

INTERVIEW IV

DATE: March 24, 1969

INTERVIEWEE: HARRY McPHERSON

INTERVIEWER: T. H. BAKER

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

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B: This is the continuation of the interview with Harry McPherson. Sir, since we last talked, there has been published in Newsweek on March 10, 1969, an article by Charles Roberts dealing with the events leading up to Mr. Johnson's March 31st [1968] speech on Viet Nam. And since its publication, it has created some stir as to exactly how accurate it is. Could you just take that story as you saw it and trace it?

M: I think the New York Times' version, which appeared a few days after Newsweek was published, is a better version, at least so far as I know. I saw Charles Roberts on the Friday before this piece was published for lunch. He had completed about ninety-five percent of that article through conversations with Secretary [of Defense Clark] Clifford and people who were around him in the Pentagon. He called me later that afternoon and said that my account did not square with theirs in a couple of particulars, and we had a mild debate about those particulars. He chose to run them essentially as he had gotten them from them.

The problem with Roberts' piece is one that I've thought about some since it appeared, and that is that in the effort to render a dramatic occasion--dramatic event--a writer almost per force makes circumstances dramatic. He makes it appear that there were serious clashes between personalities and views, [that] there must have been in order to produce a dramatic change in policy.

One of the things I learned in government, to my surprise, was that very frequently you can't tell when something is happening. You have a meeting; it's called for the purpose of developing a policy; you finish the meeting and you're really not sure whether the policy is any different from what it was when you walked in the room or not. And the only thing that gives you a sense of finality about the meeting is the assignment to some person to draft up the sense of the meeting. When that's done, you can usually get the sense that something has happened. But ten reasonable men in a room sound pretty much like each other by and large. And also they seemed--as I look back over my

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years in the White House--they seemed to come into a meeting pretty much tending toward a particular solution. And the question was how to get there with the least problem. That is, you didn't have a red team on one side of the room and a blue team on the other shouting opposing ideologies, points of view, or whatever.

And this was the case in the month of March 1968. Yet Roberts' account makes it appear as if Rusk was dragged, kicking and screaming, into a bombing limitation and was overpowered by numbers and that sort of thing.

One thing that was most painful to me was his account of how I had been, I think the term is, "systematically excluded" from discussions of the troop cutback, when in fact I had never been systematically included in such things. This was not my bag. I was the guy who came in, in this case, about March 21st and took part in, I believed, most of the discussions after that. But I was not in the critical meetings with Wheeler, Rusk, Clifford, Rostow, and the President at which the level of troop reinforcement was discussed, and in which the figure of two hundred and six thousand was steadily whittled down to about fifteen thousand. And that was the guts of the Viet Nam decision. That was more important than the decision on the bombing limitation.

B: So far as you know though, is Roberts' account substantially correct, that Clifford began to question, to doubt, and then become convinced that this was not the path?

M: Yes.

B: Is it also correct that Clifford had, at the risk of using dramatic terminology, "allies" within the Defense Department?

M: Oh, yes. The Defense Department has a bureau called the Bureau of International Security Affairs--it's more or less the state department of the Defense Department, it's the crowd that thinks about military assistance programs and about our general posture abroad. It was formerly led by Bill Bundy, who went on over to State from there, by John MacNaughton who became Secretary of Navy and was killed last year, and then by Paul Warnke, a lawyer formerly with Covington and Burling here. A number of people who had been there during the earlier regimes were still there. They had had doubts about Viet Nam for a long time. Paul Warnke developed his own doubts once he got there. So when Clifford arrived, they were ready to go and ready to provide him, in effect, with a turn-around strategy. I suspect that an awful lot of it amounted to questions for him to ask the

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Joint Chiefs. My understanding of it is that the critical point came after several weeks of briefing when Clifford put the question to Wheeler and other members of the Joint Chiefs who were describing what we could do with a larger force in South Viet Nam, whether this would win the war. And the man answered in rather conventional form that we could establish much greater security, we could pacify a great many more villages and so on and Clifford said, "But can it win the war?" And the answer was, "No." And Clifford said, "What would win the war?" And the officer said "To win the war in the classic sense of win would require an invasion of North Viet Nam or Laos or Cambodia or all three, to cut off the enemy's supplies."

And Clifford said, "Well, since our political inhibitions are such that we are not going to do that,"--and by that he meant the inhibitions that the presence of China essentially imposed upon us and with the record of Korea still in mind about the consequences of an invasion of a neighboring and client country--"since we're not likely to do that, how are we going to win the war?"

And the answer was pretty clear that we weren't; that we would have a long period of stalemate in which we would hope that we could build up the government of South Viet Nam, et cetera.

But that really made Clifford quite skeptical of the value of large reinforcements. I believe he had been shaken earlier in his feelings about Viet Nam when he and General Maxwell Taylor went out as the President's emissaries in either the summer or early fall of 1967 to visit what's called in the State Department the TCC's--the troop contributing countries, our allies in the war--to ask them for more troops and for a larger commitment of resources for the war. It was explained to them very clearly that the American people were getting restive, that if this was going to be a war to save Asia from Communism and from the threat of China that clearly they would want to put up more of a commitment. And the answer was that there were just political problems all over the place.

Clifford came back and he and Taylor manfully went through the paces of saying that everybody understood that it was vital to their security and that Asia was drawing together and so on, but in fact their answers were pretty disappointing. So Clifford began to wonder then whether this was indeed what we said it was, which was a vital American stand to give the countries of Asia time and support in strengthening themselves against aggression.

B: The Tet Offensive is generally considered to be some sort of

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turning point in all of this. Is that a correct view?

M: Yes. And here there were competing views and opposing phenomena all over the place. Saigon was telling us, that is our embassy in Saigon, and Mac-V, the military operation in Saigon, was telling us that we had really beat the hell out of the enemy; that they had taken tremendous casualties. And they had. They lost an enormous number of people including some of their best people. They surfaced a lot of assets, to use a military phrase. A lot of people who were in the infrastructure in South Viet Nam and were living apparently normal lives while being V.C. agents came out into the open and were either killed, captured, or at least identified and chased out of their villages. They lost a lot; they did not achieve what they expected to achieve or hoped to achieve at the outset. The South Vietnamese did get a momentary shot in the arm; they did work harder; when it was over they got together more effectively. A number of citizens' efforts were begun for the first time. All of this was a plus.

The negative was tremendous and was underplayed by Saigon. The negative was essentially here in this country. It was the feeling on the part of vast numbers of Americans that, particularly after Westmoreland and Bunker had come back in the fall of the year before and said that things were really just looking good--and I believe they used the expression "light at the end of a tunnel"--that after all that and after a tremendous commitment for three years--air power, five hundred and fifty thousand men and all the rest of it--that this crowd was still able to mount a major offensive that smashed into all kinds of cities and secure hamlets and such things, that they were able to hold Hue for a long time while the Marines encircled them, that they were able to get into Saigon and terrorize the population. That and the awful picture which you may remember of General Loan, the national police chief, executing a V.C. in the street.

The terrible quality of the war in Viet Nam came home to people. It appeared that these guys didn't want to quit at all and were never going to quit; that our crowd was as caught off guard as ever.

The origin of the speech was really back in the first week of February. I think the first draft I wrote of it was within the first two weeks of February. It was written after a conversation with the President in which Walt Rostow and I and someone else said that the President ought to speak, ought to be candid about the costs of the Tet Offensive, about what happened at the Tet Offensive, and call for a renewed national effort and so on.

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This was really the most dismaying month I ever remember in the White House--this month of February. I went out several times to the CIA and talked with George Carver, who is the head of Viet Nam Intelligence Operations, the analysis man in the CIA--and then I would come back and talk to Rostow. Walt has a kind of rugby player's view of a lot of international events. It's sort of a "pull up your socks--let's get going, let's put our shoulders to the wheel, let's bow our necks and it's going to be okay" point of view. It is encouraging when you're down in the dumps and when you can't see any way out to have an obviously intelligent man be optimistic. But when you feel that he is utterly neglecting Good Friday and only talking about Easter, it's even more dismaying than the facts themselves. You feel, for God's sake, that somebody is not taking it seriously enough. That he's not aware of the degree of shake and quiver in the situation, and that it's really not a rugby game--it's a very dense game in which there are hardly any rules, but certainly one of the phenomena is the fact that the crowd is murmuring its discontent.

B: What was the result of the talks with the CIA man?

M: That was a two-way--They were very candid about it. They're essentially affirmative and optimistic. They think that the thing is do-able, that it is possible to, if not defeat the enemy, at least strengthen the South Vietnamese government and ultimately so that they will be able to take care of their own affairs, to take care of the insurrection. And they studiously avoid any comments on the way this country feels about the war in Viet Nam. When they say "another five months and we'll have such and such," and you say, "Do you think the American people can wait five months?" before we do whatever it is, they disclaim any knowledge of what the American people will do or how they'll think.

It was about, I guess, in the last part of February that I began to talk to Clifford on occasion and with a sense of astonishment, discovered that he had some real doubts about matters in Viet Nam and our policy. I had some colossal ones. It's tough to explain. Maybe it was even tough to understand at the time what the hell I was doing in all of this. I had essentially negative views about Viet Nam. I read Bob Shaplen's book a couple of years ago and I read a book by a man named Lucien Bodard called The Quicksand War, written about the French experience between 1945 and 1950. And I talked to a number of guys who had been in the civilian side of things in Viet Nam and I had spent two weeks out there and had gotten a sense of this: how dense an affair it was; how many strands were running through it; and how unsusceptible it was to the ordinary

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treatment of major power commitment, military and political and economic. And so I was a "dove," I suppose in that very unsatisfactory classification. I felt that if I behaved like a dove that I would have no hope ever of taking part in either decisions or even of having such an effect as a speechwriter can have--that I would be aced out of the whole Viet Nam thing.

So I spent my time, as I look back over my memos to the President and my conversations about it, essentially dealing with P.R. problems of Viet Nam. I would write long memos expressing my own views and saying this is what I have heard those opposed to the war say. I remember writing one four-page memorandum against the bombing of North Viet Nam, and I thought it was a damned conclusive memorandum. I started to send it in and realized that it would very likely mean the end of my participation in matters with Viet Nam, so I appended a paragraph saying, "This is the way doves feel about the bombing," or something, without saying whether I felt that way or not. But it was terrible--I'm describing now a political, psychological phenomenon. It's hard to justify. Maybe the thing to do is to quit. But I didn't feel that sure that I was right. And as Bill Moyers and I once decided when we had had an argument with Johnson which we were on one side and he another, and needless to say he prevailed and I went out bitching about it. Moyers said, "Well, I complained about them too, but I found that in ninety-five percent of the cases when I was opposed to him, he turns out right."

And that's true. Most of the time Lyndon Johnson's skill and sagacity and long-range capacity to anticipate exceeded that of anybody else in the room. And he would ultimately be proved to be right. And therefore I had the feeling, while I was growing increasingly disturbed about the war, that he would probably be found ultimately to be right. It made you gasp to think that he might be wrong. So I had a big commitment in his being right. I had stayed there; others had left, perhaps in part because of Viet Nam though they always disclaimed that. I never heard anybody say he was leaving because of Viet Nam. But it was a part in Moyers and Goodwin and others getting out.

And I had stayed. And across the hall from me was John Roche, an extremely intelligent bird, one of the most intelligent and perceptive political thinkers I know of. And he was for the commitment. And he believed it was right. So there was an argument at any rate that they were right in fact. And Dean Rusk is a highly intelligent man. He's not a simpleton as Arthur Schlesinger and others have done their best to make him appear. He has a good mind and a sophisticated mind. Mac Bundy had been for the war and

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was still for the war at this time, and still for the bombing policy at this time. Dean Acheson the same. So there was an argument, at least, that they were right.

I thought that Clifford, because I had heard him in 1967 and 1966 on a couple of occasions, was as strong as any man could be for the war, for the policy we were following.

When I heard that this was not so in late February when we began to talk--and he would say, "Old boy, I want a long talk with you, because you're in a position to help me a lot." I was excited by the prospect that there was a guy who had come in essentially with the policy, with a damned good mind, a good lawyer's mind that makes excellent distinctions between things, and he was beginning to have some real doubts.

B: You're saying, of course, that President Johnson just did not like to hear opposition to his war policy. I assume that's what you meant by saying that you couldn't come out and be a dove. If that's so, what was his reaction to Clifford's doubting?

M: Terrible. I started to say, "Oh, no the president didn't mind hearing--" And he did mind it--of course he did. I would have minded it. When you've spent as much time laboring with this thing as he had, when so much that was in you was invested in this, when it had seemed the only decision to make, and when the judgment of history on his Administration was riding on this as it clearly was, no matter what else he did--. It was riding on this, on whether it had been right to escalate in Viet Nam. Having a young English-major lawyer who was not really involved in the early decisions and who was not involved in the later ones, as far as the actual troop commitments et cetera, sitting back sniping from the sidelines is an uncomfortable and an unwanted thing. As I say, I would have been the same way. You get the feeling that only we know what's going on, therefore to hell with these guys. We means Rusk, Wheeler, Rostow, McNamara, Clifford, et cetera. We talk about whether we're going to hit that target or that target. We do the operational details and so on.

The idea of opening this yawning issue, this chasm under your feet, is a horrible thing. Imagine! Christ, you put five hundred and fifty thousand Americans out there; you've lost twenty-five thousand of them dead! What if it's wrong? What if we've made an error? All the conventional wisdom at the time was that we were right. And looking back on it, maybe it's one of those weird situations where in 1965 probably if you had thrown every conceivable calculation into a computer, it would have come out saying "go." The real question is as to whether you would have

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been able to get a domestic legislative program--a liberal program--through if you had let South Viet Nam go down the drain.

Harry Truman found out what it was like to be soft on Communists and to try to push a domestic legislative program of a liberal stripe through the Congress. Instinctive violent reaction: soft on Communists, social welfare legislation, socialist, et cetera! That was an old experience of Johnson's.

Maybe I said in an earlier tape one time when there was a bill up to repeal the loyalty oath in the National Defense Education Act back in 1958 [or] 1959. Jack Kennedy had reported the bill out of a labor committee. All the universities were hot for it to repeal it. And many of them were threatening to have nothing further to do with the NDEA as long as that loyalty oath was in there. I kept putting it on the schedule to be taken up in the Senate, and he kept knocking it off. One day I asked him why, and he said, "I'm not going to get the Democratic Party into a debate, 'Resolve that the Communist Party is good for the United States with the Democrats in the affirmative.'" Same thing with Viet Nam. "I'm not going to be the Democratic President pushing liberal social legislation who's letting go of a part of Southeast Asia that my predecessor John Kennedy and his predecessor Dwight Eisenhower said was critical to the free world."

That's murder. Anyway, there was everything--The investment was tremendous. And now you get slugged. You get the Tet offensive and all the doves and the doubters who are, as you look out at the world, "Are you with me, are we going to stand against this latest aggression, or are we not?" And the "not" crowd included the [Edwin] Reischauers and the--some of the others who had doubts about our policy ultimately, although with Reischauer I was never very clear what he would have done. But it included intellectuals and men of stature and ran all the way over to people who were burning draft cards. And had I been, or had any of the rest of us been, persistent advocates of change, we would have been lumped in that same crowd.

B: Then how did it happen? If I understand correctly, after the Tet Offensive you began drafting a speech which presumably was harsh or hawkish.

M: This was an argument with Roberts. It was not a hawkish speech; it was not a bristlingly belligerent speech. The Times is not much better about it. It was a speech that you could have written yourself. You would have known exactly what to say, because the President had been saying it for

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the last three years. "We shall not be moved; we shall not give up; we shall not be defeated by this latest outbreak of aggression and driven out of South Viet Nam. We shall put in the men who are necessary to stem the tide of this aggression. We have no desire whatever to take a foot of North Viet Nam, nor to change their government. And we want to settle this thing in the worst possible way at the peace table." Hardly a hawkish speech!

I think it's because of the tremendous density of comment that surrounds us today that we feel we have to escalate every descriptive word into its extreme.

B: One of the problems is we just have these two words, "hawk" and "dove," which are inadequate. They themselves set up a kind of dichotomy.

M: That's right. If you want to read a hawkish speech, read any speech that Franklin Roosevelt gave during World War II. Good God! You know, the comparison--Lyndon Johnson is like an appeaser compared to him. Like a fifth column Communist. Because Roosevelt was saying, "We're going to bomb the Jap out of his homeland, Harrumph!" and all that.

With these speeches, God, they sounded more like Lyndon Johnson turning the Mekong into another Pedernales. That's all we wanted to do, we wanted to love these little brown brothers that we were killing! And as a consequence, it was like a semi-erection for the American people; it was completely unsatisfactory. It was neither peace nor war! It was a little bit of each, and it was just a very unhappy thing for a leader to have to be restricted to.

B: At any rate, in there somewhere the speech did change to what came out on March 31st.

M: I guess I wrote about six drafts, seven drafts. We hadn't selected March 31st until fairly late, but we were getting down to a point where it was pretty clear we knew he had to make a speech because we were going to have to require something of the country, namely call up of reserves if we were going to have a large number of troops. There was an economic aspect to it. The tax bill was stuck. Some word from the Hill was that unless we had a major call-up of reserves and escalated our commitment in Viet Nam with its attendant costs, that we would not be able to get a tax bill through. That is, Congress would not pass a tax bill merely because things were going along as they were then; you had to have additional costs which were associated with the war, then Congress would be impelled to raise taxes. This was not the major consideration about the speech, but it was a part of it.

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I guess around the 15th, 16th to the 20th of March, final debates were going on about the level of troop strength. I was not a party to them. I would hear from Clifford and others what had gone on, and I was fairly conscious of the way it was treading. I refined the draft, would send it out to Rusk-Rostow, Bill Bundy, and I believe to Clifford although Clifford says that he didn't see one until slightly later.

Then we had a luncheon meeting on the 22nd, Friday the 22nd of March, in the White House with the President. Rusk, Clifford, Rostow, Wheeler, Bundy, George Christian, myself, maybe someone else. There was some talk about the troops, but not much. There was more talk about a bombing limitation. We went around the table and what kind of limitation we could offer. Rusk ended the meeting by saying that a limitation to the twentieth parallel was the best we could offer, because the Communists had not met our demands as expressed in the San Antonio formula; there was nothing that would cause us to believe that they would not abuse a total bombing cessation. And he thought that a limitation to the twentieth parallel would be unsuccessful, because we would still be bombing part of North Viet Nam. And they said, "you have got to stop bombing all North Viet Nam before we'll talk."

So we seemed to be in a dilemma. We couldn't offer it because it wouldn't be accepted, and we couldn't stop it altogether because we had to protect our troops. That was the end of the meeting on Friday the 22nd.

On Saturday, as I was going to lunch, I just decided to write a memorandum--an idea about a bombing limitation in it. This appears in both this [Newsweek] story and the Times story. I had misgivings about seeing it [in print], because I know that there must have been lots of other conversations with perhaps similar suggestions. But I managed to blurt out to both these people that I had done this, so I'll put it on the oral history.

I recommended that we would stop the bombing at the twentieth parallel, and let's talk. They would probably come back and say, "that's not good enough. You're still bombing North Viet Nam. You'll have to stop it altogether."

B: They?

M: "They" being the North Vietnamese. We would come back and say, "We will stop it altogether if you can give us some assurance that you will not violate the DMZ, that is, use the DMZ as a channel for launching new attacks with fresh

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troops on our people in I Corps. And that you won't attack Saigon and the major cities."

They would probably come back and say, "You've got to stop the bombing unconditionally. We're not going to bind ourselves with these conditions."

We would say, "We can't do that, because we've got to protect our people, and air strikes against your resupplies is the only way we can do that. Otherwise our people are exposed in I Corps."

And this was, you remember, during the Khe Sahn period in which our guys were getting the hell beat out of them up there, and we were delivering a tremendous amount of tonnage on the V.C. and the North Vietnamese.

The conclusion of the memorandum said "If it doesn't work, if we don't get talks, at least we will be in a better posture toward the world; we will have offered something that is quite reasonable and will leave the offer open and say that anytime you communicate to us that you will not abuse the DMZ or whatever, we will stop the bombing altogether, or we'd be willing to talk now, having stopped it at the twentieth."

That was the last I heard of that memorandum except that the President sent up for it--a copy of it--later on that afternoon.

The next Wednesday or Thursday--accounts differ and I don't know which it was; we've gone around the horn several times trying to figure out which it was--we had this meeting at the State Department, which was the best meeting I ever went to. There were five people there: Rusk, Rostow, Bill Bundy, Clifford and myself. And Clifford spoke for about an hour and really poured out his feelings about the war. He brought to those feelings something that no one else could match among either the proponents or the opponents of the present policy, and that was an intimate relationship with a great many members of the American business and legal establishment. And he said, "These guys who have been with us and who have sustained us so far as we are sustained are no longer with us."

B: Was this the result of a formal meeting as is mentioned in the Roberts' article?

M: You mean the Rusk meeting?

B: No. The Roberts' article--

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M: Oh, you're talking about the twelve wise men.

B: "On March 25--met secretly at the State Department. They included such elder statesmen as--Acheson,--Dillon--Murphy--Dean--". [Quoting Newsweek article]

M: This was not as a result of talking to them directly, but it was the result of a lot of conversations by telephone and otherwise that Clifford had had around the country. I'm sure that he talked to some members of the wise men group.

He spoke with real passion and real concern. He said, "This Speech as it is presently written, is wrong. The speech is more of the same. The American people are fed up with more of the same, and they're not going to--. Because more of the same means no win, and only a continual long drag on American resources."

He spoke some about the financial problem that we had, the fiscal problem. But a great deal more about just public support for the continuation of this kind of policy. We had to have a different kind of speech. And he introduced for the first time clearly, to my recollection, the notion of winching down the war; that is, we'd offer to take a step or take it, and they'd offer to take a stop and take it; and we'd take another one and so on, until the war was finally reduced to reasonable size. Where maybe the V.C. fight the South Vietnamese until kingdom come, but we and the North Vietnamese are out of the thing. This was the ultimate goal; this was what you would shoot for. And you'd try to give that impression to the world that we are not going to put another two hundred thousand men in there and then finally on up to a million and the sky's the limit; we are turning around. We are going to start moving the level of participation down, and we'll do it each time the North Vietnamese show some interest in doing the same. We're not going to leave these guys alone and at the mercy of the North Vietnamese, that is, our friends in South Viet Nam, but that we're not at the same time going to be a bottomless pit of resources for this war.

I expressed my concern that the war had become Lyndon Johnson's war, and that a lot of people--very intelligent, basically sympathetic people--were beginning to feel that nothing could shake the President; that he had so much of his own place in history tied up in this war that he would continue to escalate it and continue to increase America's commitment no matter what the facts were, no matter what the indications were. And that this was terrible and that people thought the thing was out of hand, because we couldn't listen to the facts, couldn't listen to events.

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Bill Bundy, I recall, was not unsympathetic with this view. He was concerned about its impact on the troop contributing countries and on South Viet Nam. This was his brief. He was supposed to look after them; he was concerned that in our haste to establish a position that more nearly approximated what the people were thinking that we would let our very real efforts and, to some degree, success in South Viet Nam over the past year when there had been elections and there was an upper and a lower House, and there was body of law that was growing in some growing strength. That all that would go down the drain if we indicated that we're getting the hell out. So we had to be skillful about it.

When he was talking about the winching down of it, I mentioned this memorandum that I had written. And Rusk said, "Oh, yes, that went to Bunker Saturday night," and he said something about, "They think they can live with that," [with] making that kind of an offer.

We had lunch and--

B: Did Rostow and Rusk have a reaction to Clifford's argument?

M: Not a negative one. They raised questions, but they did not speak strongly against it. And I don't know whether this is because they had arrived at something like the same conclusions--I don't believe that's so, because later there were many conflicts with Clifford, particularly between Rostow and Clifford--or whether it's that very often they did not express a view.

Dean Rusk is a curious man and perhaps reserves his deepest views for the man he serves and for no other company, but on many occasions, at many meetings when the meeting called out for Rusk to make a statement of his position, he passed.

And Rostow generally passed. Perhaps did not see his role as an exponent of policy.

Mac Bundy, I believe, had been very active and very outspoken. I don't mean that he was saying, "Take my policy or none," but he would lay out policies and describe the merits and demerits of each one, and push one subtly. You could always tell where he stood even if it wasn't a trumpet call. It might be an oboe note, but you knew where it was.

B: You said then you went out to lunch after the expression of opinions?

M: We had lunch in Rusk's office, and Clifford said, "I think Harry ought to go back and write a new draft based on what

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we have agreed to here, a new kind of speech."

I got back to the office and he called me and we talked for about an hour about what ought to be in it. And I wrote it that afternoon and evening and sent it in to the President with a note saying, "This is what your advisers think you ought to say." I called it alternate draft number one. We were up to draft number seven on the first one.

The next morning he called back and said, "I don't like what you say in page three there," and he was talking about page three of the alternate draft.

I'll tell you about--You know, that was very exciting, to know that now the President was with us and we were going to move that way. But I have to say that in a sense--I don't know whether it was the dog wagging the tail or the tail wagging the dog. I don't know whether, at this point, he was really deeply focused on the policy difference because he had decided to use this speech as a vehicle for getting out of the election. That may have been the tail that was wagging this big dog that was in front. And he may have been more concerned with that than with the specific language that was chosen for the March 31st speech.

B: I was getting ready to ask you what was, anyway, an almost unanswerable question, because pretty clearly Lyndon Johnson had to make the final decision on this. It's not just a matter of being the President shoved and pushed around by his advisers.

M: No. You know, I think by this time he had pretty much yielded to the Clifford view, the new Clifford view. For a long time they were struggling in him, I think. On the one hand he wanted, by God, to stand up and fight these guys out there and to fight those here who didn't want to fight those out there on the other, he was getting depressed by the possibility of making it in Viet Nam and of keeping the country with him long enough to make it. His decision about the getting out had been maturing, as we know, for a long time.

B: At the risk of being overly dramatic about it again, was it clear at the time that the March 31st speech made a new direction of change in the momentum, a beginning of the winching down policy?

M: Oh, yes, sure.

B: That is, did you go through any of this same kind of travail for, say, the October 31st speech?

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M: Yes, indeed. That was a wild scene too.

B: Let's take up that one. I don't want to push you ahead. Is there more that should be added to the March 31st speech?

M: I guess we talked about the last part of it, about [Johnson's] getting out before--History had a terrible way with Lyndon Johnson. On the first of April there was general acclaim in the press, news media. The President had gotten out of the race, a rare act of self-restraint and courage and this proud man said he would not run again and so on. Also, there was hope that maybe the North Vietnamese would respond.

Incidentally, there was one other thing that was of historical interest. On the Saturday in which we were working on the speech with the President, we had a long afternoon and evening in which we went over every word of the speech. We had about a six-hour grueling session.

Nick Katzenbach had argued that we should not use the twentieth parallel, but instead should say that we would limit the bombing to that area north of the DMZ in which the enemy might be gathering his forces to strike our people. It was a functional description. It made a lot of sense. If Castro were bombing all the United States and also offering to talk to us, and if he said, "All right, I'm going to stop bombing everything except the state of Florida," we'd say, "To hell with you. You've got to stop bombing Florida."

But if he said, "I'm going to stop bombing everything except the area where you are preparing an invasion of Cuba, and now let's talk," we might have had the fact left to talk. That was the theory, and a good one, I think.

So we changed it that Saturday and took out the twentieth parallel and put in the language that appears in the speech.

The next afternoon, Sunday afternoon before the speech was delivered, I was working on some minor revisions at the very end. The President was over in the Mansion working with Horace Busby on the last part, the withdrawal statement. And it occurred to me that we might get into some trouble here, because we might have some bombing missions laid on for some place up near the twentieth parallel. And that our language suggested that it was going to be just a few miles north of the DMZ. So I called Clark--called Clifford--and said I thought it would be a good idea if he would send out a message to CINCPAC in Hawaii to restrict the next day's bombing missions and those

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to follow a few days after that to the area just north of the DMZ, so that it would be clear what we were doing. And he said, "Oh, do you think that's necessary?"

And I said "We just might get in a tight about it."

And he said, "Well, I'm afraid it's too late, because the missions have already gone out and it takes something like twenty-four hours to unhook a mission." It's a much longer time, because there are time differentials, they have to go through CINCPAC, and then it goes out to the carrier, and it just takes time, longer than one would think. It kind of gives you the spooks when you think about the ABM [anti-ballistic missile] and that sort of thing, because it takes so much time to communicate.

Anyway, I said, "Okay." The hell--You know, we were four hours away from the speech and "let's let it go."

The next afternoon the word came we had bombed Vinh or Tien Hoa--I forget which it was--way the hell up right near the twentieth parallel. A very good military target. It was a truck distribution point. Trucks came in there and got sent down either through the Mu Gia Pass or straight on down the panhandle of North Viet Nam. But it was sure as hell a long way from the DMZ.

The next day Fulbright made a violent speech on the Senate floor, really an asinine speech, in effect saying, "Well, if I were a North Vietnamese, I wouldn't go to the conference table with the Americans, because they said it was going to be just north of the DMZ and look where they bombed." Terrible speech! I mean, he couldn't have given the other side a better reason for not talking if they were inclined to talk. Here, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee said, "I wouldn't talk if I were you, because we haven't played it straight with you."

Well, of course, within twenty-four hours after that, they said they would talk. And they would send us some emissaries some place in the world.

Then we started that business of where. And the President was damned if he was going to talk at Phnom Penh in Cambodia, damned if he was going to talk in Warsaw.

B: In a sense at that time he was trapped in some of his previous rhetoric, some of his exuberance you mentioned on a earlier tape.

M: Absolutely, absolutely. He was and we couldn't get off that petard. Boy, we were there. He was right in the sense of

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not wanting to talk in Warsaw. We have enough experience with negotiating with these guys to know that it's just a madhouse, that they do everything they can to warp the atmosphere, the environment, including keeping American reporters out of Warsaw. The Poles might very well keep Jewish reporters out of Warsaw. This was at a time when a kind of semi-pogrom in high places in the universities was going on in Poland.

But still, you're right. We were stuck.

Then Paris started getting talked about. And there was a hangup on that. I remember there was--Acheson's seventy-fifth birthday party over at his daughter-in-law's. David Acheson, Pat Acheson. And Clifford came. He said, "Old boy, we've done right well so far." He said, "We've got another one to do now."

So we went off into a corner and talked for an hour about Paris. I went back to the White House about nine o'clock, and I wrote a memo. No--the next morning. I dictated it when I got up, 7:30, saying, I really think we ought to not hang up on this thing. The people now see a breakthrough toward talks. We mustn't be intransigent.

And I told my secretary to take it in to have it sent over to the Mansion. I got called [by the President] at 8:30. "Who've you been talking to?"

"What do you mean?"

"This memorandum about meeting in Paris," he said. "Somebody has been up to you, somebody has been pushing you."

"No, I was just thinking about that. It seems reasonable to me."

Well, we argued and argued and I, for the first time I think since I'd been working for him, I started shouting. I said, "Goddamn it, I'm trying to help you! I'm trying to get you out of a fix! If you can't listen to me, go listen to somebody else! I'll take my advice somewhere else!"

It was wild. My wife came downstairs and thought I was talking to the plumber. We were sore about the plumber, because he hadn't been around to fix the washing machine. And I was yelling! I hung up, just amazed. Here was old Harry McPherson bellowing at the President!

I thought, "Oh, God, I'd better call Clifford and warn him, because he's probably sending a memo himself, and it's

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probably a whole lot like mine." So I called him and I said:

"I'm warning you, because the President may call you."

He said, "What time did he call?"

And I said, "He called at 8:30, I guess it was."

"Well, I talked to him from 7:45 till 8:29."

B: What was Mr. Johnson's objection to Paris?

M: DeGaulle. Hell, you know, the atmosphere in Paris was heavily pro-V.C. all those awful, psychological hangups that the French have about Indo-China and about us as the power out there now replacing them and all that is terrible.

B: But these memoranda must have had their effects?

M: Oh, he was always going to do it. This is Lyndon Johnson. Lyndon Johnson--I was talking to a guy in Harvard the other day. He worked for him for a number of years, and he was talking about some event in which he said Johnson was doing his typical thing of taking an absurd position and making you drag him back from it. This is just par for the course.

You know, Paris obviously--hell, there was no way to say no to Paris. That's a free world capital; it has got all the communications you need, So what if DeGaulle--DeGaulle can't do anything about it, because--I mean he can be mischievous if he chooses to be, or have his people leak stories and things like that, but we're a big country. We can take that, and we've got to go ahead and talk there.

So he was probably playing for time, hoping that a better place would open up, and also just expressing his outrage that he had to go over and sit in Charles DeGaulle's capital. He had been very good toward DeGaulle, and had been very restrained. He has gotten very high marks justifiably because of his restraint in replying to De Gaulle, but he sure as hell didn't want to go sit down in his home town and talk with the North Vietnamese.

For the next few months, Clark Clifford put on the most extraordinary demonstration of personal courage and perseverance that I have ever seen in government or out. I've never seen anything like it. By and large alone! Under constant threat and some times actuality of being cut off from the President; carrying water on both shoulders and marching always uphill.

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B: Was Clifford generally trying to continue in further steps toward what you would call the winching down policy; that is, he was advocating a total bombing halt as a next step?

M: Yes. And other steps having to do with strategy, and the possibility of limiting or reducing the size of our commitment. It was sometimes so extraordinary that you could hardly believe it.

I remember one time after October. We still weren't into substantive talks, and the North Vietnamese, the Communists launched some attacks over the DMZ and in I Corps. This was brought up at a Cabinet meeting! I mean, a Cabinet meeting is almost like speaking on the corner of Connecticut and K with a loud speaker. There are guys there, Wirtz, Freeman, Cohen and so on, who are dovish and would say this in a minute. Hence the really difficult issues of national security policy were almost never discussed at a Cabinet meeting. But Clifford said, "Well, it's very bad, what they're doing; but of course it's in violation of no understanding whatever, because the understanding was that once serious talks had begun they were not to abuse the DMZ. And serious talks haven't begun, have they?"

I remember looking at Joe Califano with a look of perfect astonishment on my face. You know, I just couldn't believe that any guy could have the chutspah to say this.

B: Were any of the other Cabinet members active in this kind of thing? You just mentioned that Wirtz, Cohen, Freeman were dovish.

M: I think on occasion they may have expressed their feelings to the President. They were quite good soldiers; that is, Freeman didn't go out and make speeches about Viet Nam from one side to another, nor did Cohen or Wirtz. But their views were pretty dovish.

B: And finally what led up to the October 31st speech, the total bombing halt?

M: Well, I wish I were as clear about this. It was a terrible time. The Russians began coming around, as I remember, some time in mid-October and saying, "You can stop this thing. We'll get you an understanding that they won't abuse the DMZ and attack the cities, launch great new offenses," and all that sort of thing.

And we went back with instructions to Harriman and Vance to demand that certain things be in there. And they

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came back with new arguments from the North Vietnamese and it went back and forth, back and forth. [Soviet Ambassador Anatoly] Dobrynin was in the White House several times to see Walt, and I think on one or two occasions to see the President, saying what they would do.

The President was most reluctant to buy this. He said he thought it was getting very near the [U.S. presidential] election; he thought that he would not have anything in writing firm that would match the San Antonio formula, and that he would look like a fool. That he had quit the bombing for nothing, for no quid pro quo, and that that would make it appear that he had done it purely as a political gesture for Humphrey. He thought the Russians wanted to elect Humphrey, and that that was why they were doing it.

But Clifford kept up his drum fire. And one night about October 29th, 28th or 29th, I remember we had been writing on a speech to stop the bombing. And I got home about 10:30 or 11 o'clock and the telephone was ringing as I walked in the door, and it said, "be back at 2:00." Horrible thought. "General [Creighton] Abrams is going to be here."

B: That means two a.m.?

M: A.M. Well, I got back down there at 2:00 and Abrams walked in. It was an astonishing meeting. The President greeted him civilly, but as if he had just come over from the Pentagon. And Abrams had flown incognito all the way from Saigon and helicoptered into the Pentagon and rushed over by car at two o'clock in the morning.

And the essential questions were, "General, would you stop the bombing if you could get talks?" And he [Johnson] said, "If you were me, the President."

And Abrams said, "I am not the President, and I don't know all the considerations with which you must deal, but my judgment is that the bombing should be stopped if it will produce talks."

We broke up the meeting in the Cabinet room around five o'clock in the morning, after having had breakfast. I went over and borrowed a pair of the President's pajamas and went upstairs to the third floor of the Mansion and went to sleep about six a.m.

Came back down at eight a.m. and boy, there were long faces around. Bunker had gone in to see the South Vietnamese and to tell them that the basic arrangement that

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we agreed to several weeks before, when we said we might offer this, was about to be put into effect. Well, they had about ten reasons why it ought to not be. They had to bring it before their national assembly, had to consult with all sorts of people. They didn't know if the troop contributing countries would go along. You know, every kind of dog-in-the-manger reason why we shouldn't do it.

So we sent back instructions to Bunker. He had seen the foreign minister. He saw Thieu, and Thieu put him off: "We'll have to discuss that, we'll do that tomorrow." So Bunker, that seventy-four year old man, was up about sixty hours without sleep trying to see South Vietnamese, our allies.

Personally, I believe that they had had a very direct communication from the Nixon people that they should stand fast, and there should be no bombing halt shortly before the election.

B: Is that conjecture or do you have some sort of empirical evidence?

M: Well, I think even on this thing, which won't be public for a long time, I think I'd rather not say. I think there is some reason to believe that that is so.

And it was a pretty scary thing for the Nixon people. Humphrey was coming up strong. Here was a breakthrough at the last. I'm unable to say whether--to make a conjecture as to the authority of anyone in speaking to the South Vietnamese from the Nixon camp about this, but I believe that someone did speak to them and persuaded them just to be tough.

Well, it went on for a couple of days, for a day and a half or so. At a luncheon meeting of which I was not a part Clifford and Rusk and the President wrote a communication to our South Vietnamese allies, the likes of which we hadn't written in a long time--a very tough one. And very real. It was essentially saying, "I don't know how long the American people are going to stand with you, but I think however long it is our commitment is endangered by any sign that you are standing in the way of a resolution of the war." It was a strong, tough message which was delivered.

And they came closer to giving assent, but still had lots of objections when the President finally made the speech. He went ahead and made it. It seemed to me--You know, one always remembers one's own brilliant participation in these things and sometimes at the expense of remembering what other people did. But I remember making an outburst at

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one meeting in the Cabinet room, saying that if the President did not go ahead but permitted Thieu to speak first--And Thieu was planning to speak. He had a speech ready to be given on some national day holiday out there, at which he was going to speak about this, about how bad it would be to stop the bombing altogether until we had some ironclad written assurances and that sort of thing. [I said] that if the President permitted him to speak first, and then the President went ahead later and stopped the bombing altogether, that he would be speaking in a historical context in which our enemies said there were no agreements; it was an unconditional bombing cessation; and our friends said we didn't have anything down that was worth two cents; and we would be in the position of being fools. So it was better from the point of view of the opinion in this country, at any rate, for the President to say, "The other side understands that they must not abuse this."

B: How firm was the agreement from the Communist side?

M: On the essential points, it was an understanding in the sense that essentially the Russians were the intermediaries and were able to say, "The other side understands how you feel about this."

B: And that is the sum-total?

M: That is the sum-total.

B: And again, Lyndon Johnson had to make the final decision to go ahead anyway?

M: Right.

B: And after that, that was just about it for the Lyndon Johnson Administration, except for the talks dragging on.

M: That's right.

B: It's a fascinating story.

Is there anything more that you think ought to be added in this general subject?

M: Oh, just to state what is the obvious. Nothing was such an agony to Lyndon Johnson in his whole time in the White House. I wasn't around him in 1964 in the White House when he was making his first important decisions about Viet Nam. I know that with the exception of George Ball the opinions were pretty unanimous that he should make it--make a full commitment. Certainly in 1965 when the question was up or down, it was in or out. A gigantic commitment of rhetoric

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was backed by a minuscule commitment of resources. And one or the other had to give. If the rhetoric gave, then so did our line of defense and our whole containment policy of the Communists aggression, which would have had really serious consequences around the world. There's no question about it. That's a cost that those who are now most anti-war will either not concede or have forgotten. It's a war that--Well, we've suggested some reasons why he made the commitment to go in. He did have this virtually universal sentiment in favor of the commitment from the Kennedy-holdovers. Perhaps one reason he was inclined to take their judgment was that he did not want to break the continuity between himself and Kennedy. Another was the mere existence of this superb and skillfully managed power that we had which seemed to be sufficient to handle any kind of problem.

Pat Moynihan speaks of Viet Nam as being "our war," meaning the war of the liberal intellectuals really, because they were the ones who were most upset over the Eisenhower-Dulles massive retaliation policy. They were the ones who called for a capacity to meet limited wars and keep them limited. They were the ones who wanted the helicopters and the Green Berets, who thought that by a combination of this skillfully applied military power and economic resources and a commitment to political democracy, that we could settle just about any problem anywhere in the world.

And McNamara was so good at it, at producing the kind of military weaponry that was fit to fight a war like this that we assumed, I suppose, that we also had the techniques and the understanding that was fit to fight.

I can't think of a worse place in the world to fight a war than in Viet Nam. I've tried and maybe Nigeria is as bad. But you can hardly think of another place that has as many forbidding aspects as Viet Nam has, which may suggest that our lessons--the lessons we've learned there--are not altogether applicable elsewhere.

For a long time, the argument was made that if we didn't go in, if we didn't stand, that the American people would become isolationists. But it seemed to me to become fairly clear after awhile that the result of the war in Viet Nam, which would be an ambiguous result at best, would be far more likely to make them isolationists and make them feel that they never wanted to get involved in any such thing again, no matter whether our national security interests were involved.

I'm still at a loss to know, to be convinced in my own mind, whether we were right or we were wrong. I just don't

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know. Right now it appears to me, maybe, that we were wrong, but it's hard to go back three years, four years, in your mind and to relive the context of the decision that Johnson had to make. It was a savage decision, just as difficult as any one, any man, has had to make.

B: You mentioned before that you did a good deal of what amounts to public relations work regarding the war in Viet Nam. Was that one of the purposes of the visits to the campuses you and others on the staff made?

M: No, that was in order to "get ideas," and in part to show them that we were interested in their ideas. There was a little P.R. in it, but genuinely we hoped to get some ideas and to identify some people who were good and who might work with us. They weren't very successful.

B: You mean, successful as personnel recruiting or as idea-getting devices?

M: No offense to your profession, Herr Professor, but I swear to God in some universities, one would have thought the most urgent crying problems that this country faced were whether the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare made its grants directly to the professor or to the fellow, the research assistant. Christ, the country was blowing up and the towns were burning down and the war was going to hell and Latin America was getting worse and all the rest of it, and that--And we'd get an awful lot of university-government relations.

B: You found my colleagues parochial?

M: In the extreme. I should say not all of them, by any means. Some were extremely good. Generally speaking, the best were those who had had some considerable experience in operating form with government, and that meant essentially that Harvard was the best.

B: When were you making these trips? Roughly, what time period?

M: 1966, 1967, 1968.

B: And you didn't run into any of the Viet Nam criticism from the academic--?

M: Oh, yes.

B: I've heard others say they ran into non sequiturs. They'd want to come in and talk about new programs in the ghettos, and the academics would say, "But yes, what about Viet Nam?"

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M: Well, that happened, if I remember clearly, at Chicago. I suppose one would imagine that would happen in Chicago. [The Universities of] Chicago, Wisconsin, Michigan, all came together at the University of Chicago, and we got some of that.

At Harvard--this sounds like the self-fulfilling prophecy of Noam Chomsky [in American Power and the New Mandarins] about the new mandarins, you know--essentially, although many of them were anti-war, they stayed right on the money. Programs that they were familiar with and areas that they thought we were either overlooking or doing a bad job in, poverty, education and so on. They were more restrained, self-restrained, and disciplined in their responses; and it was much more helpful to us.

B: But generally, such trips were not particularly productive?

M: Not much.

B: One other thing that is related to this. What is the relationship between the White House and some of these journalists or, more dignified, book authors? For example, take a book like [Rowland] Evans' and [Robert] Novak's Exercise of Power, which at least reads as if it has a good deal of "inside information," or Patrick Anderson's The President's Men. What you mentioned in an earlier interview about Marvin Watson is almost identical with what's in Patrick Anderson's book about Marvin Watson. Which came first? I didn't tell Pat that. I did tell a couple of other people and one of them, I imagine, told him.

B: Did you feel while you were on the White House staff that you could talk to these people?

M: Yes, I had many, many luncheons with Bob Novak and a few with Rowly Evans, spending most of the time complaining about what they were writing, and trying to get them to write something more favorable toward us. Novak is an incredible ferret. He has got more contacts around this town than Girl Scouts have cookies. He has got a sub-government around here, people in the IRS, people in the Commerce Department and Interior and so on, and superb contacts on the Hill. I really don't know how he does it. He's an unprepossessing looking man, but he's a good listener, and he uses the old devices of taking a piece of information he has gotten from one source and asking another guy if it's so and getting another piece of the material there.

That's a good book, by the way. There are a lot of

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things in it I don't agree with, but boy, it's good. It's got a--

B: The impression that I had formed was that granted certain animuses that you may or may not like, the information seemed quite accurate. How about in the case of Anderson's book, the latter part of which is about you and your colleagues? Did you help with it?

M: I met with Anderson for about an hour and by and large talked about me and he's friendly to me in the book. One thing I can say with a straight face, even though I had many arguments with Marvin Watson--many disagreements with him on matters and he's not "my kind of feller," we're just sort of like white and c-sharp--I respect Marvin and respect the tough job he did well with plentiful disagreements. And I tried to protect him in talking with newspaper people. His scalp was highly desired by a lot of writers, particularly liberals; they need a bete noir. He was the perfect candidate: "Johnson must be an evil man. There are so many nice, bright, shiny young men around him who don't seem evil. Moyers, Cater, Califano, McPherson, you know, they, don't seem like egregiously bad people. They may be a little stupid and provincial, but they're not really actively bad. But now somebody must be. Somebody must be representing and speaking to the dark side of Lyndon Johnson's character. And that's bound to be Marvin Watson, because he's an old conservative; and he was working for Eugene Germany and Lone Star Steel, and they have a notorious labor record. He's a pol and he's narrow"--and all that sort of thing.

Marvin is narrow, and he did have a hell of a lot to learn about the world when he came to Washington. And he was a provincial. He is also able to learn; he was also tough; also capable of living with a lot of animosity around him, and doing a job for the boss. And was very seldom heard by anybody I ever talked to around the White House pressing a policy position on the President. Most of my scraps with him came over security clearances for people.

B: You've already mentioned the difficulty there.

M: Anyway, I never cut Marvin up, because I figured that the worst thing that could happen would be a White House full of guys with knives out for each other. And I was not a contributor to that, nor I think were others. It was a remarkably disciplined crowd who held their views in check.

B: While we're on a mixed bag of things here, you mentioned in passing before that one of your areas of responsibility was youth relationships. Any better success here than you had

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in the college professors?

M: Well, it seemed to me that the young people who came around, the college students who came around to talk to us were by large the brightest and most attractive group of human beings I had ever seen, much more astute than my generation had been in college. Much better informed, much wiser, and so on. And very good in a group meeting, even with very tough questions. Capable of hearing and capable of being changed in their opinions. And for that matter, capable of changing mine and others and giving it some insights that I didn't have.

B: Were these organized programs in which you arranged--?

M: Well, nothing that we organized. On several occasions, we tried. We would devise schemes for meeting with people, and it wouldn't work. It would just never get off the ground. The NSA [National Student Association], during its period of conflict with CIA, is a case in point. We just never--It seemed to me that the only thing that would really work was not for Harry McPherson or Califano or Doug Cater to meet with students. We could meet with students and they could say, "Well, my goodness, they don't have horns," and that would be a net-plus. But that would not be an utterly convincing thing, because they needed to meet with Lyndon Johnson.

And Lyndon Johnson, by and large, is good with the kind of kids that he is familiar with; and they are mostly kids from outside the Eastern Seaboard. High school kids, college kids, 4-H groups, American Legion groups, Boys' Club of America, the kind of kids who are good, clean-shaven, and are trying hard, have bought the system even though they may be having growing doubts about it--he can be awfully good with. The kind of kids who have passed over into real doubts about the system, who are angry about either the war or poverty or about their parents, or whatever--he is not good with. He simply exacerbates the problem between them.

He spoke to the Peace Corps volunteers once. He knows this. If he could be with them--I think we talked about it in an earlier tape--If they knew how many doubts he has and what a raunchy guy he is and how ambiguous are his feelings about authority, if they could see the guy really wrestling with all kinds of dimensions of problems, who is not self-righteous--you know, it would be a different thing. But he turns on a kind of a public personality, public pol personality, with them that drives them up the wall.

He met with a Peace Corps group of volunteers at the [Washington] Monument--a large number, well over a thousand

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of them--and he thought he was a smash. I didn't go, but I heard from others who went that they thought he was a smash.

Then I began to get the feedback from the Peace Corps and he was wretched. They thought he was a bust, a bore, talking about an unreal world; half of them had been out living in the sticks of the Philippines and Africa and Latin America. It was hell out there, and it wasn't any business about the bright new day, and we're going to help these people help themselves and so on. You know, that didn't make any sense at all. And if you ever have been to the Philippines, you'll know why, because it's the worst country in the world.

B: That's the same as the Lyndon Johnson communication problem generally that we've wrestled with many times.

M: Yes.

[End of Tape 1 of 2]

INTERVIEW IV

DATE: March 24, 1969

INTERVIEWEE: HARRY McPHERSON

INTERVIEWER: T. H. BAKER

Tape 2 of 2

B: This is a continuation of the interview with Harry McPherson.

One of your areas eventually became civil rights. How did you get into that one?

M: When I got to the White House, Mike Feldman was just leaving. He had had a very large brief, including most of the economic and industry group matters--agricultural, tariffs and so on. Lee White, who was his deputy, had the brief for natural resources, the environment, civil rights, so on. When Lee became the Counsel and I was preparing, under him to become the Counsel, he retained that civil rights portfolio, and I took the Feldman ones. But I have an interest in civil rights, so I stayed fairly close to Lee. And I guess the first really active work I did in the field was with him and Dick Goodwin and Pat Moynihan in preparing for the White House Conference to Fulfill These Rights.

As you remember, that was stimulated by the President's speech at Howard University, which was in turn stimulated by the Moynihan Report, called "The Negro Family--The Case for National Action." I had known Pat Moynihan about a year, and we had become friends. He is one of the most exciting men in the world, really full of more intellectual spinoff than most men acquire in several lifetimes. He is really an extraordinary man.

Shortly after I got to the White House, I had an operation and a hernia. Did I mention this earlier? It's an interesting thing about Lyndon Johnson. I had been over there about two months, I had been at the State Department as an Assistant Secretary for Educational and Cultural Affairs; and I had spent two and a half months getting ready for budget briefings--for budget hearings on the Hill for the Honorable Congressman John Rooney, who is a terror. I was scared to death; I had only been in the office about four months and in two months I tried to learn everything about it.

Johnson, through Bill Moyers, told me to come to the White House--asked me if I would like to come to the White

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House; I said yes, but I would like to go to the hearings first. Because it would have been like going to the Vatican and not seeing the Pope to be in that job and not to go up and face John Rooney. The day after I left Rooney I came to the White House. I had a few things to do and worked pretty well for a couple months. Then I went to the doctor one day and he said, "Get a hernia fixed. It's bad."

I said, "I can't get a hernia fixed. I'm in the White House now. You know, you just don't take off and get a hernia fixed when you're in the White House."

He's a very plain spoken doctor and he said, "Don't give me that crap. I used to be Walter Jenkins' doctor, and Walter Jenkins would be headed to see me sick as a dog with his back, broken out with a rash all over it, high blood pressure and all the rest of it. He'd be half way here when he'd get a call to come back to the White House, and you know what happened to Walter Jenkins? You want that to happen to you?"

So I went back and in some fear and trembling, I wrote a memorandum to President Johnson. "My doctor says I have to get a hernia fixed, and I'll be away three weeks. I think I'm pretty well caught up, and others can take care of--" You know, to do my best out of fear that he--I didn't know what the hell would happen. He would get sore with somebody taking off that long--Back came a long hand-written letter--a note--on the bottom of my memorandum. At that time I was still Assistant Secretary of State on loan to the White House, because he was trying to save money so he left me on the State Department payroll, and also because he wanted to see if I worked out. And that was the main concern. I wanted to stay in the White House, you know, it would have been a great loss of face to have to go back to the State Department. So he wrote a note saying, "Go at once, and I think we'd better transfer you quickly to the White House payroll, because that way you can get into Bethesda or Walter Reed and you will save sixty percent on your hospital costs." This astounding thing signed "LBJ." I mean, a long disquisition on how to save money, and this is one of the curious things about him. And it's something that ought to be marked, because most politicians are not this way.

Lyndon Johnson, as we all know, is as self-centered a man as ever was; but he has the capacity to empathize with very intimate human problems, of people who are of some concern to him, and many who are not. He can feel; when an old woman falls down in the street, his shins ache a little. He's a hard-nosed guy and he's tough as nails, but he has that capacity for empathy that came out in very peculiar

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ways. As cruel as he can be, or as ruthless as he can be, he also has that "individuating" capacity that not many public figures have. I hope that's remembered some day and hope someone is able to write about it as a part of his life.

Well, I got the hernia fixed. I was lying up in the bed one boiling afternoon in George Washington Hospital, aching like hell, and being served--it was about five o'clock in the afternoon--one of those typical, tasteless hospital suppers that are always served, you know, when most people are just getting over lunch they bring you around something. And Moynihan appeared with a full bottle of Johnny Walker Black and the Moynihan Report. He said, "I want you to read this, because there are a hundred copies of it and it's going to be dynamite, I think."

So we drank that bottle of scotch until about nine o'clock. And I remember walking down the halls of George Washington holding my poor gut in my hand, headed for the men's room, drunk as hell, the Moynihan Report in my pocket. Moynihan and I were both yelling and screaming about it. I was afraid that it was going to be perfect ammunition for the Southerners. I could imagine Holmes Alexander or someone like that writing a mocking piece, "Aha, I told you so. They're all a bunch of bastards and immoral people!"

Curiously, you know, the main force of the opposition to it did not come from the Southerners at all, but from lots of Negroes who had a vested interest in opposing it, something--we didn't know at the time.

The President made that speech which Dick Goodwin and Moynihan essentially wrote.

B: That was the Howard University speech?

M: The Howard University speech. And the speech said, "We have now completed or are about to complete the major civil rights legislation that was needed to combat discrimination." At that time nobody was thinking very seriously about fair housing. It just seemed so far away that we'd never get it, but it was--We were still on voting rights in 1965, and the Voting Rights Bill of 1965, having been given the impetus of Selma and Johnson's speech "We Shall Overcome," was on its way through the Congress and was pretty obviously going to pass.

So he went to Howard and said, "We've pretty well done our work on legislation against discrimination, but we haven't done much at all about the basic problem of the Negro-American, which is his poverty and which is the

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unemployment that is associated with it and the broken families that are associated with the unemployment and with the three hundred years of victimization by the whites. And we must move forward with a bold program, because we've only begun."

Moynihan, you remember from reading the Report, had been launched on this inquiry that resulted in the report by a phenomenon occurred in statistics on unemployment and AFDC, Aid for Dependent Children. For years those two graphs stayed pretty much in parallel. When unemployment among Negro males went down, so did AFDC payments after awhile. The father was going back home, if he was away; he had a job; he was taking over in the house; and the kids were getting off AFDC. So when there was economic prosperity, you had less welfare. All of a sudden, they crossed. Unemployment kept going down, in part stimulated by the war effort, but AFDC kept going up. Something had happened. And Moynihan set out to try to find out why. What he found out was that the Negro ghetto family was in such wretched condition that it was breaking up, it was developing its own momentum of pathological breakdown. Delinquency was enormous and rising. Illegitimacy was enormous and rising. Income levels were dropping. Whereas in the Negro community as a whole, they were rising; the Negroes were doing better than they had ever done, and in the last four years have done spectacularly well. They're really coming up rapidly in much of the United States. But in the central city areas, it's getting worse. Hough, Roxbury, Southeast Washington, Harlem, Watts, some of them. That disturbed him deeply, and that provoked the report.

The President took the speech, he believed in what the speech was saying about the wretched condition of the urban Negro. He knew that the Negro family was in bad shape, and this confirmed it. He had really been shaken shortly after he came into office by some figures of Negro inductees which showed sixty and seventy per cent rejection rates in much of South Carolina, probably in many of the same counties where there is a poverty now--I mean, where the hunger is being discovered. We were really in the soup. We were producing a generation of people who were going to be perpetual welfare or delinquent problems or both.

B: Did the President see the Moynihan Report itself?

M: I'm not sure.

B: Or a precis?

M: I think he probably saw a precis of it. Bill Moyers or Dick Goodwin would know that, I don't.

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At any rate, the end of the speech says, "We're going to have a conference. We had a conference in 1948, Truman had a task force called To Secure These Rights; now we've secured them. Let's call this one To Fulfill These Rights."

And shortly thereafter Lee White, Doug Cater and I, and Pat Moynihan began holding a series of morning and afternoon sessions with scholars in the field. And Pat dredged most of them up. They were Tom Pettigrew of Harvard, James Q. Wilson of Harvard, Talcott Parsons of Harvard, Eric Erickson of Harvard--it's fairly clear where the center of all wisdom is. Bayard Rustin, Kenneth Clark, Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, et cetera.

B: Do the et ceteras include some of what were already becoming by then the more militants, like Floyd McKissick?

M: John Lewis, who was head of SNICC. But that was at a time when SNICC was still an organization that you could invite to the White House without getting a hand grenade thrown through the window before they came. It was before SNICC became all black and became [Stokely] Carmichael's tool. John Lewis was much more restrained, although radical. He was not a believer in the preaching of violence. It was before a lot of things.

You know, the other day--Mike Janeway has a friend up in Harvard who said, "God, I met Cliff Alexander for the first time the other day, and it took me back to those days when we really thought it could happen," you know. Cliff, I'm sure, makes us--a lot of us--feel that there's still some hope; and yet there are not many Cliff Alexanders, white or black, around.

But it was at a time when integration was still the goal. These meetings were long and for me very fruitful and fascinating, educational experiences, in which people--Oscar Handlin, for example--talked about the experience of the Jews and in effect said, "Why can't the Negroes be like us Jews?" And Moynihan would say, "Because they're Negroes, and their experience is just a hell of a lot different from yours, their cultural background and all of the rest of it."

There was a lot of discussion about the relative strengths of matriarchies and father-centered families and so on.

The first sign that there was any trouble, as I recall, was at a meeting with Bayard Rustin, who is in my pantheon of say the five smartest men in America. He really is somebody. I don't know if you've encountered him yet, but

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he's really quite a man.

B: He's on our interview list.

M: Rustin had his extremely sensitive antenna out, and he was beginning to feel that the direction in which we were heading was wrong. Essentially it was--to use a family as the point of observation and also as a point of cure for the Negro American, I thought this made a lot of sense. I remember when I was at the Pentagon, on Saturday afternoons for about a year, I went over to a settlement in Southeast [Washington] and I taught four or five or six Negro girls ancient history in a high school; and they had an old ancient history book published in 1927 and written in the style of 1836. "Aristides bade them Eschew the Trojan yoke," I remember that great sentence.

It took me about three sessions to realize that the problem wasn't they didn't understand ancient history; it was they couldn't read this book. And then I realized they couldn't read any book! And in a rage one afternoon--it was hot as hell, you know, and I had just had it up to here with these stupid cow-like looks at me--. And I said, "How the hell are you ever going to be a secretary if you don't know what that word means?" They didn't know "commercial," "physical," "mental," never heard of them--words like that. They didn't know--fascinating--they didn't know what the word "deprived" meant. And if anybody ever was deprived, they were.

When I said that to that girl, all of them looked at me as if I had just said, "How are you ever going to be an astronaut?" It was clearly beyond their wildest imagination that they were going to be a secretary. Why? Because it had been beat, it had been drilled into them by every facet of their experience, by their housing, by the fact that they didn't have a father, the house was full of strange men sleeping with mother and sister, and that nobody could spell worth a damn, nobody could manage the finances, that everything told them, "No, you're nothing."

And I realized for the first time in my Southern liberal life that had been so taken up with getting rid of the awful racism of the Jim Clarks of this world that there was a hell of a lot more to it than that. And that we were really dealing with something immense.

I remember telling Goodwin that it was like you couldn't pick up the blanket off a Negro at one corner, you had to pick it all up. It had to be education and it had to be housing and it had to be jobs and it had to be all kinds of stuff, everything you could think of. That found its way

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into the Howard University speech, and I really had a--I was both enlightened by that understanding and dismayed by it, because it just seemed like there wasn't enough time, there wasn't enough money, there wasn't enough understanding--we'd never do it. It was just too--It was like converting a crippled person into a four-minute miler. You just wouldn't do it. And you couldn't even understand it. There was no place where you could--If you said, "All right, my concern is going to be with housing." Education had so much to do with housing and employment had so much to do with housing, and mass transportation had to do with housing. There was no place you could stand to get a fix on it.

And for me, that place was the family. Pat's Negro family report gave me a way, for the moment, to look at the Negro problem.

I don't know what the President thought was going to be the reaction to the Moynihan Report or to this concern about the family. I suppose he was afraid, as all of us were, that the Southerners would pick it up and run with it. But he probably thought also that the Southerners might say, "Uh-huh, see you've got to do something about the family." And he would say, "Well, this thing here says that you can't do anything about the family until you get jobs and housing and the rest of it. So I want this much money for housing, and I want this much money for jobs and so on; and it would suddenly be converted into a tool for him, for a massive national program. And that's what the Howard speech says.

Bayard Rustin said that there was trouble about this, a lot of trouble, and that a lot of people he was talking to thought this was a bum place to go. And pretty soon there was a tremendous reaction. All of this is documented in the Rainwater and Yancey book [Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey, The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1967)], some of which is not true, but most of which is, as far as I know. A conclusion, a massive conclusion that they draw in there, is profoundly untrue, which is that Lyndon Johnson was rather happy to see the Moynihan Report become the center of great controversy, because that enabled him to say "Well, there's no agreement on the need for a major program," and therefore he would reduce the pressures on him to produce such a major program at the time he was escalating the war in Viet Nam and couldn't do both. And that's just crazy. That's not so.

Lyndon Johnson, until middle 1967, thought that he could do both. And, as a matter of fact if you asked him today, he'd say he did do both. If you look at the scale of spending, it has been colossal. What we did in health, education, and welfare--budgetary expenditures and so on.

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But they are not the massive program that Moynihan was talking about; even as massive as they are, they're not as big as what Pat was saying was needed, and what I think most people feel is needed. They were concerned about the cities--

B: Did Mr. Moynihan ever come to doubt whether or not the family would be an effective starting place?

M: Well, no, I don't think so. I mean, he's still terribly concerned about the family. I had lunch with him last week, and we talked about some new data which is very distressing about ghetto families and the rate of illegitimacy and so on. So much tracks from that. It's not just a moral judgment: because Negroes are illegitimate or Negro women sleep around or whatever in the ghettos, that they are bad. It's just that that is associated with and is a cause of an awful lot of fragmented male personalities which become delinquent and which build in an ethos of welfare dependency.

And Pat's answer for it was relatively simple. It was income, a family allowance plan. Moynihan was very disturbed from the beginning by community action. I remember, about a year after this period we're speaking of now, driving him home one night, and he said, "You realize what you've done, don't you? You've ruined the poverty program and the anti-poverty effort with community action. It's wild; these people are out to destroy you. And you're giving money to the very people who are going to destroy you." It was a really vigorous, violent speech about the crazy way we were proceeding to remedy the problems of poverty. Moynihan's notion was that all the remedial efforts that you could make in the world, all the training programs, and all the special adult employment programs, and the jobs programs, and the National Alliance for Businessmen, all of this stuff would be of no avail ultimately unless there was an income-base in the family. You had to give the family that; then you could build on it, once they had that security. Because they'd stay home; they'd stay together; and you'd have the inter-acting family.

Maybe I'm not a good person to talk to about this. With no intellectual background, I have a gut-feeling that he's right. And that the family and the presence of a father in the family is vital for the health, the psychological health of the family. There are lots of guys who have been raised well and strongly by mothers without fathers around, or with weak fathers even, who have overcome that. But essentially it's not good to have no positive father-figure, responsible for and representing authority in

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the family, I think. This was a Catholic middle-class view of Moynihan's; it's a Protestant middle-class view of mine; it just works more often than not. If you associate woman-headed families, I mean, if you look at woman-headed families, the new data that he was talking about last week says, "In Washington, Baltimore, and Philadelphia, in the poorest areas, seventy-six percent of the families with incomes of less than four thousand dollars a year are woman-headed."

Anyway, it was a mess. Benjamin Payton (?) in New York, who was associated with the National Council of Churches--and boy, the churches--Christ Almighty, especially Protestant churches--. Some time, a long time ago, probably right in the period after [Reinhold] Niebuhr, Protestant clergymen got the idea that you had to live in the real world and that you really had to go with it and to be where it was. Niebuhr, as I understand it--An understanding of Niebuhr requires living at the nexus, at the collision of the real and the ideal, at the world and the spirit. That if you go either way wholly, you're lost. But unless you bring the spirit under the judgment of the world, then you're dealing in the abstract and without importance. Unless you bring the world under the judgment of the spirit, then you have become a sodden materialist without the spark of life. That it's the continual clash; it's "living in the ambiguity" in the famous theological expression. Well, these guys--most of the clergymen I have met are twice as amoral politically as any politician I ever met. They're willing to do anything. Talk about Real Politik. They're willing to live as if there is no such thing as a moral standard and the main thing is to "be with it." And, "if our Negro brethren say that this is a bad report because it's casting aspersions on the Negro family, then hell, let's join them. Let's say that that's just what the Moynihan Report says." Very interesting thing.

The guy who was the principal spokesman of the National Council of Churches at this time in the race field was Bob Spike. He was strongly supportive of Payton, this black man, who issued the first denunciation of Moynihan, roundhouse right. Misquoting him--Jesus, what a terrible piece of goods! As a scholar as well as a theologian! Spike was behind him Spike was behind him all the way. Spike, a year later, was dead in a motel room, naked, killed by his partner, his homosexual partner. Great man to understand the problems of the Negro family!

In a way, it's a paradigm of the churches' fear of living right where Niebuhr said they ought to live: that they ran with the Negroes, the National Council of Churches, which should have done just the opposite. Because if anybody

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had the right to speak to Negroes and to speak to white people and say, "Their family situation is going to blow up this country, and we're responsible for it. We got them in that shape."

A hundred years ago we were still selling the family in different directions, father one way, mother another way. And for the last hundred years, we've been behaving--Any Negro male who had a pair of balls was uppity and probably ought to be strung up by his neck. What else can the Negro turn out to be? We've done it. It has now approached a crisis point. Let's do something about it in a hurry before we all lose our country."

But not at all, not at all. By the time we got down to the--The place was in such a chaos that we obviously couldn't have our conference in November of 1965. It was just a madhouse. So we said, "All right, let's have a planning conference. We'll get a lot of people in here with a planning conference."

Cliff Alexander and a couple of other men including Berl Bernhardt, one of my partners here in this firm, went up to New York to negotiate it with Bayard Rustin. Bayard had sense enough to make a deal; I mean, work something out. And they came back and said, "All right, there are going to be eight panels in the planning conference. One's on housing, one's on jobs, one's on so and so. And one's on the family." By doing this, we gave up the idea of having the family as the focus, and we just treated the family as one other problem. And essentially it was the problem of--It was a psychological problem. It was sort of--All right, let's have some--Let's find out if we support some family counseling, stuff like that. It became that instead of saying, "in order to strengthen the family, it will be necessary to do the following things. And if we strengthen the family, we'll be a hell of a long way down the line toward solving our Negro problem."

Pat was treated as an untouchable, unspeakable object much of the time at the conference. Berl was the master of ceremonies and at one point said, "I assure you," in a jocular way, "I assure you there is no such person as Daniel Patrick Moynihan."

Well, it was such a rough and unsatisfactory affair that the President decided that he'd better get somebody in tough control of it by the time we had the real conference.

So he got Ben Heineman, the chairman of the board of the Chicago Northwestern Railroad, to chair it and he was just a tremendous man--very sympathetic and understanding and tough and straight--and ran a hell of a good show. And I guess it

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worked out all right. We did what Pat said we would do seven months before; we wrote a zillion recommendations; they're all over the lot. Some of the more interesting ones never got there. One panel decided that they ought to recommend that the Chevrolet division of General Motors be given to Negroes to run, because it was obviously a money maker. This was one way to get Negroes out of poverty. That never made it into the [final report]. But it might as well have, because nobody really paid much attention to it. It's a huge compendium. I have several copies at home. The best thing that can be said about it is that we got away with a conference without violence.

B: Was there ever any thought of not having that conference in the fall-- that is, when it began to be controversial, was there any thought from Mr. Johnson of just cancelling it out?

M: No, I don't think he ever seriously thought about that. One time I think he said something about it. "Why do we have to have the damned thing?" And I said, "Well, you said you would, and it would look worse--" And he said, "That's right. But you boys have gotten me in this controversy over Moynihan, so I've got to get somebody like Heineman to get me out of it."

He was quite right in doing that. Absolutely right. Because, I mean, at this point we were just over our heads. We didn't know how to deal with it.

The President with civil rights ought to be the subject of a book, and I'm sure it will be. Someone will do a good account of it. They'll tell the stories of all his votes against civil rights when he was a Congressman and a Senator from 1937 to 1956. Lyndon Johnson has obviously never been racist, but he puts it pretty well in that little book of his, this thing that appeared in the encyclopedia, [The Choices We Face (1969), reprinted from Britannica Book of the Year 1969]. It says, "I tried to reduce the heat of racial controversy where I found it, but in my day you didn't take an extreme advance position on civil rights in my part of the South because of the obvious dangers that a bigot would beat you." [not an exact quote].

He was known as a friend by a lot of Negroes, privately. One of those guys sort of like Phil Landrum of Georgia, who's responsible for the existence of the poverty program. It never would have gotten through the House if it hadn't been for Phil Landrum. And he knew it was for Negroes in great part, but he just did a beautiful job saying it wasn't, saying it was for all "us poor farmers down here," and that sort of thing. You know the good

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Southerner and the guy who's doing his best where he can, and he stands up and votes strongly against breaking a filibuster or against amending Rule 22, our great bastion of freedom in the Senate. There are many of those guys, and Johnson was one of them until 1957 when he took part in the first civil rights bill passage in eighty-five years.

His relations with civil rights' leadership changed radically over the years. I remember when I was a boy growing up in the Senate that they were always the enemy, because they were always saying, "Lyndon Johnson's not giving us enough," "the bill's too weak," and all that sort of thing. They had to say that. He would negotiate with them and they'd agree to it and they'd go out and denounce him and he'd go out and denounce extremists and that sort of thing; but they got along all right essentially but not warmly. Beginning in about--well, as soon as he became President, it got to be much better.

B: This refers to the established "big six" civil rights leaders?

M: This is the big six, which no longer exists as the kind of force it was at one time. It was like having George Meany and Walter Reuther and four other labor leaders in to talk for labor. You had the six Negroes in to talk for the Negroes.

B: Did President Johnson ever develop any line of conversation with the more militant, or can anybody?

M: Well, that's a good question. The answer in his case is yes and no. He was--Let me approach it from a different point of view, take a different question.

B: Would it be easier if I ask if there is any more leadership among the blacks?

M: Well, what has happened, I think, is pretty obvious. The leaders that we've known, the [Roy] Wilkins and so on, have passed. They still maintain the support of the majority of Negroes. It's hard to believe, but I think it's so, because Negroes are getting more middle-class and are more likely to respond to a Roy Wilkins. But Wilkins is not angry enough for a very substantial minority. I mean he's not vocal enough and vigorous enough. He's an old man to them, thinks like [A. Philip] Randolph. And I don't know who the spokesman are. I think the press has done its typical job in building up the [Eldridge] Cleavers and others who are interesting phenomena, but don't speak for--They speak for something deep in a lot of Negroes, but their judgment about what you ought to do about it, I believe, is shared by only

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a few Negroes; that is, really tear the damned place down unless we get it tomorrow.

One of the problems is that Johnson and I and Bill Moyers and many of us around the White House were Southern liberals--I'm now speaking with Moynihan in mind. He says that we have really screwed it up, us Southern liberals. John Roche thinks the same thing, I may say. That we believe in integration, we believe in reason, we believe that things are going to be fine if men of good will get together and if we put down the racists. And we're not dealing, Pat would say, with what exists today which in his term is a class of untermenschen. We're dealing with a disoriented, urban proletariat, filled with all the pathological pressures that have always beset the urban poor, no matter what they were. And these guys have had it worse than anybody because their skin is wrong. And they are boiling and they are getting more and more anti-social, more and more delinquent, and the solution of their problems does not yield to the sort of 1940-1950 and early 1960 approach which was--. There are many, many aspects of it still in the Howard University speech: "Get the shackles off the Negroes so that he can run the race of life" and all that sort of stuff. That's what we thought. If we could just do that, if we could be a sort of super YMCA, saying "You can go to school with us, we'll educate you, train you, we'll get better housing," and all that sort of stuff. But we haven't really fixed it at the base, which is money, security, family holding together, and some power that is given to them by their money. That's the way you get power in this country. You don't just--I guess you either get it with money or with a bomb. And they've tried to get it, with some degree of success, with a bomb.

But I'd like for the moment ask myself another question which sort of gets at what the question you were asking me from a different and maybe a more fruitful way. What did Johnson think about the Kerner Commission report? Johnson was extremely negative about the Kerner Commission report for two reasons: One was because it hurt his pride. There wasn't enough said about what had been done in the last few years. The Civil Rights Act, the Poverty Acts, and all the rest of it.

The second was a much more hard-nosed and much more valid reason to oppose the Kerner Commission report. And it was expressed best, the best I ever saw, by an article in the New York Times Magazine about four months ago which I sent in to the President and said that it had really hit me a body-blow, and I now understood a lot that I hadn't understood before. And it was exactly what he had been saying and had never articulated completely, to me at any

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rate. It was to the effect that the only thing that held any hope for the Negro was the continuation of the coalition between labor, Negroes, intellectuals, (including many well-educated people who had been educated to sensitivity on the issue) big city bosses and political machines, and some of the white urban poor. In other words it required keeping the Polaks who work on the line at River Rouge in the ball park and supporting Walter Reuther and the government as they try to spend a lot of money for the blacks. That's the only way they'll ever make it, because the people in that office building over there [on L Street NW in Washington] don't give a damn about them. They're scared of them, always have been; they're middle-class whites; they don't want to live around them; they don't want to go to school with them; they don't want anything. But there is a coalition that just barely is a majority in this country if it's held together sort of loosely, and that is the coalition for progress and it has supported such progress as we have made.

The riots come along and scare the be-Jesus out of a lot of members of this coalition. The response of the federal government first, of the speech writers--and this really kicked me in the stomach because I had written an awful lot of those speeches--was to express the deepest concern about the well-being of the very race that was rioting, not so simplistically expressed as "reward the rioters," but saying it will continue to be this until we do something about the conditions in the cities. This telegraphed to the other members of the coalition that nobody really gave a damn about their concern--that the city was going to be burned down; that you couldn't walk in it at night anymore, and all the rest. That the government and the foundations and the news media, everybody was concentrating on the poor Negro down in the central city and had forgotten this guy out there. That programs were being shaped to take care of Negro needs and not to meet any of the needs of the other members of the coalition.

Then a Presidential commission is formed and goes out and comes back and what does it say? Who's responsible for the riots? "The other members of the coalition. They did it. Those racists." And thereupon, the coalition says, you know, a five-letter word, and "we'll go find ourselves a guy like George Wallace, or Richard Nixon. At any rate, we'll vote this crowd out of office. They don't care about us any more, and now they've indicted us, which is even worse."

B: And you think this is the way Lyndon Johnson saw it?

M: You bet I do. It's the way Bayard Rustin saw it, and it's the way Pat Moynihan saw it, and it's the way Lyndon Johnson saw it.

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B: But you know the government did it: it had done it before the Kerner Commission report. Watts was followed immediately by, well, what they say was "massive acceleration" of federal aid to Watts, but a good deal of it was new projects.

M: Yes, it's an awful dilemma. Of course, you have to do something. You have to show some concern. The trick, I suppose, if you can pull it off this way, the trick would be to show the concern for "All God's chillen," black and white, and do some things for those--for the other members of the coalition--just as you were doing it unto the Negroes.

B: If there were that much money.

M: Yes. There are some ways that we could have done more for the others. And we could have been tougher from the beginning and more unequivocal about law and order, about the maintenance of order in the society. We were guilty about saying it. I mean, we would throw out two or three lines very much like the way we were speaking about the North Vietnamese. Two or three lines of saying, "By God, there's law and order here. You can't get away with this!" Followed by an apologetic "Of course, we understand why you rioted. We know you could hardly do anything else."

The Vice-President [Humphrey] down in New Orleans says, "If I had been raised in the slums, found rats eating my children's feet, I'd riot too."

It was that ambivalence of the liberal. And I'm speaking of me and of every other staff man I knew in the White House, and probably of the President. I think there was a good deal of that in him too. He might have been more instinctive. One instinct Lyndon Johnson has always had is to resist obvious advice, and it has served him very well. Sometimes it makes him--what we were saying earlier--it makes him take an extreme position, absurd positions, and he has to be dragged back to what is obvious, what obviously he ought to do. But very frequently it turns out that his reluctance to take obvious advice is exactly what was needed, because it wasn't really the right advice though it may have been obvious.

So when Southerners would say to him, you know, "By God, you ought to speak out, Lyndon; you've got to tell them, by God!" although in part he wanted to do that, he figured "something's wrong with that." And when others said, "Why don't you say that this whole thing has come from the fact that the Negroes are poor and that they're living

McPherson -- Interview IV, Tape 2 -- 16

in terrible conditions" and so on, and "tell those who are calling for law and order that they're empty words. It's a hollow call so long as conditions are as bad as they are."

He accepted neither completely and his message came through rather garbled.

B: That's just what I was getting ready to say. If he could not articulate this middle ground and if the staff, as you say, was not yet attuned to it, that just sort of left it at dead center, didn't it?

M: Yes.

B: Which I suppose is a good stopping place, since it's 5:30.

[End of Tape 2 of 2 and Interview IV]

The following is the text of a letter written by Harry McPherson in 1979, authorizing the LBJ Library Director to make his oral history interview available to researchers:

LAW OFFICES
VERNER, LIIPFERT, BERNHARD AND MCPHERSON
SUITE 1000
1660 L STREET, N.W.
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20036

CABLE ADDRESS
VERLIP
(202) 452-7400

May 22, 1979

Mr. Harry J. Middleton
Executive Director
The Lyndon Baines Johnson
Foundation
2313 Red River
Austin, Texas 78705

Dear Harry:

For some reason I can't remember what limitation I put on my oral history. I think it was 10 years, which would make it about due for expiration. In any case, there seems to be no good reason for further restricting access to the history. So you may take this letter as authorization to make it available to interested persons.

I hope all goes well with you. What's the story on our LBJ debates?

Best,

Signed: Harry

Harry McPherson

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

Gift of Personal Statement

By Harry McPherson

to the

Lyndon Baines Johnson Library

In accordance with Sec. 507 of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, as amended (44 U.S.C. 397) and regulations issued thereunder (41 CFR 101-10), I, Harry McPherson, hereinafter referred to as the donor, hereby give, donate, and convey to the United States of America for eventual deposit in the proposed Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, and for administration therein by the authorities thereof, a tape and transcript of a personal statement approved by me and prepared for the purpose of deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

The gift of this material is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

1. Title to the material transferred hereunder, and all literary property rights, will pass to the United States as of the date of the delivery of this material into the physical custody of the Archivist of the United States.

2. It is the donor's wish to make the material donated to the United States of America by the terms of the instrument available for research in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library. At the same time, it is his wish to guard against the possibility of its contents being used to embarrass, damage, injure, or harass anyone. Therefore, in pursuance of this objection, and in accordance with the provisions of Sec. 507 (f) (3) of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, as amended (44 U.S.C. 397) this material shall not for a period of ten years, be available for examination by anyone except persons who have received my express written authorization to examine it. This restriction shall not apply to employees and officers of the General Services Administration (including the National Archives and Records Service and the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library) engaged in performing normal archival work processes.

3. A revision of this stipulation governing access to the material for research may be entered into between the donor and the Archivist of the United States, or his designee, if it appears desirable.

4. The material donated to the United States pursuant to the foregoing shall be kept intact permanently in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

Signed by Harry McPherson on October 28, 1970

Accepted by Harry J. Middleton for the Archivist of the United States on March 3, 1975

Original Deed of Gift on File at the Lyndon B. Johnson Library, 2313 Red River, Austin, TX 78705

ACCESSION NUMBER 74-210

BIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION: HARRY MCPHERSON

Lawyer; b. Tyler, Tex., Aug. 22, 1929; B.A., U. South, 1949; D.C.I. (hon), 1965; student Columbia, 1949-50; LL.B., U. Tex., 1956; admitted to Texas bar, 1955; asst. gen. counsel Democratic policy com., U.S. Senate, 1956-59; asso. counsel, 1959-61; gen. counsel, 1961-63; dep. under sec. internat. affairs Dept. Army, 1963-64; asst. sec. state ednl. and cultural affairs, 1964-65; spl. asst. and counsel to Pres. Johnson, 1965-66; spl. counsel to Pres. Johnson, 1966-69; private practice law, Washington, 1969-.