there being

a critical event or situation?

B: I have not. I've never been a member of the EXCOM or something of that type.

P: About how many times would you say that these ceremonial occasions have occurred since your coming to the Navy Department?

B: Well, it's a matter of record how many times they've occurred. I've participated in them, oh, I don't know, half a dozen-ten times, I can't remember. I don't know for sure.

P: Do any one of these particularly stand out in your mind because of what occurred?

B: I guess there are two that stand out in my mind. One was the ceremonial occasion at which Mr. Johnson honored Mr. McNamara at Mr. McNamara's departure. My wife and I were among the fairly large group, I suppose several hundred people who were in that group, and that was one of the most moving occasions that I've ever participated in. The sincerity of the President's farewell to Mr. McNamara and Mr. McNamara completely unable to respond. With tears in his eyes he said, "I think I'll have to respond on another occasion."

One other particularly stands out in my mind, the ceremonial occasion where a Marine Gunnery Sergeant named Jimmy Howard was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. Howard, a big, husky, six-footer, middle-aged, in his forties I guess, with a wife and six or seven children, had led a Marine reconnaissance patrol which was in position on top of a mountain observing below them the Vietnamese, calling in artillery fire on them, and the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese realized where they were and attacked them all through the night. In the morning out of that patrol of eighteen men, Howard and eleven of

the men were wounded and six others were dead. They were reduced to throwing rocks because they had run out of grenades and just about out of ammunition, but they held out somehow through the night. And at this particular ceremony, I read the citation which was moving indeed, and the President congratulated Jimmy Howard. And the surviving members of that patrol were there, so that it was a very, very moving kind of thing. This kind of ceremony, this kind of courage, is always appreciated in its fullest measure by the President. He's a man who has a very high regard for that kind of courage and for any kind of dedication to the nation, but this one was particularly moving I thought.

P: Has Mr. Johnson appointed you to any study groups or task forces or committees other than in Naval affairs?

B: Yes, I'm a member of the President's Commission on Marine Sciences, Resources, and Engineering, which is a Presidential commission composed of fifteen members. Only three of us have had--four of us actually--have had any governmental connection. The chairman of this group is Dr. Julius Stratton, who was president of MIT, and there are a number of distinguished scientific professional and technical people on it. The other government members are George Reedy, who is a Special Assistant to the President; Frank DiLuzio, who was Assistant Secretary of Interior now resigned; and Dr. Robert White, who is the Administrator of ESA, the Environmental Services Administration and part of the Department of Commerce. The commission has been working for about two years; I've been a member of it for the past year and a half. One of the interesting things about this commission has been that it has met monthly once a month on Thursday, Friday,

Saturday, and Sunday, so I manage regularly to lose one weekend a month to the commission. But it's a tremendously interesting area and it's one where our job essentially is to recommend a course of action for the government for the decade to come in the field of marine sciences and oceanography, the coastal zone, et cetera.

I'm delighted to be a part of this.

P: How did it happen that you were appointed to this group?

B: I think quite clearly that my appointment relates to my present job. The Navy is the government department which has been the leader in oceanography for obvious reasons. We exist in the marine environment; we have to know a great deal about the marine environment in order for our vessels to live above it, on top of it, and within it. And about 50% of the budget, the national budget, for oceanography and marine sciences comes from the Navy. We've learned over the years a great deal about the acoustics and have had to for reasons of our sonar problems, our submarine problems, submarine detection. We have done a great of work in the field of environmental prediction, weather prediction, monitoring weather, communicating the state of the weather worldwide almost simultaneously. We have done deep submergence programs and are planning to do more, all of these an aid of getting our main mission accomplished, but also pushing the scientific frontiers back in a way that other government entities and, in fact, the private sector are most interested in.

P: You talked about studying this for future uses. What groundwork have you laid for, say, within the realm of the near future?

B: Well, the interesting thing is that this coming weekend we're meeting

for what we expect will be the last time. We'll be reporting to the President early in January, and in that time we'll propose emphasis in certain areas; we'll propose a governmental organization for his consideration and for the consideration of Congress because this is not only a Presidential commission, but it's one that has been ordered by law by the Congress. And at that time we hope to lay out a pattern. Until the commission has reported to the President, I'd just as soon not discuss it here. In fact, we may change it this weekend.

P: May I just ask you one question on that? You spoke of a government organization; you mean that would in effect be an entity in itself rather than on a commission as it is?

B: Well, no, what I'm suggesting is that the law directed it. The President asked us to consider future government organization to deal with these great problems of oceanography and marine sciences and research. And the commission, in accordance with that direction, will respond.

P: Is it your assessment that we are going to need to rely these ocean sciences more and more in the future?

B: I think quite clearly we are. The oceans are a last frontier on earth, and we are just dabbling around the edges of knowledge. We're at the point where man has gotten down to about 1100 feet below the surface of the ocean on his own; that is, not within a vehicle but simply wearing diving gear. We are at a point where now about one-sixth of the oil produced in the world is produced from offshore sources. Within the last year, oil companies have paid over a billion dollars to get rights to explore in the Santa Barbara channel out in

California at depths which are deeper than anything they've been doing so far--thousand, fifteen, sixteen hundred feet. So we're just beginning to scratch the surface. The oceans are rich in mineral resources; we know something about some of these, and our problem now is that our technology is too limited to take complete advantage. And our engineering is such that we're not sure that we can mine these, can recover these minerals and other resources economically, so that we have a technical and economic problem. We also have a legal problem as to how does one determine who gets what in the middle of the ocean? And as the President has said, this nation does not want the ocean floor and the struggle for those resources to be a source of conflict. So that the problem of developing a legal framework for the exploitation of the ocean resources is an important problem; it's one that the United Nations is considering; it's one that our commission will deal with.

P: Do you obtain information from the Navy program that is going into deep sea submersion off California?

B: You're referring I gather to Sea Lab III, which is an experiment to be conducted out of a Navy-constructed habitat or living area--vehicle, which will be implanted on the sea bottom at about 600 feet and from which our aquanauts will--in which they'll live, from which they'll venture forth during the day and night to make various experiments and take scientific readings? Yes, we do expect to find out a great deal. As the name Sea Lab III implies, this is the third experiment of this kind and we already are planning on a Sea Lab IV. But again, as you can see by the depth--600 feet, the other Sea Labs were, I believe, at 200 and 300--we're just beginning to scratch the surface.

We have a long way to go. Everything that we are doing in this area is pushing against the frontier and we hope to continue to push against that frontier.

P: I know that there have been reports of there being a lot of problems and difficulties developing in this project. How do you assess the success of it to this point?

B: Well, there has been one problem which is quite straightforward and simple.. It's unfortunate, but the diving bell which will support the vehicle at 600 feet; that is, the bell was designed to move the aquanauts from the surface to the habitat and up again to the surface, and that bell has developed a leak and it's going to take a month or so to repair it, which means that the experiment will be delayed until after Christmas. But this isn't a gigantic problem. It's simply an unfortunate manufacturing defect that we expect to correct and go on and work with the problem.

P: And you do feel the program has been a successful venture?

B: Actually, at this point Sea Lab III has not produced anything. We don't have divers down there; but the Sea Lab I and II were successful and it's the reason we decided to go ahead with Sea Lab III.

P: Have you ever traveled with Mr. Johnson or been asked to travel somewhere for him?

B: Never have. Never have. I've never traveled with him; I guess in a sense that a number of the specific kinds of things I do are sort of at the direction of the President--the answer is yes, I have traveled for him, but I have never been called up by Mr. Johnson and said, "Will you please go to so-and-so on my behalf?"

P: This is in your capacity as Under Secretary then, and where would that have been?

B: Well, I say I never have traveled with him. And a number of the places I have gone have been at the direction of the President in the broad sense of the word, but I never have been asked by Mr. Johnson as such to go anywhere for him.

P: And where have these been that you have gone as a Navy official?

B: You mean the trips that I have made?

Well, I've been to Viet Nam twice. I've been to a number of the nations in Asia--Japan, Taiwan, Okinawa, Philippines. I've been back and forth across this country a great many times. I guess I've traveled 125,000 miles a year since I've been in this job, and most of the trips in true Johnsonian fashion, rather rapid trips. I've been to London and Paris and back in forty-eight hours; I guess another time I did it in seventy-two. My trip to Viet Nam the last time was a ten-day trip and during that time I computed that I had flown something like 27,000 miles and I've forgotten how many helicopter takeoffs and landings, but it seemed to me that it was something like thirty-seven or thirty-eight, somewhat frantic kind of trip. I've been to Florida for lunch and back, and California for dinner and back; I guess a lot of us, whether in government or business, tend to travel somewhat frenetically these days. It's possible to do it.

P: Were these for specific occasions, or were they a part of fact-finding trips?

B: Both, really. Specific occasions such as making speeches. Yesterday or over the weekend, we made a very short but very pleasant trip to Newport News while Mrs. Baird launched a submarine on a specific kind of occasion. Fact finding because whenever in my capacity I go anywhere for whatever purpose, I learn a good deal by talking to the

Navy sailors that drive me--people I meet.

P: Have any of these occasions been particularly publicized?

B: The interesting thing about being in government is that one's relative importance increases with the distance put between you and Washington. And I remember about, I guess it was on Navy Day in 1966, when Senator Robert Kennedy was out in California doing some campaigning for the Democratic ticket out there, and I was in Long Beach then and Assistant Secretary of the Navy, not a very important post in Washington, But I had gone aboard the nuclear powered cruiser Long Beach, and the next morning there was a four-column cut of Baird walking across the gangplank on to Long Beach, and on page seventeen there was a little squib that said Senator Kennedy had spoken in town that day. Whenever one is away from Washington, you find the relative importance of people changes. The Navy is a well-loved institution around the nation and particularly in certain ports like Long Beach and San Diego and Norfolk--the Navy is more important than nationally political figures sometimes, and anyone who is part of the Navy then is adopted and given that kind of publicity. But I saved that paper; I thought it was rather interesting.

P: On the occasions of your trips to Viet Nam, have these been with particularly large missions?

B: The first time I went was in December of 1965, actually November 30. I had been approached about coming down here in about mid-September. Interesting from a personal point of view, I'd just come back from working for three years in Paris for my former company, the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey; had come back in large measure because I had lived abroad with my family for six out of the previous ten years--

six and a half years--and I wanted to get my family established again in the States and get away from bouncing around. I had been back at work in New York for exactly sixteen days when I was called from the Pentagon and asked if I would consider this job as Assistant Secretary. My reaction was, "You're out of your mind." But I came down and talked and having done so, went back convinced that I should come to Washington. I had been fortunate enough to serve as an officer in the Marine Corps both in World War II and the Korean War, and the opportunity to serve again, particularly at this level, was attractive.

Having said in principle I would come I went back and worked back in private business and tried not to show my excitement or betray what was going on because you recall the President was a man who took violent exception to speculation that anyone might be appointed anything--to the smallest job, and he would change his mind often. And in the meantime, in October I believe it was, the President became ill and had his operation and time dragged on and dragged on; my predecessor in this job, Bob Baldwin, had suggested when we discussed coming down here that he was going to Viet Nam November 30 and he hoped that I could go with him. It would be a fine way to learn firsthand about our problems. And time went on and on and on and nothing happened; investigations were made; the FBI had talked to my friends and people looked at me queerly and so on. And with the President ill, the White House wasn't about to announce things like this. Finally on the night, I know it was a Friday night and I think it was something like the twenty-eighth of November, I got a call at seven o'clock at night asking me to be in the White House

at ten o'clock in the morning to see Marvin Watson. And I went down and talked to him. I remember it well because it was the day that the demonstrators were surrounding the White House and demonstrating against the war and so on. And then I talked to Marvin Watson and told him my problem about the trip. He had been deputized, I gather, by the President to see whether I was loyal, presentable, et cetera. And he suggested I go ahead on the trip which I did. And so that trip was the then Under Secretary of the Navy Robert Baldwin and I and several military people. And we spent about two weeks in Viet Nam and some other countries along the periphery of Asia.

The second time I had planned to go with the Secretary of the Navy, then Paul Nitze, who is now Deputy Secretary of Defense. This was in July of '67. And in the meantime Mr. Vance left and Mr. Nitze moved up to take his place. Mr. Baldwin left to go back to private business and I took his place here; Mr. McNaughton was nominated as Secretary of the Navy and was killed in a terrible tragedy in an air crash just before he took office. I had gone out to Viet Nam just before all of this happened in place of Mr. Nitze really, and I went essentially by myself with one Admiral, one General--Marine General--spent about ten days out there. Part of the purpose was to make some recommendations to Mr. McNaughton and also to Mr. McNamara on some of the various aspects of the conduct of the war. It was an interesting trip to say the least.

P: From your contact with the Presidency, with Mr. Johnson, what impressions do you have; how would you characterize Lyndon Johnson?

B: As I said at the beginning, I don't know the President well. He doesn't know me well; he knows who I am; I guess he knows what I've done.

The President has always impressed me as a man with a great sense of duty and a great sense of the well-being of the future of the nation. I recall several bets I won that were made on April Fool's Day this year when a number of people felt sure that Mr. Johnson's March 31st speech bowing out of the Presidential campaign for this year was simply a political digression, that he would run for the Presidency. Based on my infrequent exposure to the man, I was absolutely convinced that he would not. He's a man who has a deep sense of the Presidency, as every man who has served in that post certainly in this century has had a deep sense of the Presidency. He's a man who, based again on infrequent observation, is one who lives with the burdens of the Presidency and lives with the good of the nation twenty-four hours a day. I remember one evening over at Headquarters Marine Corps shortly after Chuck Robb had gone to Viet Nam. The President and Mrs. Johnson and Lynda Bird came over to the parade ground at the headquarters to see a Friday night parade, and I was there as the senior Navy Secretary official. And after the parade, I went up in the Commandant's library just to shake the President's hand again. And he buttonholed me and began to talk in a most unusual way--a way that he hadn't ever done with me before. People were coming up occasionally to shake his hand and say, "Good evening, Mr. President." He would nod to them and say, "Good evening," but for about twenty minutes he talked to me. And it was very much in his mind the great public debate then raging about his decision to replace Mr. Chief Justice Warren who had given his intention to resign from the bench and his proposal to appoint Mr. Thornberry to replace Justice Fortas, who in turn would replace Chief Justice Warren. And he was disturbed by the criticism that was

being leveled at him and the charge that the appointment of Fortas was not because of Fortas' qualifications, but because of political cronyism and the fact that people were saying that Thornberry was a political hack. He started from scratch and went through the pedigree of Mr. Thornberry from the time he was born, his parents were deaf mutes, and his progress through college; through various jobs that he had held; and finally to the Congress, where the President said: "The first time I ever met him was in Washington. I had never known him growing up in Texas. I never knew the man, but I did get to know him beginning in 1964, and was tremendously impressed by what he had done. This was a boy who had never learned to speak until he was five." Again he recounted his whole history. And he talked about Justice Fortas and his great capability in the legal world. And then he talked about the twenty candidates that he reviewed; and he went down those twenty candidates one after the other. I won't discuss them. The President can put that on the record if he wants. But obviously he had given these appointments tremendous thought. It was most interesting to hear him really justifying his actions to me when I had never asked for justification and when I never expected that he would make such justification.

I'm going to have to run now. Perhaps we can get together again.

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Gift of Personal Statement

By, Charles F. Baird

to the

Lyndon Baines Johnson Library

In accordance with Sec. 507 of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, as amended (44 U.S.C. 397) and regulations issued thereunder (41 CFR 101-10), I, Charles F. Baird, hereinafter referred to as the donor, hereby give, donate, and convey to the United States of America for eventual deposit in the proposed Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, and for administration therein by the authorities thereof, a tape and transcript of a personal statement approved by me and prepared for the purpose of deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library. The gift of this material is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

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Signed

Charles F. Baird

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