

## INTERVIEW I

DATE: August 14 and August 28, 1969  
INTERVIEWEE: JOHN P. McCONNELL  
INTERVIEWER: DOROTHY PIERCE McSWEENEY  
PLACE: The Pentagon, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1, Part 1, August 28, 1969

McS: General McConnell, I will preface this by stating that we have had one previous interview in which we had some mechanical difficulty and the first part of the tape was lost. So this is a repeat to the point where we did stop and that will be joined with the other tape. I will begin this by again noting down your commands in the sixties, and then ask you about your first meeting with Mr. Johnson, and we will proceed from there.

You were nominated and twice reappointed by Mr. Johnson as chief of staff of the Air Force, beginning in 1965 through 1969, from which on July 31 you retired. From 1964 to 1965 you were appointed vice chief of staff of the Air Force; from 1962 to 1964, deputy commander-in-chief, U.S. European Command; in 1961 to 1962, vice commander-in-chief of Strategic Air Command.

McC: Right.

McS: Do I essentially have just the review of the dates correctly on your commands, sir?

McS: Yes, that's right.

McS: Have you ever participated in any other oral history project?

McC: No, I haven't except the one we did the other day.

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McS: Is there one in the service, within the Air Force, that you've ever contributed to?

McC: No, not yet. I'm going to do one for General Grussendorf, but it will be a classified one.

McS: Perhaps it's good to make a notation here. Maybe future scholars could have access to that at some later date.

McC: Maybe so.

McS: I'd like to begin by asking you if you recall your first meeting with Mr. Johnson and your earliest impressions of him.

McC: Yes, of course, I'd testified before him several times in various capacities when he was a senator on the Hill. But the first time I ever had any prolonged participation was when he invited me down to the Ranch about 1957 to brief him on the strategic posture of the United States with particular emphasis on the posture and capabilities of the Strategic Air Command. Because that was before the time that the Polaris had actually come into the picture, in terms of strategic capability. It was still just in the development stage. I stayed down there with him for two days and we talked informally, and I briefed him informally. I found him to be extremely acute and asked extremely penetrating questions, and I gave the answers to him as best I could. I'm sure that when that visit was over, he understood the mission of the Strategic Air Command and the posture of it, I would say, probably better than anybody on the Hill; not necessarily due to my briefings, but due to the questions he'd asked me and I would try to answer.

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McS: Do you recall at this much later date what the emphasis of what you were telling him was?

McC: I told him that what we had to do was to be sure, in my opinion, that we maintained a substantial superiority in strategic capability over any foreseeable or potential enemy; that it was only by doing that that we could maintain ourselves in a state of peace. I think he agreed. He obviously did, as indicated by his actions subsequent to that time. That was the main theme of the whole two days, actually.

McS: Were you surprised at being invited down to the Ranch? Or had you come to know him fairly well just through testimony?

McC: I hadn't known him that well, but I knew that he wanted to get some information on the strategic posture of U.S. forces, and I had been nominated by him to give it to him. I'd thought, probably, I'd give it to him in Washington. I knew I was going to be asked to do so. But instead of that, he asked me to come to the Ranch over a weekend.

McS: Did you meet with the rest of the family then too?

McC: None of the rest of the family was there.

McS: How would you describe Mr. Johnson at that point?

McC: Oh, he was a great host. He was very keen. We went out and went all over the Ranch. Since then, I've been over it half a dozen more times. It improves all the time. We had a very enjoyable association during that time. We went around and visited some of his neighbor ranchers and went out and shot pistols at a target. He woke me up two mornings, served me orange juice and

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toast in bed. After that, we got in the swimming pool; then we'd take a drive around the Ranch and then we'd come back and have breakfast. Then we'd start in.

McS: Did he ever discuss politics with you at this point? As far as what his political--?

McC: No. Not any.

McS: Did you have any ideas that he might be sort of aiming towards 1960 at this point?

McC: No. He didn't give me any indication or else I wasn't astute enough to pick it up. I think he was doing a little politicking, because he was going around and seeing all these ranchers, but actually, they were very good friends of his, very good personal friends. He'd bang on the door and somebody would open the door and say, "Why, hello, Lyndon!" Everybody in the whole place called him Lyndon.

McS: What about meetings between that first one and this would cover some seven years prior to your appointment as vice chief of staff of the Air Force.

McC: I think I testified before him a couple of times formally on the Hill, but outside of that, I didn't have any meetings with him until he sent for me when I was in Europe, to interview me to determine whether or not I was going to be acceptable to him as vice chief.

McS: None as vice president?

McC: No. None as vice president except informally.

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McS: Anything through NASA or anything?

McC: No.

McS: Could you tell me a little about your appointment beginning in 1964 when you were called for the interview and appointed vice chief?

McC: Well, he asked me to come over and see him and he asked me if I was interested in the job of vice chief. I told him, "Yes." He asked me if I was interested in the job of chief and I told him, "Of course," I was. And so he asked me a few questions about how I would operate as vice chief and chief if I should be nominated for chief upon expiration of General LeMay's term. I told him that in either capacity it was my responsibility to give him whatever advice I was qualified to give him and I would do so. Then if he didn't agree with me, I would still go ahead and carry out his decisions to the best of my ability, and I would see, also, to it that the entire Air Force did the same. He said that was satisfactory to him and said, "You go back to Europe, and you'll be hearing from me within a few days." I didn't know whether I was going to hear from him one way or the other. Then the next thing I knew, General LeMay telephoned me and told me to come on over, that I was going to succeed Bozo McKee as vice chief.

McS: General, did you discuss at all General LeMay's retirement and some of the friction that was occurring between him and the Secretary of Defense?

McC: No, we didn't discuss that. I didn't discuss that with the President.

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McS: Do you think that this had any bearing on your appointment?

McC: I think so, yes.

McS: How?

McC: Well, I think I would eventually have been appointed chief, anyhow. It just moved it up for six months. That's my own opinion. I think I understood that from the President, although he didn't say so at the time.

McS: Do you know who brought your name before the President or how it was proposed?

McC: Yes. I think LeMay and McNamara and Zuckert. I'm sure of that.

McS: During Mr. Johnson's presidency, I believe that your relationship became much more closer during this period. Could you tell me a little bit about the development of these relationships and the frequency of your contact with Mr. Johnson?

McC: I couldn't say how frequent it was, but it was very frequent. And the more that I associated with him, the more I came to admire the way that he operated. I believe--well, in fact, I'm sure, because he told me--that he continued to develop higher confidence in me, and in my recommendations to him and advice to him, although on many occasions, he didn't take it. He did take occasion on several circumstances to tell me that he had great confidence in me. And we grew to where we developed a close personal friendship,

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as well as a very harmonious, shall I say, official relationship. That doesn't mean that I was right on any more occasions than any of the other Chiefs were. Sometimes I differed with them. Sometimes I differed with the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of State. But Mr. Johnson would always listen to everything that any of us had to say; then he'd make up his mind and make a decision. Whether the decision was in accordance with our recommendations or not, we always supported it and carried it out to the best of our ability. All the Chiefs did.

McS: Would you describe for me the channels of communication that you had to the White House and your access to Mr. Johnson?

McC: You had, shall I say, three channels. One channel was through the Secretary of Defense. Another channel was as a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. And another channel was direct to the President as chief of staff of the Air Force. And through any three of those channels, I could see him at any time. I've never seen the time when I requested an audience with Mr. Johnson, either as a member of the corporate body, of course, when the chairman would take us all over there or when I would think that it was appropriate for me to see him individually, that I wasn't accorded an audience with him immediately.

McS: During this period, what would you say was the most normal means?

McC: The most normal one was either through the JCS or through the Secretary of Defense. And then the other one was when, normally, he would send for me as chief of staff of the Air Force, about something

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pertaining particularly to the Air Force and none of the other services.

McS: Do you recall what some of these were?

McC: What do you mean, the latter ones?

McS: Yes. The ones where he called particularly for you, because they were related to the Air Force.

McC: Yes. [They] had to do with the composition of the force structure of the Air Force; discussions as to how the air war in Vietnam was going on and how we could improve the effectiveness; what kind of equipment we needed; anything that had to do with the Air Force as a separate service, mostly to improve its effectiveness. He was very much interested in the Air Force.

McS: When the Joint Chiefs of Staff met with the President or the chairman met with the President as your representative, did this reflect a consensus decision already reached or would you act as individuals if there was a difference of opinion?

McC: There was only one occasion, I believe, in which there was a difference of opinion between the Chiefs that was aired before the President. We'd usually get those things settled between ourselves and we would present a united recommendation to him.

McS: What was the occasion of the one difference?

McC: The one difference had to do with the budget, when we were down at the Ranch in I believe 1966, in which I disagreed with the Navy as to the size of the carrier fleet, and the Navy disagreed with me as to



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the size of the strategic bomber fleet. The upshot of that was that it stayed, in both instances, as it had been approved by the Secretary of Defense.

McS: Just to refresh me, how was that?

McC: I think it was satisfactory to both of us.

McS: So there was no lowering of either one?

McC: No lowering of either one. In fact, most of those budget conferences that we had every year in December before the President went to make his State of the Union message, we'd always meet him either at the Ranch or at Austin. Let's see, twice at the Ranch; one in Austin; one in the White House. We would air the differences that were between the Joint Chiefs of Staff as a corporate body and the Secretary of Defense in terms of structure and budget requirements. Each one of us would talk about his particular service. The chairman would talk about the entire force structure and the entire budget. Mr. McNamara then would set forth his position and the reasons that he didn't agree with us, if there were disagreements, and there were quite a few. The President never made any commitment at the time on whether he agreed with our position or whether he agreed with the Secretary of Defense's position. Sometimes he would agree with ours; sometimes he'd agree with the Secretary's. But by far a substantial majority of the agreements were with the position of the Secretary of Defense.

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McS: Sir, as a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and a military adviser to the President, how did you find his reliance and reception of military advice?

McC: Well, he always listened to it. He had a considerable confidence in the Joint Chiefs of Staff. On many occasions, he said that he'd been associated with the Joint Chiefs of Staff in many capacities for many years and that this was the best group that he'd ever been associated with. I think he was sincere about it. He had a particular high degree of confidence in the chairman, General Wheeler. But he also had a high degree of confidence in Mr. McNamara and Mr. Rusk. When the Joint Chiefs of Staff would present a solution to a problem or a recommendation for a certain course of action, and it was opposed by both Mr. McNamara and Mr. Rusk, I don't remember any occasion when he didn't accept their combined position against the position of the Joint Chiefs of Staff except on one occasion. That was when he decided that he would open the bombing in the North to include the airfields that the North Vietnamese Air Force was occupying. And that decision was made against the advice of the Secretary of Defense.

McS: Did you participate in Cabinet meetings?

McC: Only for the purpose of presenting briefings, not for the purpose of making recommendations.

McS: How frequently was this? Was this as a group, as the Joint Chiefs of Staff, not as individuals?

McC: The Joint Chiefs of Staff were over there very frequently, either

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with the Cabinet, or a part of the Cabinet, or sometimes just with the Secretary of Defense, sometimes with just the Secretary of Defense and Secretary of State. There wasn't any regular schedule on it.

McS: I'm sort of attempting to explore how the decision-making process was with Mr. Johnson, of course relating this to the military decisions. And I'm thinking in terms of the National Security Council as an instrument in advising the President in making decisions and the less formal, more frequent, Tuesday Luncheons?

McC: Well, there wasn't any National Security Council at that time, of course. So there were very few formal meetings for the purpose of actually doing like they do in the National Security Council now, which I had the opportunity of attending on many occasions after Mr. Nixon became president. But I think it achieved the same end. Everybody got his oar in, and the President listened to everybody's advice, and notes were made and records were made of the conferences and of the conversations. So I think that while it was much less formal--it wasn't formal at all, as far as that goes--the information was available, the recommendations were available, and the decisions were available.

McS: Did it lead to any confusion?

McC: It didn't lead to any confusion as far as I was able to determine.

McS: Could you describe some of the Tuesday Luncheons that you participated in where some key [decisions were made]?

McC: He would usually have two or three subjects that he wanted to go

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over. He'd present the subjects. We would know what they were beforehand [and] we would be prepared to discuss them. We'd give, each one of us, our own recommendations, in the event we differed, and we discussed the differences and the whys and the wherefores as to how we arrived at the differences. That was all recorded by one of the White House staff and was made a matter of record. The President would then study that and he might call us back and ask us to discuss one of the problems again, or he might just call the chairman and Mr. McNamara over and ask them to discuss the problem. But, of course, the chairman, in the event he went alone, always represented the view of the Joint Chiefs. If any of us had a view different from the majority of the Joint Chiefs, he would relate that view. As far as that goes, I know for a fact that on some occasions, Mr. McNamara would be there by himself, and if the Chiefs of Staff had a different view than he did, he always related what the Chiefs of Staff view was and why, and why he differed with them. Then when he came back, he'd tell us what the decision was.

McS: Who did you work with at the White House, you or your staff, when it was not dealing directly with the President?

McC: Walt Rostow.

McS: Only Mr. Rostow?

McC: He was the main one because he was his assistant for military affairs. Naturally, he was the one. All of us worked with Walt more than anyone else, I believe.

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McS: Are there some particular meetings at the White House, such as the Tuesday Luncheons or any congressional breakfasts that stand out in your mind as to how they were conducted or what happened?

McC: No. They're all just about the same. A lot of things were discussed, of course, which didn't have any bearing on the military, but the President would bring them up and ask for our advice on them, and so we'd give them to him for whatever they were worth. First, he'd dispose of what he had previously determined would be on the agenda. Then, after that, if there was time, we'd launch into discussions of a lot of other things which actually the Joint Chiefs of Staff really weren't prepared to give an expert opinion on. But he'd ask us for our off-the-cuff opinion and we'd give it to him. He'd mull it over. Very interesting meetings.

McS: Do you recall, was there any predominance of other subjects that were brought up?

McC: No. No. Normally, it was military and international politics that were affected by military operation.

McS: You also, I believe, had just personal meetings with the President many times, just through being good friends.

McC: Yes.

McS: These were not necessarily very formal occasions, were they?

McC: No. They were always informal occasions. Actually, sometimes we'd talk about military affairs and other times he'd use me as a sounding board, I think more or less, to listen to himself to be sure that he thought what he was saying was right and [to] find my reaction

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to it. They were of no national consequence, I should say, but a lot of fun.

McS: Do any of these occasions particularly come to mind?

McC: Oh, I think that the best one we had was when we were down to Ramey. He was in need of a rest, and so he called me and told me to come down there with him. We stayed down there for about three days.

McS: Where is this?

McC: Puerto Rico. Ramey Air Force Base. Played golf twice a day; went to church; and inspected all the military facilities. [We] put on a military demonstration for him. I think he came back much rested and also a little better off financially. We played golf by his rules. (Laughter)

McS: I take it he came out on top of this, according to his rules.

McC: By his rules, yes.

McS: Reflectively, now, sir, did you see any change in mood in Mr. Johnson or change in him personally?

McC: I haven't visited him personally since he left office. I couldn't say anything about that.

McS: I meant up to your last one, January 20, up till his leaving office.

McC: Up till the time he left office, I hadn't--well, I saw a considerable change in him after he had made the announcement that he was not going to be a candidate any longer. He was much more relaxed and also was in a much better position to do whatever he

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thought ought to be done without regard to any domestic political reverberations, which, of course, every president has to take into account.

McS: I think I was thinking in terms of the Vietnam War really pressing him a great deal towards the end.

McC: No. I didn't see any changes in his attitude towards that except a very, very intense attempt to get the Paris Peace Talks going.

McS: Mr. Johnson had several occasions, both in his traveling abroad and here in the United States, where he visited bases and reviewed the troops. He always seemed to be somewhat inspired by those visits.

McC: Oh, yes, we always were. I went with him on one occasion that I remember particularly. It was Armed Forces Day, I believe, 1967, in which he visited a Marine, an Air Force, a Navy, and an Army installation. He visited McConnell Air Force Base at Wichita, Kansas; stayed there about two and a half hours. He was very much impressed by what we were doing. Of course, the troops were very much impressed with him. There must have been forty or fifty thousand people there on the base. He asked me before we left to get the next of kin of the military personnel in that area who were being held prisoners of war, who were missing in action. I got them and he talked to each one of them individually. There must have been twenty-five or thirty of them at least. I'm sure that he inspired them to hold on, and they were very much impressed with what he had to say, and I think he was very much impressed with their attitude also. I know he was, because I was right by him when he was talking to them.

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He always gave the troops a tremendous boost.

Then the other time when he stopped in Korat on his way from the funeral of the Prime Minister of Australia, he talked to the troops there at about five o'clock in the morning. And I think his remarks there demonstrated how he felt about the war and how he felt about the way the combat forces in the war were carrying out their instructions. I know that the troops got a big kick out of what he had to say and the way he said it. I suggest that the speech that he made at Korat certainly be included in any archives that you're going to have for Mr. Johnson. Because, for my money, it was very revealing and was a very well thought-out and very well analyzed speech, not too long either, but he laid it all on the line. The troops appreciated it.

Before the President decided as a result of the Gulf of Tonkin incident to retaliate with the bombing of North Vietnam, there wasn't any air power in Vietnam except the Vietnamese Air Force, which was actually in a training status more than anything else and was fighting under the advisory group of which there were several Americans. At first, the Americans were not allowed to participate in combat with the Vietnamese. Later on, they were allowed to participate in combat with a Vietnamese pilot as an adviser but not actually in command of the aircraft until the Gulf of Tonkin incident. That first retaliation, of course, was made by a carrier which was able to get there before we could put ground based aviation in. It was a very slight retaliation. Actually, it was more gesture



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than anything else. Then it was decided to put American forces in there in actual combat, and then air power started to build up to support these forces and to interdict the lines of communication that were supporting the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong forces with supplies out of North Vietnam. Finally, it was agreed that we would be allowed to bomb in North Vietnam, but still, as the President said at his visit at Korat, the national policy was that there would be restrictions placed upon air power so that there would be a minimum of civilian casualties. And if there was any danger of any even slight civilian casualties, we weren't allowed to attack those targets, regardless of how important it appeared to us from a military standpoint that they should be attacked.

So the use of air power was restricted throughout. The President knew this very well. He understood it, as he indicated in his speech at Korat. He appreciated the way that a response was made by the air forces of all the services. It wasn't just only the Air Force; it was the Navy and Marines as well. But the policy was not to enlarge the war and not to do anything that might bring retaliation by the Soviets or the Chicom's. For that reason, air power was restricted, because it was very provocative, shall I say, tactic or strategy, one or the other. So it wasn't able to do everything it could have done, had the restrictions been eliminated or at least made less severe.

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The President knew that. He said so.

McS: Did you participate in the decision in 1965 on the first bombing strike?

McC: The Joint Chiefs of Staff did as a body. They recommended a strike in retaliation.

McS: Was the recommendation that the military gave much stronger than what was carried out?

McC: I don't believe so because I don't believe we had much more. I believe, at that time, there was only one carrier out there and retaliation was a gesture more than anything else.

McS: I'm sorry. I'm thinking of after Pleiku, in 1965, not the Gulf of Tonkin.

McC: What about after Pleiku? What happened after Pleiku?

McS: I think it was one of our first bombing strikes, the opening of the bombing into North Vietnam; this particular incident really was the initial beginning of the continuous bombardment of the North demilitarized zone.

McC: I don't remember what happened in Pleiku. I know that the military always recommended a greater participation and the application of heavier forces in attacks against North Vietnam that we normally were allowed to execute. Some we weren't allowed to execute at all.

McS: What about the commitment of the ground troops in that time and not calling up the reserves?

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McC: Well, I don't remember what the JCS position on that was. I think we discussed it over and over and over again, as to whether or not there should be a requirement for mobilization. My personal opinion was there was no requirement for mobilization in those early days. My position was to the effect that you could support it by the use of regular forces, either those who volunteered or those who were drafted or those who volunteered to escape the draft. Because once you had committed the reserve forces, they were lost, and if you really got into a position where you had to have some immediate reinforcements, you didn't have any. So I think that they should have been held in reserve until such time as they actually were required. During that time, they weren't required.

McS: Was the emphasis for this coming from Mr. Johnson, to find out whether it was possible to do this without calling up the reserves?

McC: I don't recall how it was worked out. I think it was generally agreed in government that it would be more appropriate to not mobilize unless there was an immediate need for augmentation of forces, which came about later on, as you know.

McS: General, there's been a great deal written about Mr. Johnson's personal direction of the bombing of North Vietnam. Could you tell me a little bit about this and the meetings and how these decisions were reached?

McC: The Joint Chiefs of Staff would make up a target list which we thought should be attacked. That would be agreed to by the Joint

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Chiefs of Staff; be presented by the chairman or sometimes the Joint Chiefs of Staff as a corporate body to the Secretary of Defense and Secretary of State. They would, in most cases, recommend a considerable reduction in the number of targets; based upon what a considerable reduction in the number of targets, based upon what they thought would be a high degree of civilian fatalities or on what in their opinion would be unacceptable attrition for our air forces. Then they would be presented to Mr. Johnson. Mr. Johnson would make the decision personally as to what targets would be bombed.

McS: Did you participate in the last meetings with the President, when these decisions were discussed?

McC: Yes, on most occasions.

McS: Could you describe those? Was it the same thing as a review?

McC: The same thing. He would review the bidding and the reasons therefor; he'd make up his mind, and usually he would make it up right there.

McS: What were the main areas that were put forth by the Joint Chiefs and continuously rejected as being too dangerous?

McC: The most significant one was the bombing of the supply facilities in and around Haiphong. The objective of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was to isolate Haiphong and Hanoi, so that they had no communications capability between them; to isolate Haiphong itself, or its capability actually, reduce or completely wipe out its capability to act as a receiving port and a port of distribution. Most of the stuff that came into Haiphong, as I remember, went into Hanoi for distribution.

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If we could have eliminated Haiphong with a capability for receiving these supplies, I think that we could have achieved our objective much better than waiting until all the supplies got in there and then trying to catch them on the way either from Haiphong into Hanoi, or else from Haiphong south, or else from Hanoi south--diluted our effort. But the elimination of the facilities at Haiphong in general was never approved.

There were certain targets that were approved, but in general it wasn't ever approved, I believe, for two reasons. First was the number of civilian casualties that would have been involved. Second was the consideration of whether or not you were enlarging the war. And the third one was: you undoubtedly would have destroyed or at least damaged some Russian shipping that was always in there. And there was considerable concern on the part of certain agencies of the government as to what that would mean in terms of Soviet reaction. From a military standpoint, in my opinion--and I still have that opinion--we should have gone ahead at the beginning and cleaned that place out.

McS: What was your position on bombing the dikes in North Vietnam?

McC: I never agreed to bombing the dikes. That's a very unprofitable business, too difficult to do for the damage that they would have done. A lot of people thought that if you bombed the dikes, you could just flood the whole countryside. But bombing a dike, as people who have been in this business know, is, with conventional weapons, a pretty fruitless operation.

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McS: Was there any problem about the use of airpower in Vietnam regarding the services? I'm thinking in terms of the Army air mobility, the role of the Air Force, and the role of the Navy.

McC: Well, there was to begin with, service rivalries and things of that nature were, of course, all involved in it. Everybody wanted to show up that he could do better than anybody else. But that didn't last very long. It gradually subsided and pretty soon there was no problem at all, no problem at all, either about the control of the missions or about the selection of targets or anything else. It worked out fine. Still is, as far as I know. Was three weeks ago.

McS: How would you summarize the role of the air power in Vietnam?  
Air Force.

McC: Well, I think it's been very effective. I don't say just Air Force. I'll take the whole thing. I think it's been very effective. Let's take the Army first. The mobility that the Army's been able to achieve with their helicopter forces is absolutely amazing, of course assisted by our fixed wing aircraft in terms of moving troops and supplies. The interdiction on the part of the Air Force and the Marines and the Navy--and particularly the Air Force, because we had a lot more equipment--certainly cut down the capability of the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong to carry on sustained operations. And the close air support which was accorded to the Army, General Westmoreland himself said that its effectiveness had been unparalleled in the military operations in the history of warfare. That's the

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statement that he made. And I know that General Abrams has the same opinion of it because he's told me so. So I think the contribution has been most effective. I think it has saved innumerable American and Allied lives and was certainly responsible for not having to have more troops over there than we did have, even though, in terms of being able to go North, the restrictions imposed on it were very severe. But as far as fighting in the South was concerned, it was most effective.

McS: We're coming up to the point where we were supposed to pick up on the other tape. The only area that I had missed on the 1968 Vietnam policy review was the area I want to just end this with, which would be the impact of the Tet Offensive on the Vietnam policy.

McC: I think that the Tet Offensive was considerably misunderstood in the United States for a period of time. The propaganda effect of that Offensive was that the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong had scored a major military victory, as well as a considerable political victory. Actually, the opposite was true. They did not score a military victory. It took a terrific beating. They lost thousands and thousands of people killed and taken out of combat, either by death or by wounds or by capture. As far as the military was concerned, it was a victory for the U.S. and the Allies. As far as the political significance of it was concerned, it was a complete failure because the government of South Vietnam did stand fast. There was no takeover anywhere by the Communists. And, while I think

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it had a very dilatory effect in the United States for a while, due mostly, in my opinion, to the reporting that came in from Southeast Asia, and particularly out of Saigon, which was inaccurate and made the people in the United States believe that we had taken a beating militarily and that the South Vietnamese government had taken a beating politically. Neither one of them was true; in fact, just the opposite was true. And as you know, they tried to put on a few more offensives, and each one of them would get smaller and smaller in terms of force and in terms of damage that they were able to do either to the military, or to the civilian population, or to the position of the South Vietnamese government.

McS: Sir, did you see a change in the nature of our commitment during your tenure as chief of staff of the Air Force?

McC: I never saw any change.

McS: I'm thinking in terms of how we would conclude or what would be the fulfillment of our commitment there.

McC: The fulfillment of our commitment has never changed, as far as I'm concerned. I don't believe it has changed at all. And that is to arrive at a position where the South Vietnamese could establish a government of their own choice and rule themselves as they please to do, without any interference from outside sources, including the United States. That hasn't yet been achieved, but I believe it is still the present administration's policy, from what I read. I haven't been in on it too much lately.



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McS: In the beginning, though, this was felt that it would be accomplished by a viable military victory in South Vietnam?

McC: I think probably that gradually changed, at least in my position, that we should be able to achieve a military victory, and for the purpose of going ahead with the final position of the U.S., and that is to allow the Vietnamese to govern themselves without outside interference. I personally believe that you could still achieve a viable military victory. It may not be necessary to do that.

We went in there with limited objectives, and we fought a limited war and are still doing so in pursuance of those limited objectives. It never was the intent to destroy the government of North Vietnam or to destroy the North Vietnam nation itself. If it had been that intentional, we could have done it. We could have done it with air power and naval power in six weeks. But that never was our intention. So I would say that as a consequence of that or as a corollary or whatever the word is that it was never intended to achieve military victory as a number one objective. Because we didn't fight it like we would have if that had been the number one objective.

McS: General, the next part of the question goes right into the March 31 decision, and that is where we do pick up on the other tape and so I will conclude this tape here.

McC: Thank you very much.

McS: Thank you very much.

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McC: Good. I hope it works this time.

McS: The following part of this tape has been transferred from the original tape where the initial interview was lost. This interview picks up with my posing the question on the reported requests from General Westmoreland on an increase in number of troops just prior to the March 31 decision by Mr. Johnson which resulted in a troop ceiling being issued and a reduction in the bombing.

Tape 1, Part 2, August 14, 1969 (transferred from earlier interview)

McS: . . . when an increase in troops was rejected?

McC: The thing is, that's a very much misunderstood proposition. What actually happened was--I think you should interview General Westmoreland on this, because he was there, and he was the guy. He had been accused of asking for somewhere in the neighborhood of 235,000 more troops than he was given and were approved. He actually did not ever formally ask for those additional troops. He had plans as to how he would use 235,000--I believe that's the number, but you can clear it up with him. I think it's very important that that be cleared up, because I know that there was some time ago an article in I believe it was the New York Times which indicated that he asked for a lot more troops than he was given. He had plans as to how he would use those troops, in the event they were made available to him, but he said he could do the job which he had to do, under the national policy, without them. So he actually was not turned down, in terms of those 235,000 troops.

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McS: At this point, were the Joint Chiefs recommending an increase at all?

McC: The Joint Chiefs recommended a small increase, but not that big an increase.

McS: Were you apprised ahead of time on this part of the March 31 announcement?

McC: You mean, as the Joint Chiefs, were [we apprised]?

McS: Yes. Did any of you all have any indication of the last part [of the speech], of course that he was withdrawing?

McC: What do you mean, "withdrawing"?

McS: From running for re-election, in that speech?

McC: No.

McS: Did you ever talk to the President about his decision?

McC: Never have.

McS: He never mentioned it to you?

McC: No.

McS: General, in retrospect, now -- I feel that, really, there's so much to cover.

McC: Are you talking about, when you said was I apprised of the March 31 action?

McS: Yes. And then I secondly asked you about his part of withdrawing.

McC: Yes, we knew of the March 31 action, but none of us knew anything about the fact that he intended to withdraw from the presidential race. I say none of us. None of the Joint Chiefs did, to my knowledge. I sure didn't and I don't believe anybody else did.

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McS: General, it seems there's so much to cover in Vietnam, but I'm going to try to conclude, so we can go on to some other things. This seems rather superficial, but let me ask you a real, big, broad question. In retrospect, now, what is your assessment of the conduct of the war and military authority?

McC: Well, I think, as far as achieving a military victory over there is concerned, the war's not been run right, because the military commanders have been circumscribed in what they've been allowed to do. That's true from the very beginning. But the policy of the United States was not necessarily to achieve a military victory. It was to achieve a political victory, to use the military as a means of achieving a political objective, which was a free South Vietnam, without interference from other countries, including us. So if you want to achieve a military victory, then you fight a war a lot different than we're fighting this one. You don't circumscribe the commanders in the field; you tell them what the job to do is and let them go do it. If you're attempting to use the military to achieve a political decision, then that's an entirely different proposition. So I wouldn't say that the military has been misused in terms of attempting to achieve a political decision, but it certainly has not been properly used for the purpose of achieving a military decision.

McS: Were you always aware of this being the limitation?

McC: Yes, right.

McS: That this had to be a political victory and not a military victory?

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McC: Always. I was always aware of it, because I was told that that was the policy of the United States. So that's the way we fought it. That's the way we're still fighting it.

McS: Do you foresee that this type of engagement which they're calling a limited war will continuously mean this type of restricted direction of it?

McC: I don't know. In fact, I don't have any prognosis on that.

McS: Sir, you recently said that Vietnam was the most closely managed war. This is taking a very small phrase. To clarify that, I would like to know what you were referring to?

McC: What I'm referring to is that it was closely managed in terms of the objectives which were to be achieved, the manner in which the forces were employed; but what I meant more than that was the management of resources and the logistic problems that were involved in a war ten thousand miles away from the source of supply. That's what I intended to convey in terms of that particular phrase, when I stated that it was the most closely managed war in history, was the conservation of resources and the management of resources, not only people but supplies and money.

McS: Did you see this as directly coming from the President or do you mean by this the running of the Defense Department?

McC: It was the entire [situation]. Mostly the Department of Defense, stimulated, of course, by the President. Mostly managed by the Department of Defense, but more particularly by the individual services, who are responsible for their own logistics establishments.

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McS: General, were you ever with the President on the occasion of him making a decision on the selection of sites? So much is written about his doing it the nights before the sorties were sent out.

McC: Yes, I've been there several times.

McS: Can you describe any of these to me, just the method the President used with his comments?

McC: Yes, he would listen to the advice of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and to the advice of the Secretary of Defense and to the advice of the Secretary of State and sometimes to Mr. Rostow. Then after he'd heard all the pros and cons, he would make a decision. That simple.

McS: All right. Let me just ask you: On most of these occasions, was it, in effect, that you were being overruled by the President, as far as what your advice was?

McC: I'd say in the majority of the decisions, the President took the advice of the Secretary of Defense and/or the Secretary of State.

McS: To continue on, I'd like to talk a little bit about the organization of the Defense Department, its administration and policies under Secretaries McNamara and Clifford. I'd like to know what you feel the impact on the Air Force has been of the management reorganization and centralization of authority in the Office of Secretary [of Defense].

McC: I said in a testimony before the Senate Appropriations Committee

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just before my retirement that in my five years as vice chief and chief of staff, the Air Force had less air power than it had when I became vice chief of staff, which was in August of 1964, and at the same time, we had spent fourteen billion dollars in the development and procurement of aircraft and missiles. So in my opinion, the Department of Defense under Mr. McNamara ended up with a less effective Air Force than it started with. Now, there are a lot of things yet to come along which were started at that time, such as the MIRV of the missiles and the MIRV of the Poseidon. But as far as the Air Force is concerned, it has less actual striking power today than it had when I became chief of staff.

McS: Was this related to the development of the "roles and missions" concept?

McC: No. It was just a proposition of distributing funds. Airplanes kept getting more and more expensive, so if you wanted to save money in the budget, the things to cut were the most expensive items, and those were airplanes.

McS: How has this new concept of roles and missions affected the Air Force?

McC: We haven't had any problem with roles and missions at all.

McS: It was an improvement, then, you are saying, or it was good?

McC: We've had no problems. The roles and missions are the same now as they were when I started. There's been a lot of talk about roles and missions, but we have had no problem among us, as chiefs of the

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services.

McS: What about the emphasis on systems analysis and cost reduction?

McC: Well, cost reduction is okay, and systems analysis is okay. I think you should have a systems analysis set up. I had one in the Air Force and a very good one, and General Ryan still has it. But systems analysis should be in a position of doing analyses on various and sundry facets of a problem, looking at it from all angles, and coming up with the answer in terms of effectiveness; not necessarily cost effectiveness, because sometimes you want effectiveness that'll cost more than lesser effectiveness will cost at a lower cost, if you see what I mean. Systems analysis gradually grew into an outfit that was dictating policy and strategy and interpreting the USIB intelligence, which, of course, USIB had already interpreted. And they [systems analysis] would interpret the USIB interpretation of it. And in an attempt to save money, they would come up with what they called cost effectiveness proposals. They would demonstrate that you could do just as well with this piece of equipment, and this strategy and these tactics as you could with a superior piece of equipment and different strategy and different tactics. Of course, it wasn't true. But on the basis of saving money, it was bought and it was not right.

I believe that systems analysis should be in the business of looking at a problem and coming up with various and sundry ways of doing it and say, "We can do it this way for so much and we can do it this way for so much. Now, this way, number two way, is going to



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cost us less, but it'll be less effective. Now if you want to make it still cost less and want to take the risks involved"--and they shouldn't determine what the risks are; the risks should be determined by the national authorities--"then you can do it for still less. But if you want to be sure that you can do it, then it's going to cost like this." And then give it to the decision-making authorities, and let them decide what to do with it in terms of force structure and the application of forces throughout the world.

That's what they should be doing, instead of saying, for example, this is not an actual case, "We need a thousand airplanes in Europe, in the event we should get into a conventional war with the Soviets. Okay, you can have this thousand airplanes, and they'll cost you so many hundreds of millions of dollars. Then you can have this thousand airplanes, and it'll cost you half that much. You can have this thousand, and it'll only cost you a fourth that much. Okay, this is the least cost, so we'll buy them." Well, that's fine, to buy them for the least cost, but they're not going to win any war for you. That was the thing that was wrong with systems analysis.

McS: Did this have an effect on the procurement program of the Defense Department?

McC: Oh, my goodness, yes! Oh, too much!

McS: You recently made a statement, and I forget the essence of it here, but you were talking about the need to streamline the procurement

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program so that it could take proper remedial action when someone makes a serious error of omission or commission.

McC: Yes, I said to streamline, and later on in that same comment--that's from a testimony I had--[I said] streamline and delegate responsibility. That's what I actually meant by streamlining. I meant delegating the responsibility so that the people who have the ultimate responsibility can say, "Okay, this guy fouled it up." Now you can't find who fouled it up. I think that this has been due to two things. One was the gradual transfer of authority to the systems analysis people, and the DDR and E [Director of Defense Research and Engineering] people, which abrogated the authority previously established, which previously was the service secretary's responsibility. I think that caused most problems we had. I think that Mr. Laird and Mr. Packard are gradually straightening that out.

McS: What do you see as some of the more serious errors in omission or commission during the period as chief of staff?

McC: Well, I'll just talk about the Air Force.

McS: Yes, sir.

McC: We decided that we would retire the old bombers, the B-52s, and in place of those, we would develop and produce a new bomber which we called the Advanced Manned Strategic Aircraft--AMSA. We could get money from the Congress for it, but the money was never given to us; it was held up by the Secretary of Defense. That's one of the mistakes that was made, in my opinion.

The second one was: I made a proposal to the Secretary of

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Defense that we reorganize and modernize the Air Defense System for a continental air defense of the United States. The Air Staff devised a plan by means of which we could do that; it would cost "X" millions of dollars, which would be amortized over a period of ten years by the much-reduced cost in terms of maintenance and operation of the modernized system that was agreed to. It was further agreed that until such time as we got the modernized system going, we would have to retain the old system, even though it was expensive, because it was the only air defense we had. Well, we didn't get the modernized system going. But we did start tearing down the old system until now we've practically got no air defense. People content themselves with that situation, because they say there is not really any bomber threat to the United States. So that's the second mistake, in my opinion.

In my opinion, those were the two big mistakes that were made: not supporting an advanced bomber and reducing the air defense system to nothing except a skeleton before we'd replaced them with modernized air defense.

McS: Did you have occasion to make your position known on these two specific points to the President?

McC: Yes.

McS: What was his response?

McC: He decided to accept Mr. McNamara's recommendations.

McS: Would you consider, along this line also, the deployment of the ABMs?

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McC: Well, ABM didn't come in until right at the last of Mr. Johnson's administration, about a year before; and all of us recommended that we go ahead and deploy an ABM system, which at that time was called the Sentinel.

McS: What was Mr. Johnson's position on this when you met with him? There was a delay indicated.

McC: That meeting was held at the Ranch, and the decision was not made at that time; it was made about a month later. But when the decision was made, it was in accordance with our recommendations.

McS: Wasn't it, I think, July, 1967, that the Joint Chiefs of Staff publicly announced that they were in disagreement with the position we were taking on deployment of the ABMs?

McC: I don't remember the Joint Chiefs ever being in disagreement about the ABM. We always supported the ABM.

McS: No, I meant in disagreement with the administration on the deployment of the ABMs, wanting it immediately instead of the delay involved.

McC: Well, of course, I think probably we felt -- I don't know how much delay there was involved. I don't remember when the decision actually was made that we would go ahead with it. It was in December of 1966, I believe, that the presentation was made to the President at the Ranch, in which we all agreed that the Sentinel system should actually be made into an operational system, since R and D had gone on long enough. And of course, I think that our position was that the sooner the better. I don't remember any public disagreement. In fact, I don't remember whether it was delayed longer than

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we thought it ought to be delayed or not. I'm not very clear on that.

McS: What is your assessment of the congressional relations between the Defense Department and Congress during this time period in which you were chief of staff?

McC: I can't speak for the Defense Department. Up and down, on it. I know that my own personal relations, as chief of staff of the Air Force, with the Congress, have always been very satisfactory, not only to me, but by their own statements, to the members of all the committees that I had to deal with.

McS: Several congressmen have made charges of military muzzling during this period. What is your opinion of that?

McC: Military muzzling? The military didn't have anything to do with any muzzling.

McS: Well, I think they meant by the administration, for civilian control.

McC: I take it there was--I never felt muzzled. I know there was a lot of information withheld, which the Secretary of Defense withheld, I assume, on the judgment that it was the best thing for the country. I'm sure he didn't withhold it for any other reason, because regardless of all the criticisms that have been directed against Mr. McNamara, I'm sure that every decision he made he thought was the best for the United States. I was never muzzled in anything I wanted to say, either in public or on the Hill.

McS: Could you give me what you feel is a comparison between Secretaries McNamara and Clifford, having served under both of them?

McC: They were entirely different people, entirely different. Mr.

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Clifford was more inclined to take military advice than Mr. McNamara was. I wouldn't say he was . . . They both were always accessible, at least to me.

McS: What about in the manner of their decision-making?

McC: As I said, if Mr. Clifford had made a decision against the Joint Chiefs of Staff, he would always tell you ahead of time; call you in and tell you he was going to make a decision against it, and these are his reasons. "Now then, do you all want to take it to the President or not?" And Mr. McNamara would make the decision and then tell us. That's about what it amounted to.

McS: And Mr. Clifford?

McC: Mr. Clifford would always tell us before the decision actually became effective. And he'd ask us, he'd say, "Now, I've made this decision. What have you guys got to say about it?" "Well, if it's a decision, Mr. Secretary, there is nothing for us to say." "Here is the reason I made it." And then he'd go on [to explain]. "Okay, if that is your decision, we will support you." Or "Mr. Secretary, we would like to talk to the President about it."

McS: How would you describe the relationship between the Air Force and each one of these men?

McC: I don't think Mr. McNamara understood air power nor its application very well. I think Mr. Clifford understood it a little better, but also not very well. In fact, I don't think there that there was at that time anybody in the Office of the Secretary of Defense

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who understood the application of tactical and strategic air power. At least, not the way I understood it.

McS: General, can you recount for me a couple of what you consider the most urgent disagreements between the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff that you did take to the President?

McC: One was on the ABM. Another one was on the Advanced Manned Strategic Aircraft. And I think the other one was--of course, there were a lot of smaller items--the reduction of forces in NATO Europe.

McS: Did you ever attempt to convince the President of a decision being not advisable?

McC: Not after he had made it.

McS: Because it was just useless at that point, or he just wouldn't hear you out?

McC: Well, he'd hear us out. He would hear you all day long. And say, "All right, I'm not going to make this decision now. We'll talk about it some more." And he'd call you over again and you'd talk about it some more. So there wasn't any use. There wasn't anything you could say after he made the decision that you hadn't said before he made it. Because you'd played all the cards. When he'd say, "This is the way it's going to be," you'd say, "Mr. Commander-in-Chief, that's the way we're going to do it."

McS: General, were there any occasions where Mr. Johnson just sat down and you were not discussing particularly the official developments and issues regarding the Air Force?

McC: You mean just sit and talk? Yes. There have been some occasions of

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that, just talk about things in general, most of which, I didn't know much about. But I put my two bits in if I thought it was worthwhile. But you didn't want to put your two bits in unless you knew what your two bits were worth.

McS: Do you recall what these subjects were that [you discussed]?

McC: Well, they were various and sundry ones. It usually happened before a Tuesday Luncheon or after a Tuesday Luncheon, or when he called me over on occasion with something specific to do with the Air Force. After we'd get that over with, we'd discuss a few other things. I'd say they were just sort of around the fringe of national problems which he was facing and which he'd use me and other people as a sounding board.

McS: Mr. Johnson was known for his great persuasive ability and also for his temper. Did you ever have any occasion to be the recipient of either one of these?

McC: No, never.

McS: I just have a couple of concluding questions, General. I wondered if you could sort of give me what your assessment is of the impact of the Vietnam War on the military establishment and the Johnson Administration.

McC: Well, I think that it discredited the Johnson Administration the way it was run. And as far as the military establishment is, we've been living off of what fat we had, and we're not getting any more money now than we got in 1964 in terms of the value of the dollar. I'll give you an example. The Air Force budget for fiscal year 1970



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[is] currently set at around 25 billion dollars. The value of that budget in 1964 dollars is 19 billion dollars. So actually, in terms of purchasing power, we've got the same amount of money that we had in 1964. And at the same time, we're carrying a war on our hands that costs the Air Force 6 billion dollars a year, chargeable actually to the war, additional money which you wouldn't have to spend if you weren't fighting. So to carry on the affairs of the Air Force, which is just about the same size as it was in 1964, we're down for 6 billion dollars less than we had in 1964; 25 billion, now, in 1964 dollars, that's worth 19 billion dollars; we're carrying on a 6 billion dollar war as an overhead which cuts it back to 13 billion that we've got to spend for procurement of equipment, and pay people, and maintenance and operations, research and development. Inflation knocks the devil out of it.

McS: It doesn't seem there's quite enough to go around.

General, just a concluding question, which is rather difficult, but I would like to ask you how you think history will judge Mr. Johnson and rate his administration.

McC: I don't know how history will react to that. If you could find an historian who was really completely objective, and I guess there are some, I think that he would criticize the manner in which the Vietnamese War was actually carried on, not whether you got into it or not, but how it was actually [handled], the tactics and strategy of warfare. But I think he would have to find that Mr. Johnson did more in terms of welfare for the American people than any other

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president in history. I believe you'll find that out in terms of the laws that were passed, the money that was spent for the welfare of the general American people, than anyone had ever done before him. I think the research will indicate that those two things an historian could put down without fear of contradiction.

McS: General, you've given me an awful lot of your time and I greatly appreciate it. There is really an unending number of questions that I could ask you. Just let me thank you and ask you if there is anything else in the way of your relationship with Mr. Johnson that you could add.

McC: No, I don't have anything to add except, as I said, I believe in the beginning, we developed a mutual friendship and, I know, mutual admiration, because he's told me both of those things and I know how I felt about him. So that's about the only thing that I can say.

McS: Thank you very much.

[End of Part 2 of Tape 1 and Interview I]

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