INTERVIEWEE: GEORGE McGOVERN

INTERVIEWER: PAIGE MULHOLLAN

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M: Let's begin by identifying you. You are Senator George McGovern of South Dakota, and at least during the last two administrations your positions have been first as director of President Kennedy's Food for Peace Program and then you were elected to the Senate in 1962, where you served since and reelected in this last fall of 1968. In that time, or prior to that time you came to government, during your service in the House, did you have any occasion to have close contact with either Senator Johnson or Vice-President Johnson?

GM: I had very limited contact with Mr. Johnson prior to the time when I served in the Senate after 1963. I did have one rather interesting visit with him during the summer of 1960, when he was seeking the nomination for the Presidency. He came to South Dakota; I met him at the airplane in Pierre, South Dakota, which is our State Capital and immediately on his invitation joined him at his motel. He asked me to take time to read out loud a rather lengthy statement that John Kennedy had delivered as a Senator to the Massachusetts Farm Bureau state convention. It was a speech in which as a young senator, Kennedy came out in effect against the agricultural price support program--

M: Important to your state--

GM: That's correct. Johnson wanted me to understand that in the most agricultural state in the union if I supported John Kennedy I was supporting a man who a short time before that had blasted the whole agricultural price stabilization program. I think that Mr. Johnson

was wise enough to understand that I had been elected to the House in the first place in a kind of a revolt against Ezra Taft Benson's efforts to do exactly what Mr. Kennedy was recommending in that Massachusetts Farm Bureau speech.

But the interesting thing to me is the intensity with which he approached that effort. He not only wanted me to read the speech, but to make sure that I was getting the full import of it he asked me to read it out loud to him. I'm sure that he had read the speech many times but while he was sitting on the edge of the bed he listened very intently while I went through a 12 or 15 minute reading of the speech. But that was the first indication that I had had personally of the intensity of Mr. Johnson and the depth of feeling he has about political matters.

It was quite clear to me that he was most anxious to win that Presidential nomination and that, perhaps understandably, resented the situation in which he could even then see himself moving, where Kennedy had been out on the hustings for three or four years making hay with the delegates and with the party leaders while he had been in Washington fighting for things like a stronger agricultural program and Medicare program and these things that would give a Democratic candidate appeal. I strongly sensed that he was aware even then that he was in an underdog position with reference to Kennedy.

But that was my first close contact with him and I saw very little of President Johnson again until after I entered the Senate and became a critic on Viet Nam--

M: Did he play any part in the Senate leadership as Vice President, prior to that time, for President Kennedy?

GM: You see, I was not in the Senate during the first two years of the Kennedy Administration. I was at the Executive Office Building and had almost no contact at all with the Vice President until 1963. And of course, John Kennedy was killed 11 months later. After President Johnson took over I of course talked to him time to time, usually about Viet Nam.

Now I do remember the one incident when he was Vice President and we were debating President Kennedy's proposal to make wheat available to the Soviet Union--cash transactions.

M: This will be right at the end of Kennedy's--

GM: That's correct. This was in the fall of 1963, shortly before President Kennedy was killed. And curiously enough, I had been pressing for several weeks for that kind of a proposal and my senior colleague from South Dakota led the opposition to it --Senator Mundt.

M: I have here Senator Mundt last fall sometime.

GM: Yes.

M: The Vice President did get involved in that?

GM: The Vice President got involved in talking to a number of people. He came back one day and said to me when I was standing near the rear of the Senate chamber, he said, "Mr. Food for Peace, why don't you remind these people of the role that food can play in international affairs. This is not a matter of being soft on Communism or hard on Communism. It is a question of what is in our national interest and what will produce better conditions around the world." He was saying in effect "let's get in the act and speak up," which I did--partly under his prodding.

M: You were one of the earlier and more eloquent of the Viet Nam critics. Was there some specific action or event that made you determined to take that course of action early in 1965?

GM: I actually made my first statement on Viet Nam in September 1963 when President Kennedy was still in the White House. I recommended then as strong an alternative proposal as I have ever suggested which was unilateral withdrawal.

M: There are not many people around town who can claim to have been right that long ago.

GM: The truth of the matter is that the recommendation was ignored. Most people weren't even interested in Viet Nam in September 1963. I well remember when President Kennedy completed his briefing with former President Eisenhower before he took over the White House, President Eisenhower concentrated on the Laos crisis and never mentioned Viet Nam when he reviewed the various trouble spots around the world. He never referred to Viet Nam. That attitude persisted into the Kennedy administration and I think President Kennedy discovered that it was a very important issue.

But as far as the country is concerned I think it is fair to say that 95 percent of the American people, and perhaps almost that high a percentage in the Senate was indifferent to Viet Nam. So, my first brief effort drew no reaction at all, either in the press or on the Senate floor. I think people just thought I was talking about a rather obscure and insignificant little country and that it really didn't matter all that much.

As a matter of fact I decided myself some weeks later with the death of President Kennedy, and a new President coming into power,

that there was no real point in pressing on that issue. I thought that with the forthcoming election on that Mr. Johnson was not likely to make any fundamental changes in our overseas commitments. So in effect I just laid off the issue although I continued to have deep apprehension about it.

When I came back in with forceful criticism was after the 1964 election when it became clear to me that the administration was not moving towards a resolution of the war but in effect were getting ready to try to win it militarily. So I spoke out again in the middle of January 1965. I teamed up then with Frank Church in two efforts on February 17 and February 18. I think those efforts were the ones that really got hold of the White House. I have absolutely sure convictions that President Johnson was watching very closely what Church and I did on the Senate floor in mid-February--

M: Had you made those representations that you and Senator Church made at that time privately to Mr. President, prior to then?

GM: I went down to talk with him and my recollection is that it came after those speeches--shortly after that. I wasn't sure just what kind of a reaction we were getting downtown and I called up Bill Moyers and asked for an appointment. He asked me to come down to the White House at 7 o'clock one evening and I talked to the President alone for a period of maybe 30 minutes. I was terrible alarmed at his view of the world because it seemed to me that he saw the Communist menace as the overriding consideration in international politics. He said that Mr. McCone had told him that the Chinese communist apparatus was becoming very ugly and very active in Latin America and in Africa. I asked him point blank, I said, "What

do you think is the objective of the Chinese Communists?"

He said, "I think they want to take over the world."

And I said, "You mean a Hitler-style type conquest?"

He said, "That's my view."

And I said, "Well, my view, Mr. President, is by tying down so many of our resources and men in South Viet Nam, if in fact the Communist do have in mind an international expansionist program, we are playing into their hands because we have picked an area that is very difficult for American forces to defend. Furthermore we are taking on a fourth-rate power involved in a complex struggle of their own, and I can't see where that serves our interest in weakening Chinese expansionism. It may be serving their purpose."

And he said, "Well, I know there are some people who hold to that view."

M: You didn't get the impression that you were getting through?

GM: I got the distinct impression that he did not buy that interpretation at all.

M: Were there any other responses to yours and Senators Church's speeches asking for more efforts at negotiations.

GM: Yes. He sent McGeorge Bundy to the Capitol to talk to us.

M: Just you two?

GM: Yes, he talked to us and he also invited us into the meeting (Gaylord Nelson and Steve Young) and asked the Vice President to preside. It was in the Vice President's office but it was done at the request of the President.

When Bundy read the speeches in the Congressional Record I think he was stunned by the apparent logic of these two speeches,

Church's and mine. I had the feeling that Bundy had assumed that it was sort of an irresponsible, isolationism, or some kind of demagogic low grade politicking on the part of--and when he read these speeches, which if I do say were thoughtful, carefully constructed statements, I think that they made a great impression on him and shook him up to a certain extent. I had the feeling as I watched him reading--and he looked at us, and he finally said, "Well this isn't really what came across in the press."--something to that effect--to indicate that there was a great contrast between the full development of the speech as over against the three or four sentences that appeared in the press under some such heading as "Senators Blast Johnson" or something. It was a sensational kind of superficial report.

M: Did he agree to try to take this back to the President or take any action at all to follow it up?

GM: He was very cagey about making any commitments along that line other than to say that he hoped we understood that our speeches were being read in Hanoi and being circulated in South Viet Nam and that they would make it very difficult for the American position, that it was an indication of a breech in the unity of the country.

A curious thing happened, I asked McGeorge Bundy if he thought we were in Viet Nam because we were afraid of a Communist government coming to power in Saigon or because we were afraid of Chinese imperialism in Southeast Asia. He thought for a long time and he said, "Well, I don't really think you can separate the two. I think both factors are important."

So that night I attended a reception at the White House and I

asked McNamara the same question. He said, "We're not interested in the ideology of Saigon or Viet Nam. We're interested in turning back aggression." I said, "Well from that standpoint then it would make no difference whether it was a communist challenge or some other. It's the fact that there is aggression there from the outside that you're disturbed about."

He said, "That's all we're disturbed about. We have no interest in the Communist or non-Communist developments in South Viet Nam. That's irrelevant." He was very clear and very quick and very decisive whereas Bundy was troubled and somewhat pained by the question and answered it by saying that you couldn't rate one factor ahead of the other--which made me think Bundy was much more ideological in his approach. It also indicated some confusion as to analysis within the administration.

M: Division at least.

GM: Yeah.

M: You mention in your book, Time of War and Time of Peace, a meeting that Mr. Johnson called you down for, just prior to his Johns Hopkins speech.

GM: That's right.

M: Can you describe that?

GM: Church and I slated speeches again for the day after the President decided to speak at Baltimore. We didn't know he was going to speak, and we had announced to the press that we would be speaking on April whatever the day, April 6. Did he speak on April 5?

M: I think April 5.

GM: Yes. Well, in any event we got a call, again from McGeorge Bundy,

asking if we would defer those speeches and come to the White House. Church was reluctant to give a commitment because he had already released the text of his speech. I said that I would defer until we at least talked to the President, whereupon Church agreed then to defer although he was very unhappy about it. But we went down, and for some reason or other Gale McGee was invited to come down. Well, I know why he was invited, because CBS had announced that McGee and I were going to be on live immediately following the President's Baltimore speech to comment on it. So the President invited McGee as well as Church and me. We sat in that little private office of his, not the Oval Office but that other one.

M: Just outside--

GM: Yeah. That would have been about 4:30 or 5:00. Well, he kept us there for I would think an hour and a half. I was almost afraid he was going to be late going to Baltimore to make his speech that evening. Again, reminiscent of what happened to me in the motel at Pierre, he asked us to read the entire text of his speech. He said in effect, "I'm giving you what you've asked for," and he was in effect. We were pleading with him to offer to negotiate an end to the war. Dean Rusk kept saying there is nothing to negotiate. But at least officially he yielded to the central point that Church and I had been making that we ought to forget about a military decision and offer to negotiate an end to the war.

M: Then he did indicate that it was in some way a response directly to you?

GM: That's correct. He made it very clear that he regarded us as responsible critics and that he was in effect granting the suggestion that we had

made. Now neither one of us endorsed the speech 100 percent, although we praised him for that aspect of it. But we both made it quite clear that simply making the offer and then accelerating the military effort would not accomplish what we had in mind. I expressed some apprehension about the bombing getting out of hand and possibly triggering a much wider response by North Viet Nam and possibly even by China. And he said, "That is not going to happen because I personally am controlling every one of those bombing missions." He said, "I don't let them bomb so much as an outhouse without approving it."

M: As an old bomber pilot you know how accurate--

GM: He used a slightly stronger word to describe the outhouse, but anyway the point was clear that he was running the air war from the White House and approving every target. He said, "I know the danger of the bombing effort. But it's a very controlled, very cautious, very prudent and restrained effort." And I'm sure that he was absolutely sincere about that. I think he saw himself in the role of a restraining, cautious, moderate President, not permitting the military to run away with the war. What we saw was a steadily escalated war in which the President was moving more and more into an active combat role that was approaching a major effort.

I've always suspected that that was one of the communication gaps between the doves and the President. That the President was looking at the Joint Chiefs and Senator Russell and Senator Stennis and John McCormack and Paul Douglas and the whole military group in this country who were saying, "Why are you handicapping us? Why are you putting these restrictions on us?", and he saw himself as the man of peace who was restraining the hawks. But what we saw

as the critics of the whole involvement in Viet Nam was just a deepening involvement. I think the President was both hurt and pained and angered by the refusal of the doves to give him any credit for the restraint that he was exercising.

M: You mentioned a communications gap but you also mentioned, at least the first instance where what I think you once called the owls rather than the doves--the same thing--were effective. Did that decrease as time went on? Did your communications close more or less?

GM: Yes. I would say from the spring of 1967 on that the communications almost terminated between the Senate critics and the President. He was out of touch with practically all of the leading critics in the Senate for the last couple of years of his administration.

M: Was that a two way street, or was that his choice pretty much entirely?

GM: My guess is that he finally gave up on trying to pacify the doves. I think he decided that however difficult it was to pacify Viet Nam, it was probably less difficult than trying to pacify Fulbright and the doves. We were very hard on him yet I think the criticism was responsible. My own guess is that the President had a kind of a begrudging respect for the refusal of the doves to yield their position.

He brought Westmoreland back in the spring of '67 in a valiant effort to unite the country and I think to silence the dissent on Viet Nam. The thrust of Westmoreland's speech to the newspaper publishers in New York was that we had the enemy beaten militarily and the only question was whether we would lose the war in the Senate--or in the country--here in the United States. I took him

on, head on, in a major speech on the Senate floor--I guess it was April of 1967--which was probably my best speech on Viet Nam. I called the whole policy a policy of madness and made it perfectly clear that I didn't intend to be silenced by that kind of tactic. And, not just because I spoke out then, but because there were other things that were coming to a head at that time in a deepening of the military involvement, I think you can almost say for most of '67 and '68 the President was out of touch with the Senate critics. The one exception to that I suppose would be Mansfield who continued to see him weekly as a member of the leadership group.

M: Were there other forms of retribution taken against the dove group upon the White House, or which originated in the White House?

GM: I can't really complain about the President's treatment under this dissent except in one instance, and I have never been sure whether he was responsible for this or whether it was done by Marvin Watson or some of the other people around the President. But South Dakota had an absolutely clear claim on the appointment of a United States Circuit Court of Appeals judge that should have been given to us in 1968. We are the only state in the Eighth Circuit without representation on the bench. We clearly had a claim on that appointment and we had a excellent candidate. I know that Ramsey Clark was for him and recommended him but it was stopped at the White House, and I think it was because of my position on Viet Nam that the appointment was given to North Dakota although it is a state no bigger than South Dakota that had had a man on the Circuit Court of Appeals for many years. South Dakota had been without one for ten years. Governor Guy intervened and the fact that he had not been an outspoken

critic of the President but as a matter of fact had already pledged his support to the Johnson-Humphrey ticket for 1968--I think that did lead to one very clear act of retribution against me that was very embarrassing.

And, as I say, I don't know whether the President called the shot on that or whether it was Marvin Watson or one of the White House staff, but somebody at the White House killed that appointment.

M: Did they go around you to your senior colleague and support him strongly in some instances perhaps?

GM: Yes, they did. When we had the dedication of an important dam on the Missouri River the governor of our state who was a Republican working through Senator Mundt asked that the President come out and dedicate the dam. This was just prior to Senator Mundt's reelection campaign in 1966. The President was unable to go but he ordered his Secretary of State to go. So Secretary Rusk flew all the way to South Dakota and put his arm around Senator Mundt, labeled him a great American who is absolutely essential to the well being of the United States; dedicated the dam,and returned to Washington. I never had any doubt about the reason for it. It was because of Mundt's strong support for the Viet Nam policy of Rusk and Johnson.

M: You mentioned a while ago the pacification of the doves in the Senate. Were the doves institutionalized to the extent of meeting formally as the press sometimes implied they were?

GM: There were two or three meetings but they weren't organized very well. Most of the Senators spoke out as a matter of conscience and conviction. The dissent was erratic, disorganized--or maybe I should say unorganized. Sometimes Senators would get up and

make major speeches on Viet Nam with little or no effort to rally additional support on the Senator floor. I think it would be inaccurate to say that there was a carefully organized wing of dissenters in the Senate. Occasionally we got together on a letter urging an extension of a bombing pause or urging a bombing halt. This was done on three or four occasions in a kind of round-robin letter. But that was about the extent of the organized effort.

M: The Senate, as you have expressed in several of your speeches, played a gradually decreasing role through this period. Do you think that was because the White House froze them out or because the Senate let the Executive Branch pretty well take the initiatives?

GM: I think it was a combination of both. When the administration saw that even the most vigorous Senate dissenters, with two or three exceptions, would not vote against appropriations for Viet Nam they understood that the only tool the Senate then had was the power of persuasion and the capacity to marshall public opinion.

But it really took a direct challenge by Senator McCarthy, and then later Senator Kennedy, to produce the abrupt switch in policy that took place when the President announced on March 31 that he would not be a candidate for reelection and that he was henceforth going to push primarily for a negotiated settlement and held out the hope of a bombing halt. I would say that the Senate's role as a body at that point had declined appreciably and the President at that stage was more concerned about public opinion in the country than he was in the debate on the Senate floor.

M: Was it difficult to get information for the dissenters in the Senate who wanted to speak out on Viet Nam or wanted to study Viet Nam as

a problem?

GM: Well, the Senators were always very skeptical of the information they got from the Executive Branch. But fortunately, excellent sources were available through the American press that had been in South Viet Nam and through careful observations that had been made by men like the late Bernard Fall, Professor George Kahin of Cornell, who is a top authority on Viet Nam. Then I think some of the better informed press--men like Ward Just, David Halberstam, Neil Sheehan of the New York Times, Charles Moore. There are a number of those people who are well-informed, alert reporters who were very helpful in bringing back information that gave the Senators ammunition they could use in speeches and elsewhere.

M: You, as you have said, perhaps have a longer history of being concerned about this problem than most anybody. This is subjective I realize--do you think that Mr. Johnson could have reversed the situation from the time he took over, or had the commitment been made to an extent that would have made it almost impossible to do?

GM: Absolutely, he could have reversed it. And the greatest single political tragedy of my lifetime was the failure of President Johnson to use that enormous mandate he got in November 1964 to end the war. The American people had just repudiated the hawkish, militaristic recommendations of Goldwater. South Dakota, which hasn't gone Republican since the 1930's, supported Johnson--not because of his liberal domestic policy. They would have preferred the more conservative approach of Goldwater. They supported Johnson because they thought he would not escalate that war. They rejected Goldwater because they were afraid he was going to send their sons off to a

major war in Asia and that he might even involve us in an all out nuclear effort. The President had a clear mandate in 1964 to end that war and the American people would have gone with him. He told us during the campaign that he wasn't going to send American troops over there to resolve an Asian struggle that they ought to resolve themselves. If he had held to that decision I think that we not only could have ended the war but that Mr. Johnson might very well have gone down in history as the most effective President we've had since Franklin Roosevelt.

M: What happened then? Did he take bad advice and, if so, from whom?

GM: He took bad advice from Dean Rusk, from McGeorge Bundy, from Mr. Rostow, from the Joint Chiefs--who were persuasive apparently with McNamara, too--from our Embassy in Saigon. People who had invested their reputations in recommending a military course in Viet Nam were reluctant to let go of that position. I think they convinced the President that with a rather modest increase in American armament and American combat activities there that the other side would quit.

Of course after that investment was made, in order to protect it, it was easier to persuade the President to take the next step, and the next, and the next, until finally when Westmoreland was requesting another 200 to 250,000 men, under the urging of Secretary Clifford, who by then had seen the light, the President just said enough is enough.

But he, also, I think, had the political realism to understand that he had dug himself in so deeply that neither the American people nor the Vietnamese would really believe it. If he said that

we were changing our policy, they would have seen it as a political move on his part in an election year after four years of steady escalation of the war. I think faced with that kind of embarrassing situation the President just decided to get out of the political arena and use what time he had left to scale down the war and put us on the path towards political settlement.

M: Those advisors you mentioned often, like you and Senator Church--all you people seem to come from the middle west--they write all of you off as simple old isolationist. Dean Rusk says he is going to spend the next four years exposing the isolationist trend. How do you reply to that charge by them?

GM: Of course the charge that the Senate critics on Viet Nam are narrow isolationists is a complete repudiation of our whole philosophy of foreign policy. All of us are believers in the United Nations. All of us are strong supporters of disarmament and arms control and international arrangements to enforce those agreements. So far as I know, all of us have backed up the efforts of the Peace Corps, the Food for Peace Program, and have generally supported the economic and technical assistance programs. Senator Fulbright, for example, has registered his principal objection to foreign aid, not to foreign aid as such but to it's unilateral character and the danger of involving us in unilateral ventures abroad. What he's called for is a greater internationalism in the field of foreign assistance.

M: So that's, just as far as you are concerned, a simplistic charge not based on much attention to your record on other things?

GM: Yes. I think Rusk is about a generation behind the times. He is

still living in the days of Adolf Hitler, and he learned that lesson so well that he is incapable of seeing the change that is taking place in the world. He doesn't seem to understand that the Hitler lesson was a vastly different lesson than the one we need to apply to the challenge of a revolutionary, explosive developing world.

I don't know why, if Mr. Rusk is going to appeal to history, he doesn't really look at history from a broader perspective. Why does he divorce the tragic experience that the Vietnamese have had with French imperialism and French colonialism, from the problems we have out there now?

What seems to me to be a proper interpretation of Viet Nam is that for 25 years at least the Vietnamese have been trying to expel foreign powers from their soil. First the Japanese--when they stood with us in World War II, in a kind of a underground sense; then the French, they fought for eight years and finally threw the French out. Then what do we do but stumble into the same trap that the French and the Japanese were involved in of bucking up against Vietnamese nationalism.

We gave Ho Chi Minh the perfect out, the perfect opportunity, by trying to set up a kind of a unpopular and unrepresentative puppet regime in Saigon--which is exactly what the French tried to do to their sorrow--a different ball player but the same old game. I think it was John King Fairbank who said "We're sleeping in the same bed the French did even though we may be dreaming different dreams." And this is true.

Dean Rusk has never understood that the best way to check the spread of Chinese Communist power in Asia is through the indigenous

nationalism of the countries out there. I don't think that Ho Chi Minh wants to serve as a carpet for the Chinese. If we had let the Vietnamese people, at the end of World War II or even after the tragic experience with the French War, if we had let them either of those cases work out their own destiny there might have been some bloodshed, just as there was in our own early history and later during our Civil War, but in the long run they would have worked it out. Even if you had had a Communist government in South Viet Nam it would have been a government that was composed of Vietnamese, and I think we would have gotten along. But it seems to me that neither Rusk and then later the President, understood those realities of political developments in Southeast Asia. They always saw it as the beginning of a kind of Hitler-type worldwide expansionism that we had to nip, which we had failed to do at Munich thirty years before.

M: We are always, as you know as a historian, there is kind of a tradition of preventing the last war instead of the next war every time, it seems like.

GM: If I were going to single out the most significant bad advisors that misled President Johnson, I'd have to include Rusk in the list--and Bundy and Rostow would have to be in, too.

M: Walt, not Eugene--

GM: I'm talking about Walt Rostow and I'm talking about McGeorge Bundy. Now I think that McGeorge Bundy has seen the error of his ways very, very, late in the day. But Rusk and Rostow will probably go to their graves thinking they were fighting Hitler in Southeast Asia when, as a matter of fact, they were wasting American blood and treasure trying to save a political regime in Saigon that very few people

in Saigon and South Viet Nam are interested in saving.

M: Currently, you have been involved with investigations regarding hunger at home but you started that back in the Johnson years, too. Did you get through on that in spite of the fact that you were more or less closed out on Viet Nam? Could the President separate you as a Viet Nam critic on one side and a advocate of feeding hungry people on the other side?

GM: I guess I can't really answer that. I think that he did find it difficult to work closely with people, in any area, once they stood up vigorously to him on the issue of Viet Nam. That was a very sensitive issue with him. I suspect that I would have had difficulty getting administration support for any major legislative initiative that I undertook. I don't complain about that. I think, understanding a little about human relationships and political motives and so on, that it's natural that the President would prefer to work through his friends rather than those that were taking him on. So I don't do a lot of complaining about the political reprisals. In fact I'm somewhat surprised that they weren't more severe than they were.

M: Of course, your interest being South Dakota and on the Agricultural Committee--that's been perhaps you're chief activity, committee activity at least--What kind of record did President Johnson make in agriculture, if you can separate it from the Viet Nam record here?

GM: It was a moderately good record. It was not his strongest suit. It wasn't as impressive as were the accomplishments in the field of education or conservation or health. In those areas the record of the Johnson Administration I think is very good in spite of the war. On agriculture they just about held their own. They moved

along on about the same level as the Kennedy Administration, and in neither case do we really have a sensational record.

M: Mr. Johnson is, of course, pictured as the man from the Pedernales agricultural background and all, but of course he lived in Washington for thirty years. Do you think he was really as interested in agriculture as he sometimes was pictured as being?

GM: No, I don't think he had--of course, John Kennedy was just plainly bored by it and would readily have admitted that if he were in this room in a candid interview of this kind. I don't know whether President Johnson would ever admit that he was bored by it because I think personally he was fascinated with life on the ranch and on the farm and he did have an agricultural background. But, I think, his interests as a politician, moving on the national scene, were pretty well centered on the urban issues and on the questions of foreign policy. I have a feeling that Johnson would like to be remembered not as the man who fought for the farmer or the small town but the man who fought for education and for conservation and for health care and for ending poverty in this country, or at least reducing it. I think he was also very proud of his record on civil rights and the fact that he was able to break free from the traditional attitudes of southerners. I don't think he either took very much pride or any great interest in the agricultural issue. I may be unfair to him, but that's my reading of it.

M: Does that rub off on the Department then, of necessity?

GM: I have always felt that Orville Freeman's real interests were not in agriculture, that perhaps his choice of Secretary of Agriculture was not a very wise one. I think, that within the limits of

administrations that weren't primarily oriented around agriculture, and recognizing the fact that this is basically an urban country and becoming more and more of an urban country, that Freeman did pretty well. But the fact that he came out of Minnesota was not as significant a factor as President Kennedy thought at the time he appointed him, because basically Orville Freeman came out of Minneapolis not out of Minnesota--

M: That is hardly rural.

GM: That's right. He was mayor of a big city, deeply absorbed in the municipal and urban problems with a great interest in the field of national defense, national security, international trade, foreign policy. I think his interest in agriculture was one that he was able to develop only by intense personal discipline, the fact that he had a first-class mind and was willing to turn it to the questions of agriculture. But I don't think his heart was really there.

M: What about other committee areas in which you have worked? You are on the Interior Insular Committee, Chairman of the sub-committee Indian Affairs. Do you ever get involved either with Mr. Johnson or with his White House people closely on any of the business of that group?

GM: Not really. I worked very closely with the Administration on the Wheat-Cotton Bill which we were able to pass in 1964. The President wrote a nice forward to my book, War Against Want, where he gave me major credit for just steering that bill through the Senate. I did work with the White House aides and with the Department of Agriculture very closely, and I think that that was one of the great victories for the Johnson Administration in the agricultural field.

But I have only come to these committee chairmanships in the last year. I took over the Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs in the fall of 1968. We really didn't get underway until after President Johnson had left the White House. The same is true with this Commission on Party Reform. That's really just getting underway nicely in 1969. And we haven't really rolled on the Indian Affairs Sub-Committee. I've deferred to Senator Edward Kennedy, who has a special sub-committee on Indian education and they're trying to complete their work in the next few months. Then we'll begin rolling on Indian--So I haven't had close committee relationships with the administration so far.

M: You also teamed up in '68 with Senator Church on another issue, when you called for excess profit tax rather than a surcharge. Did the White House or the Treasury Department--or the White House through the Treasury Department--respond to that initiative that you all tried to undertake?

GM: I think what they did was to make sure that they had enough articulate voices raised in opposition to it to kill it. I think they were afraid of that proposal because it is an attractive one. But they never contacted me personally on it. My guess is that they were talking privately with Senator Dirkson and John Williams and Russell Long and some of the others, but I can't prove that.

M: There is a recent book, the last several months, out called The America Melodrama by three British jounalists, which purports to be a fairly detailed account of the Dump-Johnson movement that eventuated finally in the McCarthy candidacy and the Kennedy candidacy and your own candidacy. Have you had a chance to read that?

GM: I haven't. I've seen references to it, but I haven't had a chance to really look at it.

M: These people did obviously quite a good investigative reporting job, and they have a considerable amount to say about you, of course. Did that movement begin as early as late-summer, early-fall in 1967?

GM: Yes. I can attest to that. To my knowledge a number of dissonant Democrats came to me during the summer and the fall of 1967 and pled with me to become a candidate. I asked them to go see Bob Kennedy. They said they had already been there and he grappled with us and turned it down--which didn't surprise me because I had been talking to Bob Kennedy as early as 1966 about running for President. I thought he should do it. I felt that it was going to be difficult to turn the President around on Viet Nam and that Bob Kennedy was the only person who had the national stature, the name, the money and the organizational power to do it.

But when he turned them down [Allard] Lowenstein and others came to me on several different occasions with a fervent plea that I run. I don't think they thought I could get the nomination but I think they felt that if I would enter certain selected primaries, including New Hampshire, that I might get a significant bloc of votes --enough to give the Administration pause--and they might turn around on the Viet Nam issue. I asked Lowenstein to consider the fact that, while he was probably right in reporting a ground swell around the country against the Viet Nam policy, that I was running for reelection in the Senate and that it might cost me my seat in the Senate--which even from the standpoint of those who were concerned about Viet Nam would be a net loss.

So he said, "Would you mind if I go to South Dakota and do a little looking around and see what the people think about this possibility."

And I said, "No."

So he went out and spent a few days and came back and reported that he had to admit that it would be dangerous and risky for me to do it. But he hoped I would do it anyway. There were others who talked along the same line.

So I could see that there were going to be an endless series of delegations coming to talk to me--the American Friends and church groups and professors and clergy and businessmen and others, that there was beginning of an organized effort to talk me into running. Very frankly, I felt that none of us had a chance of winning the nomination but I thought the effort was worthwhile. So I suggested they pick a Senator who was not up for election. Just off the top of my head I said, "How about Metcalf, for example, or Gene McCarthy." So they went and talked to Metcalf, and he told them he wouldn't even consider.

M: But that is the beginning of the McCarthy effort?

GM: Yeah. I can tell you that that article in Harper's Magazine about Lowenstein here about two or three months ago called "The Man who Dumped Lyndon Johnson" is a very accurate account.

M: It is?

GM: Yes.

M: That's the kind of thing that's useful on these things is confirming or denying public--

GM: I know for a fact that that's a very accurate piece.

M: Did you then get involved actively in the effort that finally did convince Senator Robert Kennedy to decide to run when he finally did announce?

GM: Yes. But what happened is that when this group went up to see McCarthy, he surprised both them and me by readily agreeing. Really, I was shocked--pleasantly so--when Gene came over to the Senate floor and said, "Well, I think I'm going to go. Thanks for sending those people up. I think I'm going to run." I don't mean to imply that others hadn't talked to him.

M: This was when, in October, November '67?

GM: Yes, in the fall of '67. I said, "Well, when do you think you will make your announcement."

He said, "Well I think maybe in a month or six weeks. But I'm going to go."

So in a few days later I was talking to Arthur Schlesinger and I told him that I thought Gene was going to go. Within hours Bob Kennedy was on the phone in great distress, great anxiety, because I think he had wanted to keep his own options open through the fall and winter and watch the thing develop. Then if it looked like there was a chance to go. But there's no question but what Bob Kennedy was in great mental anguish about Gene's decision to go, and I'm not going to try to interpret why other than to say I think he saw that he would then not only have to challenge Johnson but challenge McCarthy to get the nomination. My own guess is that Bob had intended all along to run if it looked like the dissension and disaffection in the country would continue to mount.

M: And that's exactly then, by the New Hampshire primary, what did happen.

GM: He really wanted to announce before the New Hampshire primary results were in--oh ten days or two weeks before. I was one of those who tried to convince him that this would be unfair to McCarthy. I said, "If you announce, you are going to split the dissenting vote in New Hampshire and a lot of people are going to write in your name. Then the McCarthy people are going to very legimately say that you destroyed their day of glory." And Dick Goodwin talked to him in those terms. I called Dick Goodwin and told him that--

M: Can you tell me where Dick Goodwin is right now. We're having trouble finding his address.

GM: He's in Boston.

M: Is he there?

GM: Yeah. I think you could locate him through that Kennedy Center for Politics. I think they would know how to get in touch with him.

M: I was there last weekend and didn't even think to ask.

GM: He's not directly affiliated with the Center but they would know where he's at. Abe Chayes at Harvard could tell you how to get in touch with him. He's not at Wesleyan anymore.

M: No. We found that out--

GM: But do you know Abe Chayes?

M: No I don't know him.

GM: He's an international relations professor at Harvard. Well, or Fred Dutton--his law office here in town could give you Dick's--

M: Right. That's a good lead. Then after Senator Kennedy got in were you involved in his campaign fairly actively?

GM: Not really. He wanted me to endorse him, and I said, "Well, Bob I've taken the view so far because I'm up for reelection this time

that I shouldn't make any public endorsements but if you come to my state I'll introduce you in such a way that everybody will understand where my sympathies are," which I did. And he was very grateful for that.

M: Then after his assassination, what, all bets off, all your previous hesitations about getting into it yourself--

GM: No, they weren't all off. On the funeral train coming back from New York some of his aides talked to me about running in order to hold the Kennedy group together. But it seemed to me to be an awfully belated thing to do so I stalled it off as long as I could, and finally decided in early-August that I would go.

I did it for several reasons. First of all a lot of people told me that they thought Vice President Humphrey could not win in the fall; and they didn't think that McCarthy could win in Chicago and that what would happen is a number of the political realists, not wanting to go with a loser, would hold out against Humphrey and that the McCarthy people would never move to Humphrey and vice versa. Therefore you would get a deadlock. I always did think that was maybe a one in a hundred or one in fifty chance, but I felt that as one of the earliest critics on Viet Nam that if there was going to be a dark horse emerge at Chicago that maybe I would be a logical possibility. So that was one consideration, then the other was that I could see that the Kennedy bloc was not going to move to McCarthy.

M: Why?

GM: They were personally bitter about McCarthy's attitude towards Kennedy and the personal attacks. The California thing as well as the Oregon

election became pretty bitter.

M: Of course, that was both ways though. The Kennedy people were pretty rough too.

GM: That's right. It was rough on both sides and that left some scars. Then a lot of the Kennedy people always had reservations about the kind of a President McCarthy would make. Most Kennedy-type supporters take the view that the President ought to be a strong and dynamic, powerful individual; and I think they thought that McCarthy would be a rather passive president. He encouraged that view by saying he thought that we ought to have that kind of a president.

M: Did you get a response from the White House when you announced on August 10?

GM: No.

M: No view from there as to what--

GM: No, other than that they were sending the Secret Service over.

M: What about at the convention? Is the story that LBJ controlled it so strongly, so far as you know, an accurate one--the Committee on Platform, for example, before which you testified and various other convention machinery?

GM: I don't have any proof of that, but I think that the White House ran the whole show.

M: That would apply to writing the platform as well as the--

GM: Yeah. Yeah. I think they blocked the minority plank on Viet Nam which was the key fight at Chicago.

M: They had enough power to do that.

GM: Well, through Humphrey and through key members of the Platform Committee.

M: What about the final campaign? You were running for reelection. Did

the Administration get involved against you or in any way try to prevent your reelection?

GM: No, they did not. And I have a great personal affection for Hubert Humphrey. He was my neigbor in Chevy Chase for ten years, and he comes from my state, and he has been very helpful to me over the years. Although I felt that he was just dreadfully wrong on the Viet Nam issue I personally couldn't turn my back on him, and furthermore I preferred him to Nixon. So it was very easy for me to go up and endorse him in Chicago, as I did, and do what little I could--as a candidate for reelection myself--to support him. Hubert and I have maintained close relations from that time to this. I think the White House understood that. They may have even thought that as a dissenter endorsing Humphrey I might help stabilize some of the dissident elements in the party and prevent a complete rout of the McCarthy-Kennedy wing.

M: I don't want to cut you off, but are there other areas or topics along which you think you could add something to the record here?

GM: I don't think so. I think I have talked too much already. But it's really in this Viet Nam area where my significance lies as far as President Johnson's Administration is concerned.

M: Well, you have certainly put on the record a considerable amount of your views on that subject.

GM: Yeah. I do want to say this about President Johnson, that no President in my knowledge, at any time in American history, ever worked at the job any harder than he did. I don't think any President ever wanted to go down in history as a great President any more than Johnson did. He had an almost total mastery of the details of

legislative situations, the national issues, and the budget and what was going on within the government.

All of this simply underscores my own personal regret about what happened to him in Viet Nam because I think that involvement threw a cloud over everything he did from then on in. It made it very difficult for him to finance and forward his domestic program, which was a good program. It made it very hard for him to move toward an accommodation with the Communist world, Communist countries, and to do some of the things I think he wanted to do abroad. Most of all it destroyed what I think he coveted very much and that was the capacity to lead and to inspire liberal forces in this country. It shattered the coalition of liberals, and progressives.

M: Do you think that is a longterm effect?

GM: I think, maybe liberal and progressive Democrats behave better sometimes when they are out of power than when they're in. It may be that the Nixon Administration will afford the opportunities that the dissident Democrats need to begin restructuring a coalition of liberalism that will overcome some of the losses that took place during the shattering debate on Viet Nam in the Johnson period.

I don't know how long the split will persist in this party. It's going to be difficult to know what the young people will do. I think they are suspicious of both parties at this point--many of them. That is one of the reasons why this party reform effort is so important.

M: That's one more point. Has President Johnson ever indicated any position in that particular issue?

GM: Not to my knowledge.

M: And your committee that is working on it now has not yet, at least, consulted him.

GM: No, no, we have not.

M: Well, I sure thank you for your patience and time in the middle of--

GM: Well, I hope it's been helpful.

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By George McGovern

to the

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