INTERVIEWEE: SIR ROBERT GORDON MENZIES

INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ

November 24, 1969

F: Let me make a brief introductory statement. This is an interview with Sir Robert Gordon Menzies, long-time Prime Minister of Australia, in the Sheraton-Crest Inn in Austin, Texas, on November 25, 1969. The interviewer is Joe B. Frantz.

Sir Robert, we won't take time to trace your career. You did have a long leadership in Australia in a very vital period. But we'll talk mainly about your relationships with former-President Johnson and some of the issues that may have come up when the two of you were leading your nations.

First of all, when did you first meet President Johnson? Do you have any clearcut memory of that?

M: Yes, I first met him when he was Vice President to Mr. Kennedy at the White House. I met him at lunch time, I think it was. It wasn't a very prolonged meeting. And then of course I saw quite a bit of him when he became President.

F: Did you see him when he made that trip to Australia on that swing around the world a couple of years ago.

M: I don't think I did. I think I was in Great Britain at the time. The only time I recall meeting him in Australia was when he came out to the Harold Holt memorial service, when I had a talk with him. And, in consequence of that talk, here I am in Texas at the University.

F: I see. You mean you received an invitation?

M: Yes. He said he took a poor view of me going to Virginia in 1966

when I should have come to Texas. So I said, "I'll repair the defect."

F: For the record we should put in that you were a visiting scholar--

M: Scholar in residence at Virginia for about four months, four and a half months, in what you'd call the fall semester.

F: Did you see much of the President while you were down at Charlottesville?

M: Oh, yes. I went in once or twice to have a meal with him or to have a talk with him.

F: You didn't know him particularly well though before he became President?

M: No.

F: Relate the circumstances surrounding your receipt of the news of the assassination of President Kennedy. Where were you at the time, what were you doing?

M: I was in Australia at the time. And of course it came as a terrific--

F: You were having an election coming up about a week later, weren't you?

M: Let's see. Let's recall the date.

F: It was November 22, 1963.

M: Oh yes, November. November '63. I had an election at the end of November.

F: Right.

M: I remember the leader of the opposition complained that I should have dropped my election and come to attend the funeral. I didn't think that was quite in proportion since I was the Prime Minister of the country and it was a vital election. I had had a majority of one and I was very anxious to increase it-and did in fact increase it.

F: Did you have a feeling that, one way or another, the assassination

influenced the results of the election?

M: Oh, no. None whatever.

F: Even though your opposition did try to make some capital out of it?

M: Yes, but I've forgotten what capital they thought they were making. But there was none to be made of it because I had met President Kennedy and had discussed various matters with him--and I had a very high opinion of him, if I may say so. He was an admirable man to talk with because it was a two-sided conversation with him. We were, in spite of our differences of age, sympathetic to each other. So I had a great regard for him. But I didn't feel that I should abandon the interests of my own country in a vital election. We were adequately represented of course.

F: You won, as I recall, a smashing victory in that.

M: I certainly did. I needed it. I had had a majority of one the previous two years.

F: Did you hear anything out of President Johnson then after you won? Do you recall? Did you get a cable of congratulations or anything from the American Embassy in Canberra?

M: Oh, I think so, yes, I think so. The American Embassy was always in pretty close contact with me.

F: Then you were supposed to go to Israel some time during that next year of 1964.

M: Yes.

F: Was this just a ceremonial visit, or were you trying to stave off the confrontation which eventually came?

M: Oh, no. This arose in this fashion, that in Israel they establish forests and attach the names of various people to them. They had

decided they'd have a forest named after me. The whole idea was at that time that I should visit there with my wife at some convenient time and formally have it shown to me or presented to me. But it turned out that I couldn't go in that year.

F: After President Johnson became President in November of '63 the two of you did not get together personally then until you came to the States the following June of '64, when you came up to--

M: It would be about then.

F: You came up to have interviews with the President himself and, of course, with Dean Rusk and Robert McNamara, I recall.

M: Yes, and Ball--George Ball--he was there too.

F: What was the tone of the talks that you had at that time?

M: They were extremely friendly. We have very much in common. We didn't talk to a set timetable or anything of that kind, we just played around the clock, so to speak. And we had no matters of difference that had to be thrashed out.

F: This was really though the first time you had spent any protracted period with the President.

M: That's right. That was the first time I had an opportunity for, in our phrase, sizing him up.

F: You found the two of you could work together.

M: Oh, yes.

F: At this time the war in Viet Nam had not heated up so much, and yet Australia of course has been our chief ally in the war.

M: Yes.

F: Did you feel any concern about maybe having to reduce your commitment in Viet Nam--or your interest in it?

M: No.

F: So that this wasn't an argument.

M: Oh, no, we were at one on that. I'm doing a lecture on it this afternoon, involving the problem of Viet Nam. Oh no, we were completely at one. When President Kennedy initiated American action, I agree entirely and said so in our own Parliament. And with President Johnson I didn't ever have any differences whatever.

F: Now, you had a bit of a problem with regard to Malaysia at this same time running concurrently.

M: Yes.

F: Did you look on this as part of the same package, that is, were your purposes in Malaysia the same as they were in South Viet Nam?

M: Malaysia wasn't a SEATO undertaking, and we didn't think of America in particular. We weren't wanting America to intervene. The problem of the bandits in Malaysia and the pacification of the country was at that time primarily a British problem. They had large numbers of troops there, and we had troops there. We made our troops available for these purposes as an ally of Great Britain. But it wasn't at any time suggested that America ought to accept some responsibility there.

F: This was more of a Commonwealth problem really?

M: That was a Commonwealth problem.

F: And so you ran an independent policy insofar as South Viet Nam was concerned?

M: That's right.

F: Did President Johnson ever try to get you to increase your troop commitments in South Viet Nam, or did he pretty well leave that up to you?

M: He left it up to us. I think he was pressed by some people somewhere that he ought to put the heat on us, but he never did. He recognized that what we had done, we had done freely, and that we could be relied on to do what we could when we could. So that was never a matter of argument between us.

F: Now the opposition to your South Viet Nam commitment in Australia was as noisy as it was in the States. Was it ever really a prime political concern? Did you ever feel that your government might be overthrown because of it?

M: On the contrary, when I retired at the beginning of 1966 and Mr. Holt took over--I gave him nine or ten months before the election so that he could establish himself. And the opposition at that time chose to make Viet Nam and our participation the issue. And the government had the biggest majority in the 1966 election that any government ever had--just the opposite of your question.

F: It was a poorly chosen issue, wasn't it?

M: It was.

F: During that same summer--

M: The people overwhelmingly supported it.

F: Yes. So that you had the country behind you on this.

M: Oh, yes, entirely.

F: During this same summer of 1964 the United States threatened to put import curbs on Australian meat. Do you recall that?

M: Yes.

F: Of course this led to some economic discussions between your country and ours.

M: That's right. They were conducted by my Minister for Trade,

Mr. John McEwen who's a very formidable negotiator. He knows all about the rural interests. I can remember that he was, as we would say, whacking into this argument over here, but it was a local lobby of course. Some of it may have come from Texas for all I know.

F: A good bit of it did, yes.

M: Yes. It finished up, I thought, not unsatisfactorily. It has never been, since then, an issue which produced any bad feeling or anything of that kind. It was a plain, straightforward commercial negotiation.

F: Right. Our autumn--that would be your spring--in November you announced sweeping changes in your defense planning for the next three years to prepare for the increasing risk in Indonesia, Laos, and Viet Nam.

M: Yes.

F: Did this cause much consternation in Australia?

M: No.

F: Did it lead to any great conversations with the United States?

M: This is toward the end of 1964?

F: That's right.

M: Oh no, I thought the Australian people entirely supported us. There were quite a few people who thought we should have done more, but not too many people who wanted to say that we should do less except the hard core left wing opposition, who always seems to me to be more hostile to America than they were to the Communists. But that's not uncommon.

F: No, we have them.

M: In various countries you have them, too.

F: Then you saw yourself always through the Viet Nam conflict as a

junior partner?

M: That's right.

F: Not taking on a full share, but taking on as much as you thought--

M: Whatever share we could. The great point about all of this was, not that our intrinsic contribution could be from an American point of view vastly material, but because it meant showing the flag alongside the United States and showing that she wasn't battling this thing out alone. Whenever I made speeches at that time I used to complain to the Parliament that there was a disposition on the part of the Communists to make out that the one great argument in the world was between the United States and the Soviet Union, you see, and that all the rest of us were innocent bystanders. Just too bad that we should be involved in this conflict! Now that to me was utter nonsense, because that I thought that in this conflict of powers, of ideas, Australia had exactly the same interests on a much smaller scale as the United States of America. Therefore it took us not five minutes to decide that when this thing came to the point of action, we would be in it, if invited by the government of South Viet Nam. We couldn't be in it to a very large extent because we're, in population terms, a small country. But we had no hesitation, no doubts, and I've never had any regrets.

F: Did President Johnson contact you before he began the buildup in 1965? The commitment was relatively small, you know, until the spring of '65, and then we began a--

M: Whether it was the President himself who told me, I don't know. But we knew. We were kept informed.

F: You made a speech in April '65 in which you hailed the United States'

intervention in Viet Nam as an act of great moral courage.

M: Yes.

F: And you never departed from this belief?

M: Never, never!

F: I presume then that you thought this was a definite challenge to human freedom and to the treaty obligations?

M: I think so.

F: Do you think that the United States met those challenges?

M: I do.

F: And you think Australia did also?

M: Yes. If we had had twice the capacity to put forces in there, I wouldn't have hestitated to put them in, but we did what we could. But above all, it was essential to show that America was not the only country in the world that saw this challenge and was willing to do something about it.

F: Did you ever work with President Johnson on these sporadic attempts to negotiate with North Viet Nam?

M: When you say work with him, in an indirect sense. Now, for example, at a meeting of the Commonwealth Prime Ministers--I've forgotten, it was about that time--at a meeting of the Commonwealth Prime Ministers, we decided that we would make an attempt to negotiate; that we would appoint a delegation from the Commonwealth to get to work with Hanoi. This was done on the initiation of Mr. Harold Wilson. He was Prime Minister then. We communicated with the White House about this. Yes, I think we did, but some of us did, and wanted to know what the reaction would be. We were assured that that was all right, we could go ahead, and there would be every encouragement from Washington.

And, of course, in the result they refused to see our delegates. It just didn't leave the ground--that attempt--but we knew what the American attitude was. I once made a speech--I haven't got it with me--about detailing all the advances and attempts that had been made by America, so we were well informed about them, and how each of them was treated with contempt. Mere humbug! Mere capitalistic nonsense!

But then I never have believed that Hanoi will negotiate unless it knows it's being beaten. Time in this wretched business runs with Hanoi.

F: There's no logical ground on which Hanoi will sit down and negotiate in the traditional sense of that word.

M: The longer they can hold things up the more and more dissent will there be in the United States. The whole will-to-win will be weakened in the United States, and subsequently in Australia. And therefore Hanoi knows that this is a tactical victory. It makes me ill!

F: To get back to economic matters a moment, during that spring, summer, fall--I'm speaking U.S. calendar now--of 1965, we had the problem of Australian economic development and growth, and a good bit of dissatisfaction, I gather, coming out of Australia with the fact that the United States' companies were too active there and in some cases were perhaps getting economic advantages. Is this correct?

M: No, that's not correct. The dissatisfaction in some parts--

F: Is this just the opposition again making--

M: Well, yes. There was a minority view--

F: I remember they challenged you on one occasion, that the U.S. State Department policy said that United States' companies came into

Australia, offered Australians 50-percent offer. At that time you said that that was the first you'd heard of that--that that was not Australian policy.

M: No. The one argument that went on in Australia was whether American companies coming into Australia ought to make some of their equity shares available to Australian investors. It first arose with General Motors who established an enormous undertaking in Australia, the General Motors Holden car. And General Motors said, "This is not our policy. Our policy is to retain central ownership and control." My attitude was [that] for us to set down rigid conditions on which private capital could come into Australia would be to drive the capital away, because capital is a fairly shy bird; that all we could do was to indicate to them that we preferred that they should make some share of their capital available to Australians, and that's all. It wasn't a matter of compulsion. There were one or two people who thought that we ought to have compulsion.

This is a mere theoretical argument now, because in the result capital flows into Australia from the United States and from Great Britain at a great rate. And the development of our mining industries and their ancillaries in Australia would have been impossible but for foreign capital. No country of twelve million could generate the hundreds--

F: You're in the same position as you were in the nineteenth centruy when the British and the Dutch and so forth--

M: Exactly the same position. And you couldn't have generated your own capital. And therefore, as far as I'm concerned and most Australians are concerned, we welcomed it, and it's done nothing but good for us.

It has given us a magnificent export income in minerals for the first time. So I'm an enthusiast about American investment in Australia.

F: Did you ever suggest to President Johnson--I know you were up here in June and then came back in July 1965--that perhaps the United States should place some kind of curbs on American investment?

M: We didn't need to say that because there was then a movement on curbing American overseas investments, you remember?

F: Yes.

M: With this added tax and so on.

F: All you had to do was endorse, huh?

M: That's right.

F: Did you find that you could talk with President Johnson fairly candidly on economic matters?

M: Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, although it all sounded very harsh, it has worked out not very much to our injury because exceptions were made here and here and here about banks forming consortiums and financing. And, in the result, I don't think we ran short of the necessary capital.

F: In another part of the world did you and President Johnson ever confer on the problems regarding Rhodesia?

M: No.

F: Which was a problem for both countries, of course--what to do about it. I know Rhodesia had the grain failure.

M: That wasn't in my time.

F: This comes after you leave?

M: In my time it was a problem between Great Britain and Rhodesia. With each conference I attended I got that established and agreed to. It

was after my time that they made the terrible mistake of taking this thing off to the United Nations, disarming themselves and putting it into the hands of the most unstable body the world has ever seen. So that's after my time. I would never have allowed it to go to the United Nations and let a lot of fellows fume and roar away about force can do all sorts of things that we would never contemplate. So I didn't have occasion to discuss it with any President.

F: Did your being the Prime Minister of a country which, from an area standpoint, is one of the larger nations in the world but from a population standpoint is not, and which, when you talk about the so-called great powers and big powers you're not one of them and yet you are extremely pivotal because of where you're located--did this make any particular problems for Australia at the United Nations or in general world negotiations?

M: Yes, I think it does.

F: It gives you in a sense, I'd think, a kind of national schizophrenia here.

M: I think that we've become familiar now on the Trusteeship Council with countries, chiefly Communist and others who have no colonial experience, denouncing us for what we are doing or not doing in Papua or New Guinea. We have in fact an impeccable record in Papua and New Guinea, far better than any of the critics have ever presented to the world. And therefore we listen to their rage and their bluster, and we pay the amount of attention to it that it justifies--to wit, none!

F: You're talking about my old part of the country. I made it from Port

Moresby up to Hollandia, you know, a little bit at a time.

M: Well, we're doing a very good job there, and we don't need to be told by the Russians that we ought to do something else.

F: Do you think that the Australians have drawn closer to the United States over the past quarter of a century, or do you think that there is some sort of a schism that has developed here because we do at times have competing interests?

M: I think that over the last quarter of a century Australia has grown nearer to the United States. And I can say that with pleasure because my government was responsible for a great deal of the improvement of relations with America. This doesn't mean that we've ceased to be a British country or to have very special ties with Great Britain. It's a great mistake when people think that must be so, this one or other. If we had a British-Australian association, I would be a vigorous member of it, as I'm the vice president of the American-Australian Association.

F: Aren't you the only non-Britisher who was made the Lord Warden of Cinque Ports?

M: That's right. And I find no conflict in these loyalties at all. The loyalty to Great Britain is a loyalty of institution, of tradition, of blood in most cases, you see. And the friendship with the United States arises, not as Fulbright occasionally likes to pretend, from a sort of cupboard love, "Well, we'll do whatever you tell us to do as long as you look after us." This underestimates the Australian character. But it's because we do in fact have exactly the same outlook broadly on world issues.

F: My feeling in Australia during World War II was that these were an

extremely independent, tough-minded people who are not going to go along with anyone's policy except as it suits them. That still pertains?

M: Oh, quite rightly. It's a grave underestimate to think that we would just be lapdogs for somebody else. We can be a positive nuisance when we want to be.

F: Yes, you're in a good position for that.

M: Do you mind if we call it a day, because I'm getting very, very tired.

F: Could I ask you one question? You've been Prime Minister off and on for thirty years, which is since 1939.

M: Yes.

F: In that period was there much difference in the way you worked with the five U.S. Presidents with whom you had relationships, or did it pretty much follow the same line regardless of whether it was the Republican Eisenhower, or the Democrat--?

M: You're quite right. To me, I wasn't conscious of any difference. I don't profess to understand domestic politics in America. All I know is that every President treated me as well as every other President, and that's saying a great deal. And I felt with each of them that I was a friend, you know, in my small way. They made me feel that I was a friend, and they talked to me as a friend.

F: You were always able to negotiate as a friend.

M: Always able to negotiate, always able to put our feet up, metaphorically, and talk quite frankly and easily. This is the wonderful thing.

I was telling somebody the other day that the remarkable thing about the American administrations is that when I go into other countries, including some British countries, it used to take me a

week or two to feel that I was getting to know the people that I was dealing with. I've never gone into Washington, even with a new administration installed, without feeling at the end of two days that I knew them all very well, and that they knew me very well, and that we were old friends. That's the sort of instinct which characterizes the two countries.

F: Thank you, Sir Robert.

M: Thank you.

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By Sir Robert Menzies

to the

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