INTERVIEW III

DATE: December 11, 1968

INTERVIEWEE: NICHOLAS KATZENBACH

INTERVIEWER: PAIGE E. MULHOLLAN

PLACE: Mr. Katzenbach's office at the State Department, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

M: [At] the end of our last session, we had been talking about the various peace feelers, or alleged peace feelers, in connection with Viet Nam, and you had just commented that the decisive event in occasioning the talks was the President's announcement of March 31 and not any prior feelers from either side, but that that event had been the one. Now I suppose the obvious direction from there is to move to the next critical period. What was the decisive event that brought the next break, that is the total bombing halt in late October of 1968?

K: I think the decisive event on that was that we got as far as we had ever thought we could get with respect to the DMZ and attacks upon cities. And the point that we had thought was the most important--people in Saigon, the Ambassador and others--was their agreement that it would be all right for the South Vietnamese to join in the talks. We always anticipated and expected that we could never get that, if we got it at all, without their bringing members of the NLF. And that did take quite a bit of time to persuade them to that point which they eventually came to. That would have seemed to us, prior to that time, on the advice that we had, to be the most important point to the South Vietnamese.

M: But there were no specific circumstances that caused the timing--of course, there has been a lot of comment on the timing since it happened to come so near our election.

K: No.

M: Nothing particular in that connection?

K: No, nothing at all in that connection. I think it came there because it took that long to get there. It might have come a little bit earlier than that if there hadn't been problems as to the timing of when we wanted the meeting and there were strong feelings within the government here that we had to have an agreement to meet with the South Vietnamese President very quickly as a justification for stopping the bombing. And they didn't want to meet that quickly and there may even have been some--I think there were some--misunderstandings on that point. We were insisting on their meeting twenty-four hours later and I think maybe within this government, there were some misunderstandings. They had agreed to meet with us on substantive matters twenty-four hours after the cessation of bombing, but they had never agreed to meet with the South Vietnamese there twenty-four hours later. I think it may have been misunderstood here, [some] picked up an earlier comment of theirs and said we wanted to meet twenty-four afterwards. That just took a lot of time.

M: What about the South Vietnamese? Did their reaction subsequently regarding their participation or nonparticipation surprise our government? Was that contrary to what our understanding had been?

K: Well, we thought up till the 29th that there was no problem--that they were in complete agreement with us; and by the time they indicated they had some reservations about it, we had already committed outselves in Paris and with other governments-- that we were going to move ahead on it. So it would have been almost impossible for us to have turned around at

that point. If you look at the traffic on it, and I think people will, it's traffic based a good deal on the Ambassador's judgment rather than on their absolute commitment. The traffic [says] "I explained all of this to President Thieu [of South Vietnam], who nodded"--that kind of thing.

M: I see. No explicit written agreement that applied--

K: Nothing absolutely explicit on it, but I think a fair reading of it would be that we could assume he was in agreement since he expressed no disagreement.

M: After that difficulty arose, did the President take any direct role in trying to get the ship back on course again?

K: Well, the President has taken on this a direct role all along, and he did in this. It's all in the written record, letters, communications, and so forth. There's really nothing to be added to the written record on that.

M: Does the State Department feel pretty sure that we can make peace today on better terms than we could have at a previous period-- six months, a year, a year and-a-half ago?

K: I guess; but we couldn't get anybody to talk back then so--

M: So it's an academic question?

K: So it's an academic question. It's very hard to know the answer to that, because a good deal depends on their assessment of what the United States is going to do and a new administration and so forth. They might feel that we simply wanted to get out of Viet Nam so badly that they can do what the Koreans did. This may be the first of 187 meetings or whatever it was. I don't know any way of knowing this.

M: Speaking of Korea, were you involved with the Pueblo incident and Mr. Johnson's reaction to it directly?

K: Yes. I've been involved with it throughout.

M: What has been his response to that crisis?

K: Well, he called in a group of people to look at the recommendations initially on this and I think it's fair to say that nobody advised him--We went into all the possible options that--things that one could do, but there was nobody really who felt that we should do anything more than try through diplomatic means to see whether or not he could get the crew back. Because any efforts at reprisal, or military threats, or things of this kind, they're just too dangerous in a situation with the North Koreans and the South Koreans both absolutely itching to get into a fight with the other one; and if we get involved in that, there would be a fight, and one war at a time is enough.

M: Would you say Mr. Johnson got the same kind of advice in connection with the Pueblo incident that he had gotten in connection with the South Vietnamese problem all along?

K: Well, some of the same people were involved in this, and I suppose South Vietnam had some impact on this but not much. The great difficulty in Korea is that you couldn't think of anything--haven't yet thought of anything--which will get those people back. The North Koreans don't trade with anybody; no economic sanctions that you could find--they trade with Chinese, they trade with the Russians. They don't really trade with anybody else in ways that make any difference. None of it is overseas. There is no way-- if you blockade it--Korea--it wouldn't have any impact at all.

M: So your only hope is negotiation of some type?

K: So there's really nothing you can do. If you went and bombed one of their cities or something like this, you wouldn't help to get the eighty-two men back and you'd run the risk of starting a war. So there's not much we've been able to do except talk.

M: And it has been, I guess, moved to the UN in part. Is there anything they can do?

K: No, there's nothing that can be done in the UN. We did that, a little bit of that but it won't-- we may work with other governments, but they'll return the crew when they get good and ready to do it and maybe that'll be before the end of Mr. Johnson's office and maybe it won't.

M: When you first came over here, your first major trip around in the world was to Africa. What about Mr. Johnson's policy in Africa and his interest in African affairs generally?

K: I think he has had a feeling of interest. He urged me to make the trip. He urged other Cabinet officers to do it. In fact, he urged me to make a trip to Africa before I came over here.

M: While you were still Attorney General?

K: Yes. And that's one of the reasons why I went there first. It was also because nobody high-ranking ever seems to go to Africa. It's the one place that Mr. Rusk has never been, and he feels very-- he's very sensitive on that point. He would like to have gone.

The problems of Africa are sort of long-term problems, and I think that the presence of even somebody like myself or the Vice-President's trip this last year is very-- you get a lot of political pay-off out of it, because there is so little really you can do in terms of solving problems

in a hurry that just the expression of interest that comes from a high-level visitor is probably worth a good deal in terms of political relationship with the African countries.

M: What about the influence of domestic politics on policies in a place like Africa where you have a very loud group in the United States on one side and a very militant group on the other side really in the United States pulling different ways in policy toward South Africa and Rhodesia and places like this?

K: Well, they're very sensitive about the Southern African problem, but our policies on this to date have been policies which, while they don't think they go far enough, they really do understand that there isn't much else that we could do that would have any real effect. It's just a problem for them so they wish we would do more, but when you get specific about it there really isn't much more that we can do.

M: When you ask them what they want, they don't have a very specific answer?

K: Right. [The] President of Congo said if you just bomb this bridge here, why it would make all the difference in the world. Well, it hasn't made any difference in Viet Nam, so I don't know why it would make any difference in South Africa. But it gets sort of silly. You know, they accept our racial views. They accept the sincerity of our nondiscriminatory objectives. They share the same ones.

M: The African nations?

K: The Africans. And so I think that they don't really think if our policy doesn't go as far as, in their views, it should towards Rhodesia and South Africa, Southwest Africa, the Portuguese colonies-- they don't attribute that to racial motives. They tend to attribute it to investment

or this or that or the other, or NATO or something like this with the Portuguese--

M: What about the groups in the United States?

K: Hasn't been much of a problem really.

M: They haven't pressured you.

K: No.

M: Is the same thing less true regarding the Middle East where there's always alleged to be a great deal of domestic political sensitivity toward policy making?

K: There has been some there but not much. There's a tendency I think on the part of the Jewish community here to have some mistrust of the State Department. The State Department always seems to be more pro-Arab in their view than the White House. And I guess historically there's some justification to that. The State Department has tended to be more oriented towards foreign policy considerations, and the White House tends to be more oriented towards domestic political consideration so that I think over the years this has been true.

M: It's not so much State being pro-Arab as it is the White House being pro-Israeli in this case?

K: Yes. There's more willingness in the White House to go further in that direction. I think that has been less true really-- I think really it has been less true in the time I've been over here, in the two years I've been here, than it really was in the past administration.

M: That's interesting. That anticipates a question I was going to ask. I heard a fellow from Georgetown University, Professor [Hasham] Sharabi make a comment on television the other night that the pro-Israeli stance

of the Johnson Administration had pushed the Arab bloc into the Soviet camp. Do you think this is an exaggeration-- ?

K: Yes, that's a lot of nonsense really. The President's statement after the war, the June war, was a statement that was really accepted by both the Israelis and the Arabs; and it became the basis for the UN resolution, and really it should be the basis for peace. But it was acceptable both ways.

M: What about the six-day war-- the events leading up to it and so on? That's a crisis that, although it lasts on and on-- at least the explosion point was compressed in time. How does the President and the high-ranking portion of the State Department function in a crisis of that nature?

K: Well, we're trying to avoid it--trying to find solutions to the Gulf of Aqaba question, but the Arabs had gone so far on it, it's awfully hard for them to back down on this. Whether they would have done something or not, we didn't know. We tried to get the Israelis to cool it. I think the President thought that he had an assurance from the Israelis that there would be no war. He certainly felt he had one, but they nonetheless went ahead and while they had provocation in terms of incidents they really-- although they never said it publicly-- it was a preemptive strike that they did. They may have done it on their view that they were about to be attacked themselves, but they unquestionably did do it in that way. We then tried to get it stopped and finally succeeded. The hot-line was used, although frankly I don't think the message from Kosygin, when we finally did get the war stopped there, indicated the situation was as dangerous as some of the news stories seemed to have played it. I thought it was a fairly moderate letter, message, to tell the truth.

K: And he wasn't really threatening things. But he was saying, "Let's get on with it."

M: Were we prepared to do anything to clear up the Gulf of Aqaba difficulty if the Israelis had held off on their attack?

K: Tried to do things. There was some discussion of whether or not we ought to convoy any vessels in there or do that kind of thing. We did talk to some other governments about it, but it never really in my judgment made much sense. I wasn't involved in that: I was still on the tail end of my African trip when that was going on.

M: Right. You almost got caught in that part of the world.

K: Well, I was in the Sudan just before it.

M: You could come back and give them some expert advice on observance, anyway. But we didn't have any plans in operation that the hostilities stopped?

K: Not really. Gene Rostow worked on some plans to get some of the maritime powers to get together on this. But I think he may have carried it a little bit further than really the President ever had any intention of carrying it. I think the President was thinking of this-- let's look at every option and possibility rather than having a firm plan for doing this kind of thing.

M: What about contingencies if the fighting had gone the other way? I know you have contingency plans for all sorts of alternatives, but were any of them seriously considered at the Presidential level as far as you know?

K: No. I think that nobody expected any possibility of the fighting going the other way.

M: In other words, this was such a far-fetched alternative--

K: /The intelligence was/ absolutely flat on the fact that the Israelis would in essence do just what they did. That is, that they could mop up the Arabs in no time at all. And so we really never decided what it is we could do if it went the other way.

M: Europe is too big a question to draw out in the time you have, but has Mr. Johnson in your direct experience evidenced any particular concern for specific European issues or problems?

K: Well, yes, particularly he has been anxious to see whether or not he couldn't improve relationships with the Soviet Union on which he had made, I think, a great deal of progress up until the Czechoslovakian affair, which kind of ground that to a terrible halt. Despite the problems that General DeGaulle has caused, I think he has been very far-sighted in terms of the realization, which I think President Kennedy had also, that you weren't going to change DeGaulle. It wasn't going to do any good to snipe at DeGaulle. That would just worsen the situation. And the President has believed in and has supported what really has been our policy for many years with respect to NATO and to Western Europe and to Western European unification. He has been interested in it. He has been unable to demonstrate his interest in this as much as I think he would have like to and this has really been a fallout from Viet Nam. He would have liked, I think, to have made one or more trips to Europe and to have visited in Europe with European leaders. He did of course go to the Adenauer funeral and did stop in Rome just before Christmas in 1967. I think he would have like to have done much more than this, but I think Viet Nam and the demonstration problem really made

this almost impossible. And of course he has had his problems with Congress on the troops, although he has felt very strongly about the need not to let this unravel. He has had all the monetary problems and the United States has taken very generous action with respect to supporting the British and indeed supporting the French on the monetary side. We've been rather more generous, I think, in this respect than really our allies have been with respect to us, although they've made efforts. I think we were pretty rough on [Ludwig] Erhard [Ex-West German Chancellor]. The President wasn't, but I think Mr. [Robert] McNamara and Mr. [Henry] Fowler were.

M: This is on which issue now, or on the whole array of issues?

K: No, really on the monetary issues and supporting troops and contributions there as sufficient. So I think probably Mr. Erhard thinks that we really brought down his government, and indeed we may have. So it shows that being firm and tough in not always the wisest policy.

M: Does that involve, too, the killing of the MLF?

K: Well that was--yes, the MLF. I was never really involved in that.

M: That was pretty dead before you came over here?

K: In my judgment the MLF was dead before it ever got started.

M: Of course there's a lot of people over here presumably who didn't agree with that. It's part of the, what I think you called one time, conventional wisdom to say that the Europeans want more of a role and we've got to learn to consult with them. Have we consulted with them on such things as Viet Nam, for example?

K: Well, not a greal deal in Viet Nam. We've consulted on European problems, and particularly on the nonproliferation treaty-- which has cost us in terms of our relationships with the Germans at least. We've consulted and consulted, but the problem is not that you don't consult: the problem is that Europe doesn't speak with one voice-- you get conflicting advice. You consult with the British, and they're all for something; you consult with the Germans, and they're against it. Now that you've done all your consultation, what is it you're going to do?

M: Back where you started from.

K: If we could lead them into doing more themselves-- if they did more consulting themselves and came up to us with some European positions that were agreed positions, I think their voice would be much more effective. That would cause us problems, but it would be a much healthier relationship. But we have not been able to get much of that done, even though we've tried to.

M: You have mentioned in some of your speeches that you feel like we're at a point-- the United States is at a point-- where it's going to have to begin to cut some of our commitments around the world. How does that square with the statements that came out of the recent NATO meeting regarding particularly the commitments in the Eastern European countires?

K: Well, NATO is not a commitment that we're going to back out on but-- I would think over the years, the next four or five years, we ought to be able to work out a way of reducing somewhat the U.S. troop presence in Europe. It's in a way, silly not to, because as we develop much more effective means of transportation, we ought to be able to do a much effective job of persuading people around the world that we have a

capacity to get a lot of people there in a hurry, all of their equipment, arms, and everything else.

M: Is it our capacity that they doubt or our willingness that they doubt?

K: Well, I think they doubt the capacity a little bit, and I also think they kind of doubt the willingness to do it. But you've got a hostage theory on it--two divisions are just as good a hostage as five divisions really.

M: It doesn't take many trip-wire troops?

K: No, it doesn't take much in this respect. So I would think probably we would do that. I had in mind-- after the war we had such a problem with instabilities all over the place. We really have done--- we've been very successful in building up many more independent, stable countries that aren't about to give up their independence. Now, when I talk about commitments and a reduction of commitments, you now are dealing with a different situation. For example, I would think post-Viet Nam, really the whole SEATO thing makes no sense now. And this doesn't mean that we will not have commitments, but we ought to be-- the Asian countries ought to be working out their own security arrangements with the United States perhaps a guarantor in behind this and not in the front ranks doing the whole job. It certainly makes no sense to talk now about the U.K. and France and others in that situation, because they're not going to be in it. So SEATO has gotten down to making the United States a kind of separate guarantor with almost each individual country out there, and I think they ought to be more interested in their own security arrangements.

M: So when you talk about cutting commitments; that's really, as you're talking about it, a mark of success of what we've formerly done.

K: It's a mark of success--yes. And I think now we don't need to do all these things.

M: No one after all ever imagined that we'd keep troops in Europe forever after the war.

K: You've got very, very difficult problems to solve, like Korea. We've got two divisions in Korea, and they've been there now for twenty-odd years, whatever it is, since the Korean War. Now we're not going to have them twenty years from now. We must find a way of preventing two divisions from being tied down for all times in Korea without-- we're going to have to be very careful about how we do it, because removing them could just trip off a war. But again there have to be ways of seeing what you can do with building up the South Koreans and reducing the extent of that commitment which right now is just frozen. We don't dare take anything out of there.

M: I've come to the end of the things over here that I had in mind. I don't want to cut you off on it though. There is one other domestic issue that I found in reading the first--

K: I think the record over here--you know, this Department--the written record is really an awfully good record.

M: Better probably than the domestic side.

K: Much better than the domestic side, I would think, because you have to keep so many people informed of so many things that everything really gets recorded in one way or another in a cable to somebody.

M: And kept.

K: And kept. So that you've really got a good written record.

M: The one domestic issue that I, by my own fault, seem to have left out in

talking in our first conversation is regarding President Johnson's use of stockpiles and the whole problem of using this as a weapon for economic purposes in the domestic side. Were you involved in this in the Justice Department?

K: Yes, I was involved in quite a few of those decisions.

M; The copper controversy and things of this nature?

K: Yes.

M: This seems to be a new Presidential technique. How did it originate?

K: Well, I think it originated from the great desire of the President and others to try to cut down inflationary pressures in two senses: one, on prices of particular basic commodities like copper, more generally on the budget; and couple that with the fact that the stockpiles don't make much sense. The question was can you with an orderly disposition of stockpiles serve this kind of an objective. I always thought that you could. Copper would be the strongest example in a way. By being willing to release copper out of the stockpile, we were able to keep our copper price down in this country, which made a lot of difference as far as inflation domestically is concerned.

M: What was the reaction of the copper interests to this type of executive action?

K: Well, they were really for it. They didn't have great problems with this. Disposal of the stockpile generally they're not for because everything sold out of stockpiles means that much less that they can sell. But copper was so tight that there really was not that much opposition by the copper industry. More opposition on the part of Congress than there really was by the copper industry.

M: That was the other part of how much--how widely is it known that this stockpiling practice has been used?

K: Well, I think it was pretty widely known. It wasn't totally candidly admitted in this regard, although I think really fairly. You didn't hide anything. They knew what was being sold out of the stockpile. The industries involved really didn't have major objections.

M: There was no question of legality of this?

K: There were some questions of legality. I thought they were not difficult. I think the President did have that authority under all these circumstances, and we wrote memos to that effect.

M: What about what seems to be a much more direct way of accomplishing part of the same thing--were price control measures considered actively?

K: Yes. These were considered several times. They are so difficult to administer, and so unfair in their administration that inevitably you cannot have price controls unless you have wage controls and you freeze in all kinds of the existing inequities at one particular moment. They were discussed many times but always rejected. I think really they were discussed more for the purpose of persuading people to go along with other steps than they were for the purpose of seriously considering them.

M: They were rejected below the Presidential level-- ?

K: Well, the President used to suggest them from time to time and have them looked at, but I always thought he did it mainly because he knew there would be so much opposition to it that it would make other possibilities look better to people if they thought he might seriously be considering wage and price controls.

M: That's a pretty good tactic that way--

That's the only other issue that I had. Is there anything that you would like to talk about that we have missed, if you can recall at all what we have talked in the past about?

K: Oh, I can't really think of anything.

M: Well, if something should arise you can always add it to the transcript. We can break it right there, if you would like, then.

K: Okay.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview III

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE
LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interviews of Nicholas D. Katzenbach

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, Nicholas D. Katzenbach of Riverdale, New York do hereby give, donate, and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title, and interest in the tape recordings and transcripts of personal interviews conducted on November 12, November 23, and December 11, 1968 in Washington, D.C. and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

(1) The transcripts shall be available for use by researchers as soon as they have been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

(2) The tape recordings shall be available to those researchers who have access to the transcripts.

(3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcripts and tapes.

(4) Copies of the transcripts and the tape recordings may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request.

(5) Copies of the transcripts and tape recordings may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

Nicholas D Katzenbach
Donor

Nov 21. 1977
Date

James B Rhoads
Archivist of the United States

December 14, 1977
Date