INTERVIEW IV

DATE: January 10, 1969

INTERVIEWEE: PAUL NITZE

INTERVIEWER: DOR OTHY PIERCE

Tape 3

P: Mr. Nitze, I believe this is our fourth interview. Today is Friday, January 10, and we're in your offices at 4:15 in the afternoon. I'd like to ask during this session some questions on the organization of the Defense Department, and some round-up questions.

Just to begin with you, Mr. Nitze, have been both the service secretary and the department of defense secretary; and drawing from the experience, do you think that the Defense Department is properly organized and consolidated both now and for the years to come?

N: That's a somewhat difficult question to answer. Frankly I think the Defense Department is a very well organized department today. I think it runs surprisingly smoothly and efficiently for an organization of this size. I have the impression that decisions are arrived at with better information, more accurately, more promptly, and with more dispatch and vigor in this Department perhaps than in any other agency of the U.S. government. I think much progress was made in perfecting the organization of the Defense Department in previous administrations. I think Mr. [Robert] McNamara contributed substantially to further improving the organization. And I think during Mr. [Clark] Clifford's time it has had a chance to demonstrate how smoothly it could work and without being further changed. Mr. Clifford came in a year ago, and the transition was very smooth indeed, and the whole Department mobilized itself to his support; and I

think he also would testify that this is really a very good instrument for carrying out the policies decided by the secretary of defense and the president.

P: There have been some charges that OSD [Office of the Secretary of Defense] has become over-centralized and over-staffed. What is your view of that?

N: That is not my view. My view is that it is important that our military establishment be responsive to the will of the president and the national security council. In fact I can think of nothing more important than that the military establishment be continuously responsible to those top level decisions of the president and his advisers. And this is not easy to do. One looks at almost any other country that has got a big and effective military establishment; they've had great difficulties in assuring that it wasn't the military that ran the government, but the government that ran the military. And during Mr. Johnson's administration, I can guarantee that it has been he and his civilian advisers who have made the decision, and it hasn't been the other way around. And I deeply believe that this is the way it should be.

P: Have the changes affected the decision-making process, particularly in times of crisis where there is a need for immediate council of war, so to speak to arrive at policy decisions or movements to make?

N: I'm sorry; I missed the point of the question.

P: How has this affected the decision-making machinery in times of critical situations where you--and this is a tremendous department--and of course you have dealings with the State Department. Have these changes affected your ability to make these decisions in times of crisis?

N: Yes, I think the decisions during the Cuban missile crisis--just to take that as the most notable crisis--I think those decisions were made with the best inputs from the joint chiefs of staff and the military services, from the staff working for Mr. McNamara. I lived through all that period, and I think it's fair to say that the Defense Department was as responsive and as productive as any organization in the government.

P: Would you recommend any changes?

N: Yes, obviously all situations can over time be improved. I don't think it's fair to say that the decision-making process is centralized in the office of the secretary to the exclusion of other parts of the structure. Clearly no organization as large as this--after all, there are five million people who work in one way or another directly for Mr. Clifford--can operate without a decentralized organization. The question is how does one decentralize, and what degree of policy control does one maintain. Certainly all the tactical decisions in Vietnam are made by General [Creighton Williams] Abrams and his staff in Vietnam. When it came to those interfaces between military decisions and political decisions--such as target selection in North Vietnam the question of degree of operations in Laos, or the degree of operations tending toward affecting Cambodia--those things are political-military decisions. They should come to the president and the secretary of state and the secretary of defense, and they do.

So the process of organizing this thing correctly is to be able to delegate to the right centers of authority all the decision-making that can and should be effectively made at that level, but seeing to it that that is monitored and controlled by higher echelons; and that those things which do affect the interface between the military and other

considerations should in fact go up to the right level for decision and for the right coordination with the State Department, the Treasury, the Bureau of the Budget, Department of Commerce, or whatever it is. And frankly I think the way the organization is set up today, this works very well indeed.

P: Do you think Mr. McNamara's management--reorganizations--have solidified civilian control?

N: I think they did, yes.

P: What is your opinion of the quite frequent--

N: Frankly the problem isn't so much the question of civilian versus military control as it is the question of policy control. After all, General [Earle] Wheeler participates in the Tuesday luncheons with the President; he participates in the determination of policy, and he is a military man. The question at issue is whether the policy as determined by the President after consulting with his advisers is in fact carried out. So the issue is not civilian control versus military--it's whether top level policy decisions which are participated in by the military, whether those are then carried out and effectively carried out by the next echelon.

P: Then you don't see any substance to the charge when it arises that the civilian control has prevailed over the seasoned military mind?

N: Generally those who have made this argument have not been those who have had seasoned military minds.

P: That's a very good answer. Mr. Nitze, as you have already mentioned, Mr. Clifford has been secretary of defense now for almost a year. How would you compare Mr. Clifford

and Mr. McNamara in terms of style and pace and decision-making, delegation of authority?

N: They're really two quite different men. Mr. McNamara was determined to understand and be sure that he understood all the various important things that went on in the Pentagon, and really to get more detailed control and understanding of the questions of logistics, of base structure, of pay scales, of logistic guidance, of a thousand and one different things. And he did institute a system of the five-year force level and financial plan and a number of management tools which enabled him and his associates to see where the major issues were and be able to intervene with some degree of information and intelligence in what was going on and straighten it out and really get a more effective defense establishment. This required a tremendous amount of work on his part, and as a result of it, he acquired a very detailed and intimate knowledge of a thousand and one different aspects of the Defense Department.

When Mr. Clifford came in, he had for many years been a close adviser to President Johnson; had for even longer period had experience in advising Presidents--particularly Mr. Truman, he had been General Counsel to Mr. Truman. Even before he became secretary of defense he used to, I think, normally be consulted by the President for two or three or sometimes as many as six hours a day. So that Mr. Clifford was one of the President's close confidantes; he was more than a confidante really--one of his principal advisers. And when he took over the job of secretary of defense, President Johnson made it clear to him that in addition to being secretary of defense he was to continue being a general adviser to the President. Therefore, Mr. Clifford spent much

more of his time either in telephonic communication with the President or at the White House than did Mr. McNamara. His style of operation also has been one of greater deliberateness. He has wished to consider each issue that he was either asked to decide or asked to make a recommendation on to the President with great care, consulting with a number of people, being sure as to the wisdom of his recommendation before he made it. Therefore just from the standpoint of utilizing his time wisely, it was impossible for him to deal with the mass of detail that Mr. McNamara used to deal with. Therefore, whereas in Mr. McNamara's time the deputy's job was largely that of being an alter ego, of helping him on this mass of decisions and being able to handle it when he was out of town or otherwise engaged, but Mr. McNamara dealt with all the substantive detail. For Mr. Clifford this was not the right course of action, and that is not what he did. What he did was to concentrate upon his relations with the White House, and the important issues which the President was seized of--primarily Vietnam, but also NATO; and such other issues as the President was interested in; and to leave largely to me that detailed work which I previously worked on with Mr. McNamara.

P: Can you say that the department as a whole works better or less under either one of these approaches, dictated by the personalities of the men?

N: That's hard to say. I think there were more changes and perhaps forward changes in the organization and administration of the Defense Department during Mr. McNamara's period. Frankly I think the department has perhaps run more smoothly under Mr. Clifford. There haven't been as many changes, but it has operated more smoothly. And I think one of the reasons therefore is that Mr. Clifford has felt it wise not only to keep me

fully informed as to what he was doing, but also to keep the small group that he meets with every morning at 8:30 fully advised as to everything that he was doing; but also beyond that to keep a larger group including the joint chiefs of staff, the service secretaries, and the assistant secretaries of defense generally very fully informed of all the things that he had done during the preceding week at his Monday morning Armed Forces Policy Council meeting where he has been very clear and forthright in discussing with them and getting their views on everything that he has been doing, which means that the high command in a broader sense has thoroughly understood the way in which decisions have been arrived at, so with that better understanding they have been better able to carry out the policies.

P: During your time here in the Defense Department, how would you assess the department's relations with Congress?

N: The relationship between the executive branch and the legislative branch is bound to be in part an adversary relationship; particularly there is a competition for power and influence between the legislative branch and the executive branch. And the important committees of the Congress are very jealous of their prerogatives and their authority. So there is bound to be some degree of conflict between the two branches. I think many people think that Mr. McNamara's relations with Congress were not good; I don't share that view. Certainly during the first five years of Mr. McNamara's incumbency in office, he got through the Congress every single important thing that he had his heart in. Now this isn't to say the Congress loved him, but it is to say that he was effective in getting through the Congress the things that he thought were important.

Toward the end of his tour of duty, some of the Congressmen came to resent the fact that Mr. McNamara had been so successful during the preceding years, and began to throw road blocks in his way. But even then the things on which he was defeated were by and large minor things. Mr. [Lucius Mendel?] Rivers, for instance, got the Congress to decree by law that Mr. McNamara's decision that the Navy was to give up the dairy at Annapolis could not be done; Mr. McNamara was defeated on that. It was an item which amounted to sixty thousand dollars of government expense net. He was also defeated on the proposition that the naval districts might be consolidated with some saving and expense. But after all none of these things go to the heart of Defense policy.

P: Do you think there could have been better relations, or things could have been better handled between these two branches, specifically Defense Department and Congress?

N: Not really, I don't think so. In detail, yes. Obviously nothing works perfectly in detail. But by and large the important thing is to formulate important, wise programs, and to secure the authority of Congress to execute them. And this has been done. It depends on what your standard is of perfection. If one's standard is that there should be no stories in the press about conflicts between the department and the executive and the legislative branch, you're not going to get anything done. If one's standard is what programs have you developed, have you gotten them through the Congress, or haven't you gotten them through the Congress, even though there has been a good deal of friction in the process, I would opt for the second as being the correct standard, not the first.

P: And this has not put any obstructions in your way or made progress or procedure more difficult?

N: I don't think so. But we worked very hard to keep our relations with the Congress in as good shape as we could, while still fighting for the programs we thought were right.

P: To depart a little from Defense, I would like your views on what you feel the reason is for what is constantly harped upon as being the lack of public understanding of our involvement in Vietnam.

N: That certainly hasn't been due to any lack of attempt to explain our involvement in Vietnam. It isn't really a question of understanding. I think everybody understands the Vietnamese war pretty darned well. The question is a deeper one, and that is whether one agrees with our policy in Vietnam.

P: Do you think that the Defense Department could have possibly explained in 1965 and at the beginning of the build-up the long, what's called lead time, needed to sort of fill the pipeline to bring everything to the very height needed for--

N: I wasn't aware that anybody has had a feeling that we underestimated the time involved; in fact, I thought everybody was really quite surprised at the speed with which--

P: I meant the public, not the Defense--

N: Well, I'm talking about the public. I really do not believe that many people in the spring of 1965 thought that it would be possible for us to move two hundred thousand men to Vietnam and fully supply equipment within one year's time.

P: I'm thinking of terms of people thinking you win in a day or--

N: That's quite a different thing.

P: Or you lose in a day, and your troops come home the next, which is not the way--

N: The way you phrased the question was, you said could we better explain the lead time in

getting the men over there. We got the men over there faster than anybody thought we would, and better equipped than anybody thought we would.

P: I meant on the larger--

N: But the question as to what the probable difficulties would be of translating that deployment of men and equipment into a military victory--I think if one reads Mr. McNamara's testimony and his press statements during that period, he really was very cautious about any estimate about rapid victory. Prior to 1965 I remember Mr. McNamara believed and so stated that he thought things were going well and that the war would be over, that the situation would be greatly improved in some given period of time. But I don't remember that after 1965 Mr. McNamara made any statements which indicated excessive optimism about the state of the war. The complaints against him really were that he was too cautious.

P: Mr. Nitze, how would you just in an overall view describe the relation between the president and the defense department during the last five years?

N: Well, the president is commander-in-chief.

P: Would you like to elaborate on that?

N: And that's the way we view it.

P: I'm thinking in terms of your relationships day-to-day, and any other elaboration on that.

N: No, I haven't any other elaboration on that.

P: From your position what do you think is the main factor of Mr. Johnson's unpopularity?

N: I'm not sure that he's that unpopular. When one looks back to the period, I guess it was '64-'65 when he was having his difficulties with the press about turning out the lights in

the White House and his long debates with Scotty Reston, I think the feeling arose not only in the press, but in a wider community that the President was expecting more loyalty, more understanding, and more sympathy from the press than was realistic to expect. I think they had the feeling that he did not understand the fact that there was again a normal adversary relationship between any president and the press, and that he would just have to live with that normal adversary relationship.

P: To what do you attribute the rise of the expression "credibility gap" and what it implies?

N: I never thought there was much merit to the idea of the credibility gap. Frankly I thought it was more a gap in sympathy than in credibility.

P: How do you think history will view Lyndon Johnson's administration?

N: As a vigorous, productive, and in some ways tragic administration.

P: Why do you say tragic?

N: Because I think there has been a misunderstanding between President Johnson and the American public.

P: What do you see that as?

N: Well, it goes back to what we were talking about before--there has been an emotional relationship but not a happy emotional relationship. If one contrasts FDR's relationship to the American public, that was an emotional relationship, but it was a happy emotional relationship. This one I do not think has been a happy emotional relationship on either the President's part or the American public's part.

P: What was your reaction to his withdrawal on March 31st?

N: Surprise and amazement.

P: Did you think the situation in this country and of course our involvement in Vietnam and other extra-national influences were the responsibility for this?

N: I don't know. I thought undoubtedly there were many considerations which had entered into his mind; I thought it was probably true what he said, and that was he felt that the important thing was to solve this South Vietnamese issue, and that if he were to be a candidate his decisions would be looked upon as being motivated more by party political considerations than by pure considerations of national interest. And that therefore in the interest of the country, this was the wiser decision for him to make.

P: Do you think that has been true?

N: Yes, I think in part it has been. I think it would have been very difficult for him to have made, for instance, the decision he made in the October 31st speech had he been a candidate for election on November 6th.

P: The bombing halt.

Mr. Nitze, at the beginning of our interview you mentioned that you had had one other interview of this kind with a history project.

N: Dorothy Fosdick on--

P: Was it the Kennedy history project?

N: Yes.

P: These things of course will connect and be accessible to scholars in both areas. Do you have any changes or corrections or additions to that information that you gave then?

N: I can't remember one word of the information I gave her.

P: All right. We've had a very interesting and long interview and covered superficially at

least a great many subjects. Do you have any further comment on anything we discussed or have not talked about.

N: No, I don't think I do.

P: I'd like to thank you very much.

N: Thank you.

End of Interview IV

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By Paul Henry Nitze

to the

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