

INTERVIEW XXIII

DATE: March 15, 1988

INTERVIEWEE: JOSEPH A. CALIFANO, JR.

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: Mr. Califano's office, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1, Side 1

C: At some point in the 1964 campaign when [Barry] Goldwater was attacking Johnson and [Robert] McNamara for having no new weapons system--I told you the story about the Polaris [mentioned in Interview XX] and how we got the new name? [Bill] Moyers called me and said the President wanted to announce new weapons systems the next day. They were going to be in the Sacramento, California, and standing on the steps of the state Capitol with [Edmund G.] Pat Brown. This is at the height of the presidential campaign. And I remember talking to McNamara, and two of the hottest things we had which we thought it was okay to announce because the Soviets probably knew about them were the SR-71 [reconnaissance airplane] and something called Over-the-Horizon Radar, radar that could see over the horizon. I whipped brief statements out to the plane or wherever they were and the President announced them. I know it was the Over-the-Horizon Radar and I believe the other weapons system was the SR-71. And then we caught a lot of hell for announcing them in a political setting. I mean, it was some kind of big political rally but I do remember that.

Califano -- XXIII -- 2

G: Was this because simply the context or because it was something that was felt should have been kept secret longer?

C: My recollection is that the context attracted more flak than whether it should be kept secret longer. But I'm not sure. I think it was the context. And it was related. It was because of Goldwater's constantly feeding on the administration. I mean all of the attack was from the right in that campaign.

G: These notes from December 1965 and the Joint Chiefs' meeting at the Ranch indicate a concern for keeping the production lines open. Was this in effect authorizing the production or the manufacture of a plane not so much because you needed it but because you needed to continue capability to be able to supply it?

C: Let me just--give me two minutes. I'll answer that. Let me just spin through the--
(Interruption)

G: All right. I had asked about the process of keeping the production lines open.

C: Well, let me just go back. Every year in December the President would meet with the [Joint] Chiefs and the Secretary of Defense on the budget to hear the chiefs out on those items on which they disagreed with McNamara. Charlie Schultze usually attended those meetings and I began attending them in 1965. This one was held at the Ranch. It began typically. McNamara said I notice here they were 99.5 per cent in agreement with the Chiefs on the budget and [Earle] Wheeler thanked the President for this. McNamara began by saying there's no way of getting below 60.1 billion and the President wanted to get under sixty billion dollars. And I notice later--we'll get to that where he starts to make any changes contingent on getting this thing under sixty billion. Everybody always wanted more. The air force always wanted the most more to my recollection. I think this

Califano -- XXIII -- 3

was General [John] McConnell's first year as chief of staff of the air force. [Curtis] LeMay had retired. And the first issue we discussed was the issue of the F-12s. You have to remember McNamara was building the TFX, what became the F-111, a plane that he wanted both the air force and the navy to use with the wings that would swing back so the navy could use the same fighter plane. That had been a decision that had been bitterly opposed by the navy. They wanted their own separate airplane. And it had been a decision which became the subject of enormous congressional controversy, investigations of Roswell Gilpatric. Gilpatric had to delay his departure from the government when he was deputy secretary of defense for fear that it would look like he was running out under a cloud. So he stayed a year, or more than a year, longer than he wanted to.

G: What was the navy's argument?

C: That the plane wouldn't work. That you had to have a plane tailored for an aircraft carrier and that you couldn't make one basic plane. And McNamara was coming from the auto business. I mean McNamara was coming from the theory that you build a chassis--and one chassis had five or six models on it--you build a chassis and you can save a hell of a lot of money.

G: Who was right?

C: Well, we have one plane. We have the TFX. So I think the answer is who won.

McNamara won ultimately and we're sitting with essentially the same plane. The air force was then using the F-12 and I guess we were still in 1965--you really have to check my recollection on this. The TFX, the F-111, was not yet operational in the sense it was coming off the production line, but it was expected to. The air force wanted to preserve the production line for the F-12 and they were willing, as I understand my notes here, to

Califano -- XXIII -- 4

slow down production on the SR-71, the reconnaissance airplane, and take some of that money and keep the production line open on the F-12. I don't think McNamara wanted to do that but he indicated at the meeting that in one way or another he'd keep the production line open. The argument for keeping the production line open incidentally was not irrational. The argument was that if you closed it all the way down and you had to reopen it because the F-111 didn't come out fast enough, it would cost you a hell of a lot more than just producing a few more planes.

(Interruption)

G: Your notes say that it would cost one hundred forty-five million dollars to reopen the line.

C: Yes. His argument was that that would be more than just producing the six planes. I can't get it from my notes. My hunch is just from remembering what McNamara was like that he'd probably figure he could keep the line going producing less than six planes in the course of the year, maybe producing three or something. In any case, McNamara essentially told the President he'd take care of that issue.

The next issue we talked about was the Nike X. Wheeler indicated that the chiefs wanted more money for the Nike X. General [Harold] Johnson I should say, indicated that he thought the Nike X had been adequately funded, speaking. I guess the Nike X was an army weapon, was it? Yes. I can't remember. Over the long haul, we're talking about a weapons system that would cost twenty to thirty billion dollars. You've got to put that number in the context of a defense budget of sixty billion to appreciate how expensive that was.

G: This is for the Nike X?

Califano -- XXIII -- 5

C: Yes. McNamara did not want to increase funds for the Nike X. His view as recorded in my notes at least were that we could penetrate the Soviet system, quoting him, "we can guarantee that" whatever they deployed and that we should spend money protecting our people the way the Soviets were protecting theirs with a major shelter program. He did not think the Nike X would give us a good defense. The number here I just don't understand. He says, "If a company would buy a shelter program, it might reduce fatalities to a hundred sixty to a hundred seventy million people." That's essentially the whole country. That number has got to be wrong. We were also worried at this point about a nuclear attack from the Chinese Communists, which McNamara was saying they would have their principal capability in the 1975 to 1985 period, when he thought they'd be able to put twenty to seventy warheads on the soil of the United States. The system that he was proposing--he being McNamara--he argued who allow a reduction of fatalities from twenty to thirty million as a result of a Chinese Communists attack to one to two million.

G: Was this simply a bomb shelter?

C: And he thought he could do this for a hundred sixty million dollars. I believe this was largely a shelter program but I'd really have to check other--you'd have to check other papers to figure it out.

G: Well, there is discussion here also of an ABM system, is that right?

C: Yes, an anti-ballistic missile system later on, and it was a combination of that. General Johnson disagreed with McNamara on how long it would take the Chinese Communists to have that kind of a nuclear capability. Admiral [David] McDonald then made his pitch for more frigates and carriers--the navy always wanted more carriers--pointing out that

Califano -- XXIII -- 6

five of their carriers were not capable of handling modern airplanes and this was his way of also sticking it to McNamara on the TFX that if the navy is going to end up with this plane rammed down their throat they needed new carriers from which to fly it.

McNamara pointed out that there was initially in the 1967 budget program a carrier which he had taken out in order to cut costs as he put it, "without cutting muscle," and that he could maintain the existing full carrier force for another year. McDonald, the navy admiral, said he preferred to defer other items in the budget. I don't know what "SCN" [Shipbuilding and Conversion, Navy or Ship Construction Navy] stands for. And he'd like to reconsider the carrier question. The President said he did not want to reconsider anything until he got the figure down below sixty-one billion which was his way of really cooling off the chiefs and McNamara a little bit too. And McDonald said, "Well, give him the carrier and he'll cut other stuff out." And the President said we have to remember that they, meaning the Pentagon, had to lead in terms of fiscal responsibility. We then got into an extended discussion of the reserve and forces and army forces. McNamara noting that the budget called for an additional five hundred seventy-eight thousand people--four hundred fifty-seven thousand military and a hundred twenty-one thousand civilians--that would be necessary to support the deployment of four hundred thousand men in Southeast Asia. I just don't have any sense of the extent to which that jibed with what was going on publicly in December of 1965. We ought to--I don't know what was happening.

G: Well, it's a far larger figure than--

C: It is, isn't it? I mean I'd like to know what we had over there. You must have that somewhere in late 1965 and 1966. Remember this is the 1967 budget. This is the

Califano -- XXIII -- 7

budget--we're talking December of 1965 about the budget that's going to be in place from July 1, 1966, through June 30, 1967, that was then the fiscal year.

G: It was about a hundred eighty thousand troops.

C: That we had there?

G: Yes.

C: McNamara, talking about this problem, the reserve problem, to the President says, "We always thought we'd call up the reserves to do this. We tore apart the strategic reserve. We have a six-to-twelve-month lowest state of combat readiness in the non-strategic reserves and we need time to reduce that." He also was worried about whether we had enough equipment for them. General Johnson said that fiscal 1966, the year we were in, and fiscal 1967 budgets would help do that, that the build-up would level off in March to about fifteen thousand men per month in Vietnam, which is still a pretty hefty clip. He wanted more civilians to help in the support area. And McNamara and Johnson got into a discussion over whether he needed thirty thousand more men or twenty-two thousand more men. Johnson wanting the thirty thousand. McDonald also wanted to increase the number of people that he had. He raised this as an issue and McNamara said he would work that out with McDonald. LBJ said that you know we're going to have much trouble. We've had to be careful of everything. We've got to be sure that the people out there, namely out in Vietnam, have what they need, quote, "our boys must have all they need," close quote. McDonald then moved on to a discussion of anti-submarine warfare ships. This was a chronic fight with the navy. I can remember when I was with McNamara. I think in the early McNamara years we built up our ASW [anti-submarine warfare] capability. McDonald wanted more, and McNamara said we would win anything at sea

Califano -- XXIII -- 8

"promptly and conclusively." We can blockade the Soviets and that our anti-submarine warfare capability was extraordinarily effective. McDonald said that may all be well and good, but he came back to his request for the carrier.

McNamara said that we had a serious problem with the Minuteman missiles, that the Minuteman missiles may not be what looks like here, as "hard" as they were designed to be. That we'd carried out some tests, the fixed system functioned properly but we had some difficulties and he mentioned this as a very sensitive matter. If there were any leaks the Soviets would retarget and target on our missiles. Part of it was they didn't know where our missiles were, where our hardened silos were. McConnell--the air force guy--just used that to make another pitch for air-based missiles. But again he did confirm what McNamara said about the sites not being hard enough, not being able to--now I remember. Our view was that the missile sites were so hard--we believed the Soviets felt that the missile sites were so hard that they really wouldn't try and target directly on the Minuteman missiles. They'd either try and develop an intercept system, an ABM system like the one we were trying to develop, or they'd go after other targets. McNamara was telling the President these sites were not as tough as we thought they were.

G: You mean hard in the sense of being able to locate or--

C: Hard in the sense of being able to destroy, being difficult to destroy, being capable of resisting Soviet attack. And that that was very sensitive. Johnson, an issue on which he talked about more than once was, he used to talk about what about nuclear weapons that get away from us. Are we in any danger of losing control of any of these weapons? And [John] McConnell said there was no such danger and there was a general discussion of how sensitive this was I guess and people keeping their mouths shut. General [Wallace]

Califano -- XXIII -- 9

Greene, the commandant of the Marine Corps, wanted more transport planes, more spare parts. The transports he wanted were KC-135s. The spare parts he wanted were A-6 aircraft. McNamara blew him out of the water by saying, one, we've got plenty of KC-135s and, two, the A-6 was not yet tested. Greene wanted to replace the C-119s which he said did not provide an all-weather capability or a night-time capability. McNamara considered that nonsense basically, saying we had a 150 per cent increase in our lift capability, no need to replace them. McConnell was worried about attrition of aircraft and whether we needed to have more to take care of attrition. McNamara thought we were fine. Then Wheeler began a discussion of the Military Assistance Program; he was reading from a memo he had. But that quickly went into a discussion of getting more--as President Johnson used to say--getting more flags in South Vietnam. And our Military Assistance Program directed at Wheeler's discussion trying to get Korea to get some troops there, get Thailand to get some troops there, Turkey, the Philippines, and Iran all to bring troops into Vietnam, that that was important. Wheeler was saying that. Johnson said he agreed with that; so did McNamara.

G: Was there an understanding that our aid would be designed to encourage other countries to join in--

C: I think whether we started in late 1965 or later, the President was very strong on getting other people to put in some of their "stack," as he used to put it, in Vietnam, that we shouldn't be there alone, that these people, whose freedom and security we were defending in addition to South Vietnam's, in Thailand, the Philippines, what have you, Korea, should be in their with their troops. And, yes, I think not only military assistance but probably everything we could move on was there. Everything we had, military

Califano -- XXIII -- 10

assistance, economic assistance, would be used as a lever to get them to send troops in to help the South Vietnamese.

G: Was this leverage required do you think in order to--?

C: I think the President thought it was very important in the context of support at home and it was also very important in the context of those nations--it's almost like state aid. I mean if the program is worth it for the state, they'll put up some of the money. If it's a good health program, they ought to put up 20 per cent matching funds. If this war is worth fighting, then the Philippines ought to send some troops. Korea ought to send some troops. Thailand ought to send some troops. Other nations that are concerned about--either in the immediate area because of the security issue in their area or because of general security concerns, i.e., Turkey on the Russian border or Iran, they should be willing to fight this war. It was part of a view that we were fighting communism.

G: I guess my question really centers on whether it was actually reduced to an issue of their participation coming not from a commitment to fight communism but because they were receiving military aid from the United States, that we were using their participation to show a united front, that we had these other flags there. That it was not simply a U.S. effort, when in fact the real reason they were doing it was because they were getting all this aid from us.

G: I think it is certainly fair to say that we used our Military Assistance Program, witnessed it coming up right in this discussion with respect to several countries to get them to send troops to Vietnam. Now you know what's the chicken and what's the egg? And my hunch is that there were fairly blunt conversations. You want military assistance, we want some help in South Vietnam; that's what it's for. If you're asking the question, are

Califano -- XXIII -- 11

they mercenaries? I don't know how to answer that question. I'm sure there are people that would charge that. On the other hand, the argument was they had a lot at stake; they ought to be putting some of their own soldiers on the line.

G: There must have been a country-by-country difference as well in terms of--

C: There was a country-by-country difference and I don't have it--and I don't know whether it's been declassified--but I note here in my notes that Wheeler was going from a memo. I said, "Figures from memo." Also these countries were not naïve; they knew. And notice here, Wheeler saying, "Uncertain Far East situation. We will ask Koreans for one and a third divisions more." Okay? South Vietnam. They will want more in military assistance, okay? Money, after all, was the least expensive thing we had to put in Vietnam.

At the end of this discussion Johnson said to the assembled chiefs and to McNamara, "You military people can help on this in terms that you can help really get more troops from other countries in there. It's not just a State Department problem." Then he went off and more generally said, "I'm prouder of the military men than ever before. You men are responsible for this. We are reaping rewards. DOD is the model for all departments." He was talking about the efficiency in the Defense Department. He then said, "We have to get the job done out there." McNamara says, "We'll need a June supplemental budget if the war continues." Johnson says, "Wheeler should stop off"--meaning get over there--"and get more foreign flags in Vietnam, en route to South Vietnam." Wheeler was obviously going to Vietnam and he wanted him to do this. And Johnson is saying, "Vietnam is escalating on us always"--I just can't read my own handwriting. Johnson said, "How vulnerable will we be if we don't call up the reserves?"

Califano -- XXIII -- 12

And Wheeler apparently indicating that we can wait a little bit on that, and then General Johnson of the army coming in saying everybody can't go at once anyway.

Then there was a discussion of freezing enlistments or extending enlistments for some period of time, whether a congressional resolution was needed to extend the enlistments of people there.

G: It must have been a controversial proposition though?

C: It was but you know we did extend enlistments. I don't know how we did it. I can't remember whether we went to Congress for the resolution or whether we just did it, but I know we did it. Then McNamara started talking about moving our commitment up from a hundred eighty-five thousand to two hundred and twenty thousand, and in the course of that he'd want to get more combat personnel, a higher proportion of people who would be combat personnel and fewer support personnel. Then he, McNamara, wanted to ask for authority for an extension and for calling up the reserves. Somehow or other McNamara got into talking about the cases of malaria in Vietnam. He said we had a thousand cases. I don't know what prompted Johnson to get to mention his concern about leaks. He then asked the Joint Chiefs what they thought about the situation in Vietnam and Wheeler said that the morale of the troops was high, that they were eager and aggressive. He described a briefing that [William] Westmoreland had given them out there, talked about the fact that they were building roads and that this was helping them--"they" being the South Vietnamese--to move about. Wheeler reported that there were Viet Cong forces in Cambodia, that the extent of the Cambodian government knowledge of that was unknown at this point in time. He sort of proudly said the First Cavalry gave the North Vietnam a lesson in warfare. He wanted to do more in North Vietnam to hurt them, to deal with

Califano -- XXIII -- 13

their petroleum system, to deal with their basic capabilities. He noted that there were three Soviet freighters coming in to Haiphong Harbor, substantial shipments of fuel and something else coming in from the Soviets, tanks and fuel. Talked about the number of North Vietnamese divisions and Westmoreland's desire for more people. LBJ said we had to be careful how we built up there because we shouldn't let the Viet Cong and Russians use our own--namely what steps we were taking in the United States--to justify their escalation, and that's why we should keep any troop movements and what we were moving over there out of the newspapers.

G: Justify it to whom, I wonder. The Soviets?

C: Justify it to the world. Because we were building up our forces, they would have a right to build up their forces. Johnson wanted to build up our forces more secretly. He raised a discussion of what the Russian intentions were there, asked Wheeler. Wheeler said, "The intelligence community does not think that the Russians would do anything more than supply maybe some telecommunications." Johnson's comment was that the Russians were talking pretty tough. Wheeler said, "It's just talk." Then Wheeler began discussing the Chinese communists and was not as certain about them not doing anything if we greatly expanded. McDonald talked about the need to essentially bomb the supply routes between Hanoi and China and to work on their petrol. He also talked about mining Haiphong Harbor. Wheeler said, "You can constrain the flow of supplies but you can't stop it." General Johnson said that the thought in South Vietnam [was that] we were just getting some structure in the country and we were getting the benefit of this so we'd know more about it. We might also have some better information. He also talked about intercepting supplies. General McConnell of the air force supported everything Wheeler

Califano -- XXIII -- 14

was talking about, and said that he visited our air force troops in Thailand, that morale was high. Some people want to go back for another tour, that the army commanders were telling him, his people, that the air support they were getting from the air force was excellent. General Greene talked about dropping leaflets. I remember we had a major program to drop leaflets in Vietnam. I don't know what impact they had on the North Vietnamese and also on the Cambodians. He also wanted to make sure the Cambodians--he thought that the use of sanctuaries in Cambodia was a major problem. I think that's what he was talking about. I can't be a 100 per cent certain from these notes. And he wanted to blow them up. General Johnson said we were doing too much reacting and not enough acting. The President asked them about a [bombing] pause, what about the pause? And there's a note here about [Anatoly] Dobrynin. There must have been something Dobrynin said to somebody, [McGeorge] Bundy or someone. Wheeler said, "We are doing all we can to keep the flow of supplies"--I can't--the Xerox is just not good here.

Tape 1 of 1, Side 2

C: Looks like it says, "Everything I hear about a pause would only give the enemy time to regroup." But I can't really make it out. It may be worth getting me this page, okay, because we did ultimately have the pause. Johnson read a wire from Dobrynin. I don't know what that said. There must be some wire. If it's been declassified I wouldn't mind seeing it. Admiral McDonald of the navy and General McConnell of the air force were both opposed to any bombing pause. And that ends that session. Those are my notes for that. I can't remember when the decision was made. I do remember more discussions

Califano -- XXIII -- 15

about the pause, not necessarily with the chiefs but with McNamara. And I can't remember when the President decided to pause.

G: Okay. I'll get that.

C: I also have a memo of mine in my chron file which I may have mentioned to you--I remember seeing it years ago because it stunned me--which said--I may have mentioned this to Mike--something like--this was when we were resuming. We had a meeting in Washington in the Cabinet Room with the chiefs and the discussion was whether to resume bombing or not. And I sent the President a memo saying the Chiefs hadn't made the case. And then I said, "You ought to get a good lawyer like Vance to make the case when we resume." So I just assumed we were going to resume. It would have looked like a heroic memo if I hadn't; it didn't make sense. But it's there somewhere. It's a short memo.

G: Any other recollections of the meeting that--?

C: No. I'm sure the budget came in on--just for the hell of it you might have somebody down there check--I'm sure it came in under sixty billion, probably 59.9 or something. I know we had a meeting--I notice on the President's [Diary]--we had the meeting with the chiefs, and then--I love this--"Meanwhile Governor Averell Harriman flew"--this is when we were meeting with the chiefs--"flew to Austin to meet with the press, and Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Krim were in their bedroom in the main house napping." I ought to send that to them. We then had lunch. There was just a brief talk and we had a brief--I don't remember anything more. I just can't, looking at this.

G: Okay.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview XXIII

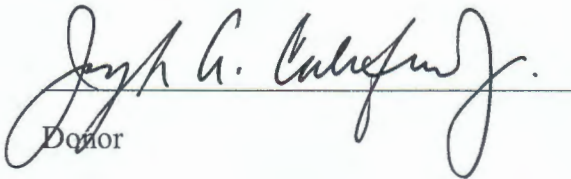
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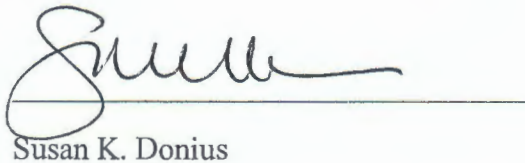
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Interviewed by: Paige Mulhollan, Joe B. Frantz and Michael L. Gillette

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