INTERVIEWEE: Richard Neustadt

INTERVIEWER: Paige Mulhollan

M: Let's begin, sir, by identifying you. You are Richard E. Neustadt, and you are currently director of the John F. Kennedy School at Harvard.

N: I'm Associate Dean of the School and Director of the Institute of Politics.

M: Currently.

N: Currently.

M: Your various positions in the national administration during the last eight years have been primarily as consultants to various departments or agencies on special assignments for both Presidents Kennedy and President Johnson.

N: That's right.

M: Did you have any personal relationships with President Johnson prior to the time he was President?

N: Just of a very incidental sort. I met him first, I think, in '59 up in the Senate. I don't even recall the reason or occasion. I remember George Reedy--

M: Not closely.

N: I remember he was Majority Leader, and we talked about something or other. Then we had a little contact at the very beginning of his Vice Presidency.

M: You are listed occasionally as a supporter for the Presidential nomination of Mr. Johnson, after Mr. Humphrey lost in West Virginia. Did you take an active part?

N: I didn't take an active part. That certainly was my view at the time--which is sort of ironic. I went around expressing to anybody who would listen but that isn't exactly taking an active part.

M: So you weren't close to the situation--

N: I wasn't part of the apparatus.

M: Go on then with your contacts as Vice President. I didn't mean to interrupt you.

N: Bill Moyers asked me to do a report for the Vice President on the Space Council and on how he should handle himself in that--how he should set it up, how he should handle himself, what his relations ought to be. He got very coy about the report, for reasons I think I understand. He'd pass it around to all the people like Clark Clifford and Jim Webb, whom he knew and trusted, and they told him it was good advice. And he followed it pretty much, but he would never admit that his office had asked for it.

M: You said you understood that. That's somewhat typical of his task force reports sometimes when he was President. What is your understanding of that?

N: There were really two considerations. He didn't have me calibrated--that's the essential. Then, oh, there must have been all kinds of calculations. It's hard to follow, but there always are all kinds of calculations that are hard to follow.

I think that is the essential one. I was Kennedy's expert, and he was rather displeased with Bill for having asked, though pleased with the results.

M: He liked what came out but not having to go that route to get it.

N: Then shortly after that there was an immensely funny episode which was my last relation with the Vice President until well after he took office. His staff--I can't remember who it was. It wasn't Moyers. Moyers wasn't yet working for him, or Moyers had left him or was leaving him to go to the

Peace Corps. I just can't recall the timing exactly. Somebody on the Vice President's staff sent down to Ken O'Donnell a draft Executive Order--this was right after inaugural, so Bill was still there but it didn't go through his hands--and it was an immensely silly Executive Order. It delegated from the President to the Vice President all sorts of things. Ken showed it to Ralph Dungan and to me--we happened to pass through his office just after he got it--and we laughted about it. He very sensibly bundled it up and sent it back. He didn't show it to Kennedy or anything. But somebody, one of us, said, "By God, there's been nothing quite like this since Secretary Seward wrote Lincoln back in April '61."

Then that day I had lunch with Marc [Marquis] Childs. We just talked in general about life, presidencies, transitions and stuff. At the end he got off on the Vice President-President relation and how difficult it was. So I said something to the effect that it always starts badly, but my guess is it's going to come out all right. People will be edgy with each other, but they're both anxious to make it work. But the beginnings are hard and then said something like "There was, I understand, a draft memorandum from the Vice President to the President which grabbed everything in sight, sort of like Seward to Lincoln." Well, this was a "Ha,ha," I think.

Childs did really an extraordinarily irresponsible thing for Marc to do--he immediately went up on the Hill saying that he'd heard from a most responsible source a most serious allegation. This got to Johnson who was very upset. By the time it got to Johnson it was Stanton and Johnson--[Secretary Stanton and President Andrew Johnson]

M: A more serious case.

N: And one that didn't come out well. The Seward point was that when Lincoln stood firm, Seward harnessed in. They grew close. But Stanton-Johnson was more serious and less pleasant--LBJ was terribly upset, called Jack Kennedy, you know, "Who's been trying to separate us?" Jack called Kenny. Kenny puzzled and called me. I puzzled; I'd forgotten all about it and then remembered. So it all got smoothed over, and Jack Kennedy took the line, "It's just that God-damned professor," and soothed him down.

M: He did finally trace it to you.

N: Oh, sure.

M: Did he have anything to say to you directly?

N: No, I don't think I talked to him about it. Ken traced it to me--if I recall the conversation, traced it to Childs and went around in a circle--but I never talked to the President.

This made the Vice President very edgy, and finally about a month later Doug Cater had a dinner for the Neustadts and the Johnsons to sort of try to soothe the Vice President. We had a very pleasant chat. I remember at that chat he made a great point of, "That was a good memorandum I had gotten from you, but of course I didn't ask for it." The two things obviously were of some relation! Well, I was mad at myself and madder at Marc, and it didn't help matters any, but it wasn't very important. And those two--the one substantial and the other ridiculous--were the only contacts I had with the Vice President. Shortly after that dinner I went abroad and was gone all of the next academic year. Didn't see the Vice President again until the spring of '64.

M: After he had become President by then.

N: Yes.

M: Did you have a chance to see, on any occasions when you were working for President Kennedy, how much or how little Mr. Johnson was included in on the crisis decisions, the important decisions?

N: No, I have no first hand testimony to that. I have some secondhand testimony from people like Bill and Mac Bundy, but you'd do far better to get it--

M: Yes. You were gone through many of those episodes; you were abroad anyway.

N: That's right. The unanimous testimony of people like Bundy and Sorenson--I do know that Kennedy intended--we once talked about this--to have the Vice President at every God-damned meeting he could think of.

M: Presidents always start out intending to do that.

N: No, I think he did it deliberately all the way through, was my impression.

M: He was consistent in wanting to do it then?

N: Yes. But from all the discussions I had of this matter with various members of Mr. Kennedy's staff while he was President, I think the Vice President disciplined himself enormously. He would not speak unless he could speak in support of the President, and he would not offer advice unless specifically asked by the President. So he was at a hell of a lot of meetings on a hell of a lot of things, but when the President was present their impression was that he would not offer advice unasked and he made every effort to speak supportively of the President. And I have no doubt that this cost him enormously.

M: Personally?

N: Personally. There was a case where he did fight some things through, like the SST, at a level below the President and the President acceded for one reason or another. But I'm talking about meetings with the President--NSC meetings or their substitute, the smaller groups that met.

He was a very disciplined Vice President by all the secondhand accounts I've had. Now I think Kennedy genuinely wanted to keep him busy and keep him

involved. But I don't think Kennedy ever got much real advice from Johnson. But this is all secondhand, all secondhand. I wouldn't pay too much attention to it.

M: Then when he became President, what position did you occupy?

N: I had been a consultant to the President on the President's Management Improvement Fund, which is administered by the Bureau of the Budget. There were two or three of us in that category and we said to Charlie Schultze--no, it was Kermit [Gordon]--I can't remember which it was--Kermit?

M: Came first.

N: In November '63, "We ought to resign," and he checked it out. Of course, the response was "Nobody should resign from anything."

The way that consultancy worked, I was on call by senior members of the White House staff or the President and the Budget Bureau paid the bills, so that requests for my advice didn't go through the Budget Director. It was simply understood that when I was asked to do something by Sorenson or Bundy or Kennedy, I would do it. And after--if they didn't want resignations I didn't resign--but I'd really had three clients and two of them left.

The remaining one was Bundy. In the summer of '64 I was on a private trip to England and did a private non-official report for him on some aspects of our relations with the British, which all got leaked. As a result of that, when the Labor government won McNamara suggested to Bundy and Rusk that I be brought in as an ad hoc deputy to Bundy to help out on the preparations for the first Wilson visit. [interruption]

M: You had just mentioned that at the end of 1964 Mr. McNamara suggested that you be brought back in as a more or less regular ad hoc advisor to Mac Bundy.

N: This was not regular. This was a special project of getting ready for Mr. Wilson's post-election visit and the negotiations on the Multilateral Force.

M: Before you go into that, did you say clearly that you were on a private trip--

N: In June.

M: That resulted in the memo that was widely reprinted a year or so later.

N: It was reprinted four years later.

M: Four years, right. You weren't sent to do that job?

N: No, no.

M: Can you estimate Mr. Bundy's position on the substance of that issue, the MLF? Was he as neutral toward the substance of MLF as is alleged generally?

N: Yes, I think the Geyelin account is pretty good.

M: All right, that was fairly complete, too.

N: He had become a skeptic about the Multilateral Force, but the President had gotten himself committed to it. Bundy was going along, but he wanted to be absolutely sure he kept the President's options open, that the President knew what he was doing.

Since the critical discussion would be with the new British government, and our government had to get itself in order on this issue after the election, I went down for about six weeks starting in the middle of October and served for that period not as a consultant but as a temporary operative in the White House--as in effect, Bundy's staff man on MLF for a temporary period. And after our election, [I] went over to England and "fact-found" the state of preparation in the British government and the points of view of the British government and the internal politics and then had a long talk with some of our Embassy people on the Bonn situation, and then came back and participated in our preparatory sessions on the substantive issue before the British came. And then the sessions with the British.

These two sets of sessions over-ran each other. It was an occasion in which Mr. Johnson was continuing to meet with his top advisors, not having made up his mind right into the second day of the meetings with the British. It was a little confusing to the British but these two sets of meetings were going on, and some of them simultaneously.

M: You think Mr. Johnson was still undecided at that point?

N: No. I think Mr. Johnson decided--I think he only put his mind on the thing on the Saturday before the Monday when Wilson arrived. I think by Sunday night he had made up his mind he wanted out of this--or he wanted to de-committed to it, left uncommitted. He spent the next two days with his own people, quite apart from the British,""making up his mind," but I think he had done it beforehand. I think it was clear by the Sunday evening meeting that he had made up his mind probably earlier that day.

I think what turned him--I think Bundy, with some help from me, alerted him to the risks here. But I think he then did his own homework on the Hill--and mostly in the course of that Sunday. I think his calculations were essentially Hill calculations in light of what was going to happen if we pushed the British and the Germans--and in light of his desires for that Congress, that new Congress. It was a very adroit and sometimes brutal performance. It's the one occasions where I had a chance to whitness what they call the "treatment" at the White House--not of me or Bundy, not of me because I was there temporarily, on loan, an outsider in effect, although doing an inside job, but technical in effect, and not Mac because I don't think he ever had Mac calibrated, and people he didn't have calibrated he didn't beat up on. But the hazing of some of the others was fascinating to watch.

M: The hazing was purpose, or hazing just as an outlet for his own tension?

N: I don't think it was just as an outlet. My impression was that it was all very purposeful.

M: And of his staff people.

N: Oh, of McNamara, George Ball, even of Dean Acheson a little bit--and that famous exchange, "Now take Dean here, the man who got us into the Korean War, couldn't get us out, and had to call in Dwight Eisenhower to do it for him!"

M: There are a small number of people who do that to Dean Acheson, I suspect.

N: Dean answered back--was the only one who did. No, some of it may be tension, but my impression is that Mr. Johnson had a fine eye for the human vulnerabilities of people he was working with and looked for that soft spot and then turned the knife in it as a means of attaching people more securely. There may have been also, you know, a streak like the Franklin Roosevelt streak, of just liking to pull the wings off flies.

But this one occasion was the only time I really saw this aspect. I thought it was maybe instinctual but not unpurposeful.

M: Did he deal with you personally, or did you deal entirely through Bundy?

N: No, he dealt with me--he didn't deal with me independent of Mac but he dealty with me--I mean, I did have some dealings with him personally, although in most of those sessions I was the silent note taker, Bundy's note taker. I didn't talk much. I did when I was asked a specific question or when there was something I knew from just having been abroad that he wanted to hear about.

Then after that was over I guess I was simultaneously serving on one of those task forces. It was a Moyers task force. After that was over, I did a little advisory work for Bundy from time to time during the spring and nothing directly for the President. Then the fall of '65, it seems

to me, he had Califano get hold of me about, of all things, four-year terms for Congressmen. That's just a hilarious and ridiculous story, not worth repeating.

M: I don't know. If it's hilarious and ridiculous, it's probably well worth repeating.

N: No, no, it isn't. I talked to the President on the phone a couple of times, but I didn't actually see him. He just played me--he got a bee in his bonnet about this. He wanted something that would get him--I'm interpreting. I told him not to touch this one with a ten foot pole unless he was sure he had the votes, and the Attorney General, then, I guess was Katzenbach, gave him comparable advice. So he decided to put it in the State of the Union Message. I suspect, from what Joe Califano told me, what he really wanted was a surprise--a surprise, an applause line. Then, when it began to turn sour--which it did right away of course, the House seniors are not a bit interested in this particular reform--he told Katzenbach he had done it on my advice; he told me he had done it on Katzenbach's advice. He got Califano and Katzenbach to call me and beg me to go testify as a private citizen and a professor which I felt obliged to do. He played with us a little. Now how conscious this was I don't know.

M: It made a convenient way to get out of it after it began to go bad.

N: Then Joe [Califano] started calling me up for advice, became a client. Then Bundy left and while I have known Walt Rostow for a number of years and we have had perfectly good relations, I was so out of sympathy with his personal views on Viet Nam and with his general operating style--his tendency to ask for advice and engage in a three hour monologue--that I never went near Walt. So the only client in that sense became Califano, who used to

call me always alleging that it was the President's instance--which of course it usually wasn't--on a variety of domestic issues--and then getting academic people together to onsult and help on task forces and stuff like that.

Then quite by accident I was down there one day and Joe and Bill Wirtz, whom I have known for years and with whom I had once served on a Taft-Hartley panel, trapped me, literally trapped me into having luch with the President where I was trapped into serving on a panel on the American Airline mechanics dispute. [I was] mad as hell about it. That took six weeks out of my life, and the White House mismanaged it a little bit. The President mismanaged it himself a little bit.

M: In what way?

N: In working out a deal with Meany before the mechanics had had a chance to turn down the board report. We'd assumed they'd vote down the first report. In union democracy, it's a tradition they have. Especially this union at this time the White House got committed to the Board's report and to a deal with the AFL-CIO--Meany was supposed to influence the union; he couldn't. Then that's what got repudiated, you know.

M: The White House let itself be repudiated when it didn't have to do so.

N: Yes. We could have been repudiated--the Board. That's what I'd expected. Anyway, I wasn't there that day, so I don't know why. We'd finished our work and gone home. Then I don't really recall when I next saw the President.

We had a couple of marvelous conversations in the course of that. I was down one night after one of our hearings and went in to collect Joe. He was in with the President and Harry McPherson so they called me in and the President obviously didn't want to go home to dinner. He had some guest from Texas, and he clearly didn't want to see them. He had one of these long magnificent monologues for three hours in that little bitty office off

the Oval Office. Then he took us over to the house where Mrs. Johnson in her usual adroit fashion smoothed things over; let Harry off to go see his dinner guests, it now being eleven o'clock; saw that the President, Joe and I got fed. It was the night after Meredith had been shot on that walk of his. The President's capacity to take punishment for no reason was beautifully revealed that night because he sat at the table in that little family dining room that they built on the second floor with these Texas State Teacher's College guests of his, and Joe and I and Mrs. Johnson--with that God-damned button TV switch at his place--and had his bowl of chili. The 11 o'clock news, and he has to watch all three of them, switching from one to another, and each time see this unpleasant business repeated: the shooting, the commentary, his own statement. Then he went to bed. I suppose it had been that he'd been avoiding all evening and perhaps not the company.

M: Right.

N: But his monologue about his early years in Texas and why he hated cops.

M: Now that's one I haven't heard.

N: Why he hated cops, how he'd always hated cops--and what he and his seventeen year old friends had done to the sheriff of-- they burned down a barn and I've forgotten--the flavor was superb, and as an old Trumanite I'm just an absolute sucker for this particular flavor. But it was a wonderful hour. One of those hours was on why he hated cops. He always hated cops. He had grown up on the wrong side of the tracks, and if you grew up on the wrong side of the tracks you hated cops. Then what he had done to the cops, or he and his boy friends.

I'm late for a lunch that I have to run off to.

M: Can I have five or ten minutes more here?

N: I'll give you one minute. Let me just run--you may have to come back because I really can't be any later.

After '66 there was some discontinuous exchange with Joe on particular things. I do not recall any further personal sessions with the President.

M: The only other things that I really thought might be important to talk with you about are things that are in a way general and in a way related to some of your writings--although I have no desire to duplicate anything you've put in print a number of times. Such questions as, for example, you referred awhile ago to his doing his work on the Hill in regard to the MLF. Is there such a thing as a Congressional provincial president, a man who because of his thirty years with one branch is too narrow to see the rest of it? This is the type of question, and I'll be happy to come back.

N: I think we better try to treat those separately and let me ruminate separately.

M: Why don't I either try to come back either when I'm in Cambridge again or today or tomorrow.

N: Will you be in Cambridge again?

M: I will be, yes, sir, for sure.

N: Well, let's do it then your next time up because--

M: I have an appointment with Mr. Bator this afternnon and tomorrow morning, and I can come after that one tomorrow morning.

N: Why don't we see if that will work. He and I are both inundated by these students, and now we're going to have faculty meetings.

M: I understand. This turned out to be a very bad day.

N: Let's try to grab half an hour to finish up.

M: That's fine and if we can't then when I come back to town--

N: Yes, we can talk generally about the presidency.

M: Good, fine.

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By Richard Neustadt

to the

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