INTERVIEWER: PAIGE MULHOLLAN

INTERVIEWEE: HENRY D. OWEN

December 18, 1968

M: This is an interview with Mr. Henry D. Owen, presently Chief of the Policy Planning Council of the Department of State, a position which you have occupied since exactly when sir?

O: When Walt Rostow went over to the White House in March of 1966 I became acting chairman of the Policy Planning Council and then I was assigned to the job on a permanent basis in June of 66.

M: I believe you have been with the Policy Council in some capacity or another since 1955, is that correct?

O: That's correct.

M: Did you ever have an instance of contact with Mr. Johnson during the period before he became President, either as Senator or Vice President?

O: Yes. When he went on a trip, I believe in 1961, to Africa and then to Europe, he asked Mr. Acheson to do a speech on European policy for him and I was then working with Mr. Acheson on some NATO and Berlin studies. Mr. Acheson asked me to prepare the speech, I did, and the Vice President liked it and then asked me to work on several other speeches when he was Vice President.

M: How did Mr. Johnson go about assigning a speech of that type? Does he give you pretty full free reign, or does he give you pretty clear guidelines?

O: In the case of the speeches that I did for him when he was Vice President as I remember, Mrs. Carpenter called me and told me what the speech was about and what the general guidelines would be and

sometimes I believe Horace Busby spoke to me about it, and sometimes he would send down an outline, and I'd write the speech, or I'd write the outline and he'd write the speech.

But altogether there weren't more than two or three or four of these speeches.

M: You are one of the few people who provide the kind of continuity that gives you a perspective on this Policy Planning operations here, from 1955 to the present, can you give me an estimate on the changing role or a comparison of the role of the Policy Council under the three Presidents under which you have served here?

O: Yes. That's President Eisenhower, President Kennedy and President Johnson. I'd say the more important variable from the standpoint of the Policy Planning Council is the Secretary of State. Now insofar as the President's personality comes to bear on it's work, I'd say the comparison was this: during the Eisenhower period you had a very elaborate and very formal NSC machinery and the Policy Planning Council made an input into that, the head of the Policy Planning Council, which was then called the Policy Staff used to sit on the NSC planning board, he'd attend their meetings two or three days a week and he was deeply involved in their work. President Kennedy abolished that NSC machinery by and large, and the President's contacts with the Policy Planning Council during the Kennedy Administration were largely personal, and then Walt Rostow knew the President and would sometimes go over to see him or send him special papers. This was a rather limited link, but it was there. When President Johnson became President, at first the same thing continued, but then the link became somewhat more personal. Walt got to know

the President better, got to send him more papers, and have more frequent contacts with him and this of course finally led to his going over to the White House. In my case, in December of 1964, the President asked if I would come over and join the White House staff. I had then worked on a speech dealing with European policy which he gave in Georgetown and which he liked. I spoke to Bill Moyers and we both agreed that probably I would be as useful or more useful to the President by staying in the State Department than if I joined the White House staff, and Bill spoke to the President. And it was agreed that I would stay in the State Department, that from time to time I would send memoranda giving my thoughts on speeches or anything else for that matter directly to the President, always providing the Secretary of State with a copy of what I sent the President, so from then on I followed this channel and had reasonably direct access to the President through it.

M: There are always, of course, the press stories that the President's habits of calling up officials in various levels frequently at odd times. Has this ever happened to you?

O: No. It never happened to me while I was in the Policy Planning Council, I don't believe it happened but very seldom to Walt.

M: What about the relations of the Council to the White House Staff? Have those changed markedly between say the Kennedy period and the President Johnson period?

O: The President Kennedy period--well it's different--I suppose [it's] more a matter of their personality of the Special Assistant for National Security than the President. When Mac Bundy was there, Walt had contacts with Mac Bundy, now that Walt is there, I've had

contacts with Walt. But I think these contacts have been more a function of the personal relations between Walt and Mac and between Walt and myself, than between the Presidents and the Chairman of the Council, so we're talking of the staff relations.

M: So the personality of the people who held the jobs were the determining factor there.

O: That's correct.

M: You mentioned the more controlling element being the Secretary of State awhile ago. Didn't Mr. Kennan once say that he resigned when he lost direct access to the Secretary of State?

O: What Mr. Kennan said was that he resigned because there was some alleged requirement that he should clear papers with the regional bureaus before submitting them to the Secretary of State. In my knowledge of the Council, which goes back to 1951 when Paul Nitze was here, there's never been such a requirement. I think the Council would be unworkable if there were such a requirement. The head of the Council has always had direct access to the Secretary under Mr. Acheson, Governor Herter, and Mr. Rusk. I think the frequency of access has been less under Mr. Rusk than it was under Mr. Acheson and Governor Herter, partly because Acheson and Herter both personally knew the head of the Council before they became head of the Council whereas Walt and I, Mr. Rusk knew only as a bureaucrats rather than personal acquaintances. And secondly, because I think Mr. Rusk's tendency has been to rely more on the line bureaus in the State Department and less on separate staff operations than perhaps Mr. Acheson and Mr. Dulles and Governor Herter. Even there, it's awfully hard to generalize, Mr. Dulles had a very close relationship with Bob Bowie, who was head or chairman of the Policy Planning Council.

Mr. Acheson I think had a somewhat less close relationship with Paul Nitze and in any event used Paul more for odd jobs, rather than merely for policy palling. So I guess what you'd really have to say is the relationship between the council and the Secretary of State has been a function of so many different variables in terms of personality and attitudes that it's very hard to draw a straight line generalization through this period.

M: One of those difficult things to trace is the generation of ideas in a major department. Who assigns the planning projects to the Policy Planning Council in the Johnson Administration.

O: I'd say in every Administration by and large the Policy Planning Council's work is self-generating; we think of our own ideas.

M: You don't get a call from the White House staff saying, do a paper on something or other or this type--

O: Some times you'll get a request from the White House staff or from the Secretary to look at a certain problem. The most common trigger for that kind of a phone call was an upcoming Presidential speech and they want some new idea or initiative to put into it.

M: Was the Policy Planning Council a frequent contributor to Mr. Johnson's speeches as President?

O: I think Walt contributed some when he was here. I haven't really contributed greatly in terms of speech language. From time to time I've given ideas, substantive ideas to go into speeches to Walt or to Harry McPherson or directly to the President, but I have not, as far as I can remember, worked much on drafts of Presidential speeches while I was here, except on the President's October 1966 speech on Europe, which Zbigniew Brzezinski and I did quite a bit of work on.

M: When you have an idea in the Council and work it up into an substantive approach of some kind, how do you get it into the action channel?

O: Send it as a memo to the Secretary.

M: Is there anyway you can then lobby it forward?

O: Oh sure. I can go and talk to him about it, or I can ask for a meeting in which other interested areas in the department will discuss the idea. The Secretary is very good in responding to any request for a meeting, he's very good in reading any paper; and papers that we send him get read, anytime we've asked for a meeting on the subject of such a paper he convenes the meeting, so I'd say there's been no limitation on our ability to get his attention on our own initiative other than our own ability to think up ideas to bring to his attention.

M: The reason I'm pursuing this is because I suppose the most frequent criticism of the State Department, not only in the Johnson Administration, but frequently I suppose, is that there is this bureaucratic resistance to new ideas at every level. Is that an exaggeration or is that an accurate--

O: I think there's a measure of truth to it, by and large. People who have line of responsibility have a natural instinct to want to continue what they are doing and to be suspicious of advice from people like the Policy Planning Council who don't have to assume the operational consequences of their own advice. I suppose this is a natural and healthy skepticism on their part. So that it isn't the easiest thing in the world to put over a new idea. Generally, new ideas will

flourish best when there's some immediate requirement that has to be met--a speech that has to be given, a crisis that has to be met--then people reach out beyond the normal routine and are more receptive to new proposals.

M: One of the new ideas at least one time that got to be an old idea before it was through, and the one I suppose you're closely connected with in the public image is of course the multilateral force thing.

O: That is correct.

M: I suppose the best question is simply, can you tell me the true story, who the players were, how it originated, what happen, Mr. Johnson's role?

O: A full story would take a long time, but let me give you a short story. It originated in 1960 when Bob Bowie, a former head of the Policy Planning Council, was brought down to prepare a report for Secretary Herter on NATO over the next ten years. And the main new idea in this report was the multilateral force, and that idea was then accepted and approved by the Eisenhower Administration. The idea was endorsed without great enthusiasm in Mr. Acheson's report on NATO in 1961. In 1962, it surfaced in a speech President Kennedy gave to the Canadian Parliament. Nothing much happened then until Gerard Smith and Admiral Lee of the Navy were sent to give European countries some more information on the force in the fall of 1962. This was because General Norstad was proposing medium range missiles for NATO forces and the US position was that we didn't want to provide that for national ownership and manning but would be willing to provide them through the multilateral force. But we weren't particularly anxious to provide the missiles and they [the Europeans]

thought this was such a complicated way that probably nothing would happen.

Then in January of '63, DeGaulle vetoed the British admission into the Common market and the Germans and the Italians, who were both rather incensed over the fact that we had sold medium range missiles to the British at Nassau for national ownership and manning, asked so what about them? And these two events taken together triggered a greater U.S. and European interest in the multilateral force, so Ambassador Merchant was brought in to head up the Smilth-Lee team and go out for an extensive round of discussions with the Europeans.

The curve rises until the summer of '63 when President Kennedy visited Europe and was told by MacMillan that the British government was not in a position for domestic political reasons to go ahead. President Kennedy then put the idea on the back burner for awhile. President Johnson of course came to power that fall and in the spring he had a meeting with the main protagonists and antagonists of the idea in the White House and decided, okay, let's go ahead and see if we can do this. And an attempt was made to move forward, Ambassador Finletter of Paris was very vigorous, and it became clear in the end that the matter would hinge on whether the British did or did not accept the idea. It was an election in Britain and the Labor government was returned and Wilson came here in December of 64. Before the President had a series of meetings on the problem, and the most important factor I think was that he found out that congressional opinion, partly perhaps because they hadn't been briefed adequately, was largely adverse. I think that was determining in his mind, and he decided then that he would not push the idea. The British were delighted to be let off

the hook and that was in effect the death of the idea. That's a short history of the MLF.

M: The intimations are made that somebody that's very active, the theologians, Cabal, depending on who you read--

O: You're well informed--

M: --were trying to commit the President to something either surreptitiously or without his full knowledge of what was goin on, why is this intimation made?

O: I guess you'd have to ask the people who made that--so far as I know, both Finletter in Paris and Gerry Smith who succeeded Livie Merchant in Washington kept within the guidelines that the President had laid down at this meeting in March or April of '64. I think several possible explanations: a) they may have misunderstood him, b) there's a natural tendency I think when you have a situation in which some people are enthusiastically for an idea and other people are more cautious, and there were others in the government who were more cautious, the natural tendency to think that the enthusiasts are straining at the leash as they are, and the enthusiasts think that the cautious people were holding them back, and out of the situation I think there just naturally comes a series of mutual resentments and recriminations in which the enthusiasts say that the cautious people are undercutting the President and the cautious people say that the enthusiasts are getting ahead of the President, and it's the job of historians like yourself to figure out who was right.

M: That's why I'm here. To find out your side, which is as yet as far as I know has not surfaced. This has a reputation of being bitter

bureaucratic fight did it get pretty tough?

O: I don't think it was all that bitter. You may want to talk to other people, Gerry Smith, Mac Bundy, I'd say the leading cautioneer was Mac Bundy, the leading enthusiast was Gerry Smith, George Ball maybe also, I don't think between these people there's any bitterness; there certainly hasn't been any bitterness between Mac and myself. We've remained good friends. I think there was sharp substantive difference but I don't believe that it got to the point of personal animosity, at least I wasn't exposed to any.

M: Frequently the President is charged with looking with disfavor who propose policy he doesn't ultimately accept, any of the people involved in the theologian group lose their jobs or get threatened for loss of jobs? Gerry Smith resigned--

O: Well, we'll come to that in a minute. But I think that's obviously not true since Walt Rostow who was one of the leading theologians and I were both promoted after the demise of the MLF, so it's clear there was no retribution. Gerry did leave, and that happened I think because George Ball felt that he had a better idea of pushing the basic concept if there were not a special office dealing with the multi-lateral force with high visibility. And Gerry, who divined what was in George Ball's mind, offered his resignation and George Ball accepted it. There was no indication whatsoever that the White House wanted Gerry's resignation.

M: Was there a division on the policy between those people who were very great adherents of the disarmament schemes such as the non-proliferation treaty?

O: Oh, yes. Foster at the meeting in April, '64 argued against the MLF,

Foster and the people in ACDA were opponents all the way through.

But I don't think they can fairly be blamed for its demise. They kept their opposition within the limits of bureaucratic practice. I think the decisive factor was congressional attitudes. Now whether congressional attitudes could have been changed if we had briefed the Congress more effectively I don't know, but due to a series of tactical and timing problems we never did get a chance adequately to brief the Congress and the President finding himself in December, '64 in a situation in which he would have to really put the arm on the British and do it in a way in which it would become publicly evident that he was putting on the arm and then finding himself without the secure congressional base in which to do this, felt he was in an impossible situation.

I don't think that opponents of the MLF, either ACDA or Mac Bundy, can fairly be blamed for the failure to brief the Congress; it was just one of those things. I think the ACDA people were simply upholding their interest which was disarmament and I think Mac Bundy was simply doing his job, which was to protect the President's options. He and I exchanged letters when he was leaving the government and he said then, I think rightly, that he and I had both been doing what was proper in the jobs we held. His job was to keep open the President's options and my job was to push new ideas as hard as I could.

M: There's no doubt that perhaps the MLF was sacrificed as a quid pro quo for the the NPT?

O: No. Oh, well that came much later. In 1966, I guess it was, in the course of the NPT negotiations, the U.S. government did sacrifice

a corpse, not a living body.

M: But the NPT does pretty well foreclose the possibility of some revival of this type of scheme?

O: The only kind of collective force you could have under the NPT would be if a federated European state had emerged, and that's obviously a long, long way off, if ever.

M: One of the recent writers, regarding the whole episode, said that in a way Czechoslovakia--the invasion of Czechoslovakia was an MLF without tears--

O: In what?

M: This is Andrew Copkin. And that is accomplished some of what the MLF adherents had hoped to accomplish without the drawbacks of the program itself had. Is that a fair statement?

O: Oh, no, no. The MLF was an approach to a series of problems which Czechoslovakia has not helped resolve one way or the other. The problem was how to apportion nuclear responsibility between the U.S. and Europe. The Europeans aren't prepared to leave the nuclear responsibility entirely in American hands--vi the fact that the British and the French both have national forces--so then the question is in what form should the Europeans participate in nuclear adherents? Well either you can do it through national forces, as the British and the French now do, or you can do it through some sort of joint force. If it's to be a joint force, it could be one of two kinds, either a European force or an Atlantic force. We thought at the time of the MLF that the Atlantic force was better, at least to start with, because it kept closer linkls between the U.S. and Europe. Now that option has been shot down; therefore what you are now back to

is either a continuation of a separate national nuclear forces, which have obvious disadvantages in terms of their divisive effect within Europe and the discrimination they imply against Germany, or a joint European force which would remedy those difficulties but would not involve as close links between the U.S. and Europe as the MLF would have. I don't think the invasion of Czechoslovakia bears one way or another on these issues.

M: When you get a issue like this that is of some technical complication, does the President--in this case President Johnson--really in your opinion understand all of the implications of the proposal and the alternatives involved?

O: I don't think the issues here were technical; I think they were political, and I think the President understood those very well. I think he understood the issue of discrimination against Germany better than 95 percent of the people in the U.S. government. I think he understood what the MLF was about. I think he just found himself in a situation in which, because of congressional opinion, it seemed to him either impossible or too costly to prosecute the idea, but I don't think this reflected any lack of understanding of the idea on his part.

M: You did a study that has been mentioned several times regarding dissent which of course has become a major problem in that last couple of years in President Johnson's Administration. How have you accounted--

O: Now which study is this?

M: Didn't you do a study on dissent in the academy, the academic critics of the Viet Nam policy particularly?

O: No, we did a paper on youth attitudes, that may be what you're refering to.

M: Maybe what I'm driving out, let me make clear what I'm trying to get to, the academic community seems to have felt that the Administration has never adequately explained what it was doing, at least they don't seem to be able to talk to each other. Did you'all look into what the nature of that dissent was?

O: No, we didn't. I'm puzzled at your reference, the only thing that is at all related that I can think of is the paper which Ed Doherty prepared in the last year on youth attitudes on foreign policy. We had a meeting with this and the Secretary about a week ago.

M: What about the academic dissent? The Policy Planning Council used to have good contacts in the academic community. Have these suffered because of Viet Nam?

O: No, I think we have excellent contacts in the academic community, we have a wide range of consultants, we get them in, we show them our papers, including a number of critics of the Viet Nam war, like Mr. Reischauer at Harvard. No, I don't think, at least in the period which I've been head of the Council, which is the only part I know directly on this question, that our contacts have suffered in any way. I suppose that's in part because it's quite clear to the academic community that the Council has nothing to do one way or another with Viet Nam policy. This policy is made by a relatively small number of people, and the Policy Planning Council just doesn't happen to be part of that magic circle.

M: What about that? One of the original roles of the Policy Planning Council was to dissent or to think unthinkable thoughts, and so on.

Have you continued to be able to exercise this kind of dissent under the Johnson Administration?

O: Yes. I've never hesitated and I'm sure Walt never hesitated before me to send forward any views we held. In the case of the Viet Nam war, I've always felt that my knowledge was so limited that I was uncertain myself as to whether I knew enough to intervene, or try to intervene very actively, in the policy process. I wasn't invited to any of the meetings on Viet Nam, and I didn't see the relevant policy papers; they weren't circulated to the Policy Planning Council. Nonetheless, simply on the basis of what I learned from the newspaper's less highly classified briefings within the State Department, I did sometimes form views and I sent those to the Secretary. But that a relatively rare exercise because I just didn't feel that I had access to the information needed to reach a sound judgement. And Joe Yager prepared a larger paper, which also went to the Secretary.

M: Does that say something about the Council? Is it a European oriented--

O: No, I think it says something about the way Viet Nam policy was made in the State Department. That for obvious security reasons the Administration felt it had to limit knowledge of Viet Nam, of current operations, to a relatively small number of people. We just aren't among them. Now as I say we did send forward a recommendation in March of '68 on the question of limiting troop levels and de-Americanizing the war, that's the only-- we sent forward two memos then--that is the only occasion during my term that I can remember in which we addressed the issue in any basic substantive sense, except for Joe Yager's paper, and the reason was simply lack of information on which to form a judgement which would be sufficiently well informed to command the Secretary's respect. Particularly if it was a judgement which differed in some way from

the existing policy. In March of '68, simply the fact that everything seemed to be coming to a head gave us the desire, if not the knowledge, to advance our views and we did.

M: Then in March of this year at the time of the President's withdrawal?

O: Yes, early in March of '68, we did send a memo over to the Secretary with our views but that's the only occasion in my term in which we did that.

M: How far can you dissent? Once a policy course of action is decided upon, then can an agency like the Council continued to send up contrary memos?

O: Oh, surely. The Secretary has made perfectly clear that he welcomes dissent and obviously he wouldn't approve if I went and voiced my dissent in the New York Times. But within the government, I've never felt the slightest restraint or the slightest deterrent to expressing any view which was at variance with the Administration policy. The only limits on my expression were my own ability to conceive views which warranted attention.

M: Is there anybody over here who is questioning really basic foreign policy assumptions? What I have particular reference to is the charge made by some historians, particularly who call themselves new leftists, Horowitz (sp), William A. Williamson, and others, who talk about--go back to 1945, -6 and -7 and say well our whole idea that the Soviet Union was basically aggressive which was wrong. Does anybody go back and examine that?

O: Well, I don't know anyone who goes back to '45, but certainly there are people who are examining whether the present premises of policy are sound. In the State Department there are at least two places

where this is done and probably a great many others. One is the Policy Planning Council. For instance we're now engaged in looking at the question of U.S. security interest in the developing areas, Asia, Africa, Latin America, why do we care? Is this just a shiboleth? Is there some real reason behind it, and similarly my impression is that the Bureau of Intelligence Research, Tom Hughes, does some sort of examination.

M: So, I think the assumption of these scholars is that the conventional wisdom gets established and then its forgotten about and everything dates on that, and that's not the case?

O: Well I can't try and read the minds of everybody in the State Department. All I can say is at least in these two places there's an active effort to continually question the conventional wisdom and the Secretary, in my experience, has always been receptive to getting papers on views otherwise expressed which challenge the conventional wisdom. He may not agree with them, but he certainly exposes himself to those views and doesn't resent it if they are offered.

M: You'all of course put up a lot of studies, and they're a matter of the written record that historians will be able to check, Southern Africa, NATO, regionalism, and all the rest. Are there any that President Johnson since you've been chief or that in your knowledge President Johnson has indicated specific interest in having pet studies that you have participated in?

O: I have the impression that the President generally was interested in that question of regionalism, regional economic cooperation in the developing areas and that when Walt Rostow was head of the Policy Planning Council some of the work he did on Latin America

in that area, and some of the work we did on Asia in that area before the President's Johns Hopkins speech in 1965 commanded the President personal interest.

M: How does he indicate that, directly?

O: Oh sometimes directly, but though Mac Bundy in one way or in talking to Walt, he'd see him at a reception for the Latin American Ambassadors, I remember he spoke to him once. The government's very sensitive to the President's views and if he has them, somehow you learn about them.

M: Yes, I can see that. He seems to be rather fond of historical analogy using a lot of them in his speeches. Are you the people who dredge these up for him?

O: There's only one historical analogy that I helped--I'm very interested in the Civil War and every once in awhile I write something on that, but other than I'm not a good source of historical analogy.

M: Generally speaking, you don't advise that historical analogies make good explanation for current policy for him?

O: No. I happened to be fascinated by history and I have a personal interest in looking at present policy in the perspective of history, but he's never sought my advise, I say except for information on the Civil War, he's never--no, that's not true, come to think about it, that's not true. Because Walt once asked me to prepare a history of past American wars and the degree to which there had been dissent during these wars, the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Civil War, World War I and so forth, and I prepared a paper for him. I prepared a long paper and then a shorter form paper of that which I believe the President was very interested in.

M: Indicating maybe he does take seriously the historical background?

O: I think what he took seriously was this: he took seriously the proposition that he was not the first president to find himself unpopular because of a war, that in fact most of the wars that we've prosecuted except for World Wars I and II, have been unpopular at some point or another within the United States and have placed the presidents who prosecuted them in very real political jeopardy.

M: I don't ever know that the Council's the place that does this, but do you plan for a possible crisis by outlining all ranges--

O: No, contingency--there is a separate operation for contingency planning in the State Department and the Policy Planning Council takes part in this planning but doesn't mastermind it.

M: So, you're not the one whose staff--I'm driving at the idea of how the President gets staffed for a crisis.

O: No. That's not our responsibility, that's done elsewhere.

M: I'm beginning to run down here. What can you add in the way of important contacts between this agency and the presidency or the presidential staff that might be of consequence here?

O: I don't honestly think of anything that you haven't touched on. Of course your questions were quite good and I don't know of anything to add to them.

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

Gift of Personal Statement

By Henry D. Owen

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, _____, 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 terms of this instrument available for research as soon as it has been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

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 Henry D. Owen

Date Oct 11, 1971

Accepted James J. Broadhurst - for
Archivist of the United States

Date September 30, 1974