

INTERVIEWEE: CLARK CLIFFORD (Tape 8)

INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ

June 16, 1970

F: This is another interview with Clark Clifford in his office in Washington, D. C., on June 16, 1970, and the interviewer is Joe B. Frantz.

Let's talk just a little bit now about the problems with the Department of Labor proposed reorganization in the autumn of 1968 and your role in it. I don't think that you were concerned with the actual reorganization, but there was some difficulty between the President and Secretary Wirtz which did involve you.

C: The present recollection that I have is that, as Secretary of Defense, I was a member of an ad hoc committee that was to consider some type of problem in which the Labor Department took the lead. I think it was involved in some manner with government employees, and I recall receiving from the Department of Labor--Secretary Wirtz--a copy of either a prospective ruling or possible legislation having to do with government employees. I recall going to a meeting in Secretary Wirtz's office in the Labor Department and I recall that Joe Califano was there. We discussed this particular report.

I was opposed to the recommendation made in this particular report because, whereas it might apply appropriately to employees in other departments, I felt it did not apply to the Defense Department in such a manner that it would be a benefit to the Defense Department.

In some manner this report had some relationship, or some connection, with a plan or reorganization of the Labor Department. I was on the periphery of that particular problem until sometime in the fall of 1968 and it would very likely be October. I know it was before the election of November 1968. The President spoke to me about the fact that there had been a disagreement between him and Secretary Wirtz with reference to this reorganization plan for the Department of Labor. The President indicated that he thought it was too late in his administration to come up with a plan--which was quite radical in nature--and he thought that--

F: This had nothing to do with the efficacy of the plan, but more the timing.

C: It seemed to me that it had more to do with the timing, although there were facets of the plan which were not agreeable to the President. But apparently Wirtz, in some manner, had given a type of commitment. I think, as I recall, this commitment had been given to some labor leaders, that he was going to effectuate this plan before he left. I did not have the details of the dispute between the President and Wirtz.

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The President brought me in because he knew that Wirtz and I had worked together and that we were friends. The President indicated to me that Wirtz had sent word to him in some manner that he, Wirtz, was preparing to resign. The President felt that this was an unfortunate time for Wirtz to select. In October before the election came on, the fact that there would be publicized the dispute between the President and the Cabinet member; the fact that the basis of the dispute involved the reorganization of the Labor Department; the fact that, as I recall, there was involved in there some pressure from Labor leaders to effectuate the plan and if the Administration was saying they chose not to go through with it, and Wirtz was pushing to accomplish it, it could have an effect upon the general attitude of the labor leaders at that time. So the President, as I recall, (a) because of the timing and (b) because of the fact that there were facets to the plan which he felt were definitely inimical to the operation of the Department as far as the country was concerned, he was opposed to it. Wirtz was pushing hard and the President informed Wirtz that he refused to go along with the recommendation. Wirtz had indicated to him that he was going to resign.

It was about that point that the President called me in and suggested that I might go over to see Wirtz--

F: And for the record, the plan and the implementation of the plan had been leaked?

C: Yes, I think the President told me that. I was not familiar with the details, but I think he said that there had been publicity given to it under circumstances that indicated that the leak had taken place in the Department and that was a part of the whole pressure program being directed against the President to force him to acquiesce in this plan. That wasn't very appealing to President Johnson, as you might suppose, and he resisted it. Wirtz then indicated that he was going to resign.

At the President's suggestion, I called Wirtz and went over and had a long visit with him alone in his office, at which time Wirtz went through the whole proceeding as to why this should take place and, if the President wouldn't acquiesce, why he, Wirtz, felt that he should go.

My secretary had just handed me a memo as a result of looking up my date book during the time I was at the Pentagon, and I find that the first meeting that I had with Wirtz was on October 3. That was a meeting attended by Wirtz and Califano and maybe another man or two. My secretary informs me that it had to do with the Executive Order #10988, which involved the subject of Employee-Management Cooperation in the Federal Service. Now this was unrelated to the dispute. But I did recall going over to his office on that occasion. The time that I went over and talked with him at length at the President's instruction, my secretary indicates was October 24.

F: This is less than two weeks before the election.

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C: That is correct. I know I spent as much as an hour and a half, and I may have spent close to two hours then, going over the whole matter with him, listening to all the points he had to make. I'd been informed enough about the President's attitude to present the President's case as to why the President felt that it should not be done at that time and, also, gave him some arguments the President had given me regarding the merits of the plan. The main argument that I made to Wirtz at the time was that I thought he ought to give attention, of course, to a number of other factors, but above all he must give attention to his own self interest.

I was sorry that he had had the dispute with the President. After all, as Cabinet members we all serve as servants of the President. We did not make decisions independent of the President--that when he made them, then it was up to us to carry them out.

I recalled discussing the difference between the American system of serving in a Cabinet and the British system. The British have a tradition that if the Prime Minister takes a position on an important issue and the Cabinet member disagrees, the Cabinet member indicates his disagreement by his resignation. We do not have that system in this country, but if the President makes a decision we continue on to serve and, by so continuing on, attempt either to change the President's mind over a period of time or to modify his attitude. That is the recognized custom in this country. We went through that at some length.

But the major point that I made was that, as far as Wirtz's career was concerned, he had served this administration--the Johnson Administration--with distinction. He had served in another capacity first, I suppose as Under Secretary of Labor. I think when Goldberg had gone to the Court, I think Wirtz had come into the job which meant that was back in the Kennedy Administration. So he had served honorably and well and made a good reputation, and I took the position that that enormous investment of time and effort would be destroyed if he resigned under the present circumstances as a result of a dispute with the President.

F: Were you fairly close to Secretary Wirtz? Or just know him about the way you would know another Cabinet member?

C: About the way you would know another Cabinet member. But we had always had a pleasant relationship.

Incidentally, the relationship that he and I had together had deepened and broadened some because of a mutuality of interest in, and agreement on, Viet Nam. At one stage he had come to me and had commented on the fact that he was exceedingly concerned at the direction the Administration was taking on Viet Nam. We had a long conversation. I think he was very comforted to find the attitude that I took on Viet Nam.

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That constituted something of a bond between us.

F: Do you think the President recognized this drawing together and is the reason that he called on you in this instance?

C: I think he knew nothing about that at all, because the visits that Wirtz had paid to me had been kept in complete confidence. I had not reported them to anybody, nor had Wirtz. It was just our mutual concern over our policy toward Viet Nam and our agreement that each of us would work in all of the ways that he might in an effort to change the direction of that policy. But in doing that it brought us closer, and I had no compunction about going over and discussing the whole matter with him at the direction of the President.

I hadn't gotten very far, I thought, until I got up to that argument about--after Wirtz talked at length about the principle involved and how he felt he had the right to resign as a matter of principle and he had in mind letting go a blast at the President. I think he felt that there was some kind of understanding between him and the President which would require the President to stand behind him. I don't say he claimed there was any agreement of some sort, but at least he felt that the President should stand behind him on this one. He expected the President would.

F: He was sort of in the position of an outraged woman, I gather.

C: I think I wouldn't describe it quite that way. I know he was very emotionally involved. He took the position that this had been in the mill for a long time, that he was an advocate of the plan. He had let many persons in his department know that he advocated the change. He had informed individuals outside of his department of his enthusiastic support, and I think he felt that it would make him look like a goose if, in the closing days, he was unable to put through this plan. I think he felt also, and he argued, that he had been trying to do it for a long period of time and had constantly been delayed and delayed and delayed by the White House and that he now felt that it was a studied course of delay on their part, in an effort to avoid this kind of reorganization.

F: I don't want you to get into too tender subjective judgments, but was there some tension between him and Joe Califano?

C: I had the impression in that second meeting, the one where I discussed this matter, that apparently there was. I think very likely it existed on both sides. What the background of that was I do not know. But I think I had encountered before some abrasiveness that existed between those two men.

But in this instance I believe the compelling argument was how could a man take five or six years of service and really just throw it away--that all he had to do was continue to abide by the judgment of the President and stick it out for, what at that time really was

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not much more than a couple of months more, and be part of the team for all that time--retire as part of the team. I thought if he were to break with the President publically and get into this very bad snarl with him, I thought it would affect his entire future. He did not know what he was going to do after he retired. I talked a little with him about that, and the effect it would have upon his future career if people remembered him as the Secretary of Labor who had quarrelled with his President and who had probably been forced to resign.

When it was all over, he indicated to me that he thought the talk had been valuable to him, that it brought some other facets into it, and he wanted to continue to think about it, but certainly he was not going to take precipitate action. And he was going to think about it more.

I have a recollection of having talked with him about it again in person--either at Cabinet meetings or at meetings in the White House. I have another recollection of maybe having talked about it with him over the phone. Each time I would report to the President the substance of the conversation, because Wirtz knew why I was there. He knew I was there as an emissary of the President. The conclusion that Wirtz reached was that he changed his mind and decided not to resign and to stay on to the end.

By the time the end came, which was January 20, I had something of the feeling that the difficulty between the two men had ameliorated a good deal, because I remember Wirtz being out at the airport when we all went out to say goodbye to President and Mrs. Johnson. I remember standing next to him as we shook hands with President and Mrs. Johnson as they went on up into the plane and flew away. That would be the substance of my recollection of the incident.

- F: Do you think that he paid any attention to the possibility that his resignation would harm the Democrats in the election?
- C: I would think that that would be a factor. We discussed that also, and we discussed what the country was likely to have to face up to if Mr. Nixon was elected. I used that as another string in the bow in attempting to persuade him that the results of his resignation would be contrary to what he was trying to accomplish. That almost the exact opposite results would ensue from his resignation from that which he wished to accomplish. He was a known liberal. He felt very strongly about a liberal program. He knew that if Mr. Nixon came in the program that he believed in would not continue on and we discussed at some length the damage that his resignation at that time for that particular reason would do to the Democratic nominee, Vice President Humphrey. I believe that was a consideration that entered into his final decision.
- F: Is this usual, from your knowledge, for the President to send one Cabinet member to mollify another? A President, not necessarily this President?

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C: It's the only time that President Johnson had used me in this capacity. I'm sure it had been used by other Presidents.

I remember on two occasions, when I was working for President Truman, that he used me. One time it was for me to take a message to Secretary of the Treasury Snider that the President was not going to go along with a certain policy. The other time President Truman used me was for me to go over to the then-Secretary of the Interior and to inform him that the President wished him to resign. Now, I was serving as counsel at the White House then, but I remember those two instances in which the President used me. Particularly I remember the last one with the Secretary of the Interior because I remember sitting there at his desk and his crying after I delivered the message. It was a very dramatic and certainly unpleasant assignment that I had, but I know that Presidents have to use Cabinet members and staff members for assignments of this kind. I had had previous assignments from President Truman. I attached no significance to that.

I was gratified when the assignment turned out favorably. I believe, and I think the President believed, that the long talks I had with Wirtz contributed a good deal to Wirtz making the decision not to leave. And we got over that crisis without there being any publicity attached to it. It was kept under complete cover.

F: Is there a strong wear-out factor in being a head of a Cabinet? For instance, if this had all come about, say, when Secretary Wirtz was a couple of years fresher, would this have been less likely to happen, do you think? This again is subjective, but I wonder just what the wear and tear on a long-time Secretary must be.

C: It's an interesting point and there is substantial validity to it. As a Cabinet member continues on as head of one of the important departments, he cannot refrain from getting into controversial positions. It adds to the strain. It adds to the wear and tear on the man. Also, he takes certain positions. He develops certain responsibilities, certain debts that he has to people who have supported him in time of stress. When he gets into the posture of being pushed by people to whom he might be indebted and he can't come through with what he thinks he should be able to do, it creates real stresses. It's much more likely to happen after a man's been in office for some years than during the early part of his tenure.

F: I was thinking also of that somewhat erratic performance--without evaluating--that went on between the White House and the Department of Interior in the last days of the Administration. I wondered again if you don't--after a long period in office like that--almost come to the point where you wonder if you're going to be able to finish the game--not needing a relief pitcher.

C: The analogy is very good, because after a man has been in his position for quite a long time a certain rigidity sets in. You can't avoid it. He learns so much about it. He's taken so many positions on it and his feelings are very deep, which are not so in the early innings

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of the game. But after a while he gets in the position where, maybe by the six, seventh, or eighth inning--

F: He has a game plan.

C: That's right, and it's entirely possible by that time his attitudes have hardened so that he's more likely to come into conflict with the President. The analogy is quite good. In some instances probably the right course of action would be bring in a relief man.

As a matter of fact, maybe we have an analogy in that regard right before us that we've not looked at, and that is Secretary McNamara served for seven years under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. And I think President Johnson reached the conclusion, in that regard, that probably the thing to do was to have a relief pitcher to go in in the late innings of the game. And it happens--I might say that in the present Administration it just happened a lot sooner. They've changed a great many positions. You hardly can recognize any player now on the ball field with the changes they have made this last week.

F: One last question, and I'll let you go for now. Does the feeling develop of semi-independence at Cabinet rank, and a resentment builds up at the intrusions by White House staff?

C: Unquestionably. That also occurs later in the tenure of a Cabinet officer. When he comes on in the early years, I think he makes it his business to get along with the President and get along with the staff so relationships will all be pleasant. As time goes on and the Cabinet officer gets hardened in his positions, then he is less likely to accept with equanimity insertions by the staff members of the White House or interventions by them in instances in which he thinks that maybe it belongs just to him and the President, and particularly is that so if he senses that the staff man perhaps does not agree with him. Then he gets concerned about his relationship with the staff man. And that time and time again has caused difficulty. And I think it is probably inevitable. It's just part of our system.

F: Well, thank you, Mr. Clifford.

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By Clark M. Clifford

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