

INTERVIEWEE: BENJAMIN READ

INTERVIEWER: PAIGE E. MULHOLLAN

January 13, 1969

M: By way of beginning, let's just introduce you here. You're Ben Read and your current title is Executive Secretary of the Department of State and Special Assistant to the Secretary, is that correct?

R: That's correct.

M: At what date did you acquire that position?

R: I took over this desk about six months before President Kennedy was assassinated, so I've been here for almost six years.

M: You've been here through the entire Johnson Administration then?

R: Yes, throughout.

M: And prior to that, I believe you were an Administrative Assistant to Senator [Joseph] Clark [D-Pa.].

R: On the Hill.

M: Right. For a period of five years--

R: About that, correct.

M: Did you ever have occasion during that period to come into contact or have acquaintance with Mr. Johnson, either when he was Senator or later when he was Vice President?

R: Limited, but some, yes. I had an amusing experience because there was a long period of time when President Johnson thought that I was T. R. B., who was writing [in New Republic] the anonymous column--knifing him. And he used to glare at me across the Senate chamber so--when I barely knew the man--and one day I remember asking Bobby Baker as to why I'd earned this harsh look. And he went up and explored it with the President and he said, "What's that so-and-so T. R. B. doing in disguise around here?" We were able to disabuse him of that, and he was always most pleasant after that although the Senator for whom I worked and he did not see eye-to-eye on a number of things, he was most gracious. I had my own personal circle of friends who overlapped with his staff very closely--Harry McPherson and I have been the closest friends for ten years.

M: I think one of our people is talking to Harry McPherson this afternoon, as a matter of fact.

R: I knew almost all of the staff quite well and most favorably during that period.

M: Senator Clark was then throughout that whole period on the Foreign Relations Committee, was he not?

R: No, he had not gotten on the Foreign Relations Committee at that point. He wanted very much to get on it, but he was a freshman Senator and he had not gotten enough seniority to get on the committee.

M: So you didn't have any contact with Mr. Johnson in connection with that committee's business during that period?

R: No, but the reason they got at odds was that Joe Clark and a few others got started making a number of suggestions about organization that were, I'm sure, considered a great nuisance by the Majority Leader; and this put them very much at odds.

M: This was the so-called liberal clique over there--Paul Douglas and--?

R: Yes, we used to fight the battles of Rule 22 vigorously every other January, and lose methodically--

M: Then in 1963 when you came over to this position, did you have any contact with Mr. Johnson in connection with the State Department's business at that time?

R: Only indirect and only occasional. The most direct business I had was that we had had a system of liaison officers for the State Department who serviced the needs of the Vice President and attempted to keep him current and briefed on important foreign policy matters, and it had never worked out terribly successfully. Some of them had just not ever established a rapport with him, and I don't think either side felt terribly happy, or that we had done a very good job on this. It happened that a friend of mine from way back in Philadelphia days named Lee Stull was chosen (I've forgotten whether I had anything to do with his choice or not) in the early fall of '63, about two months before the assassination, to be the Vice President's liaison man. I worked very closely with Lee to try and change the diet of information that went to the Vice President to make it more responsive to his needs. And I think we succeeded, because Lee was a fellow that the Vice President took to, and he used to invite him out to his home and got to know him quite intimately. And he was able to, because I gave him complete access and told him all of the main things that were going on here, which had not been the case with the earlier liaison officers, I think he was able to be quite useful to the Vice President and at the time of the assassination, he put in an invaluable two or three weeks and proved to be a very important belt of information to the President as he assumed office in November.

M: At the time of his taking office I think one of the major columnists wrote something to the

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effect that Mr. Johnson simply didn't know anything at all about the world. Was that an accurate assessment at that time--that he had to learn quick after he took office, or would you say he came with a better preparation than that?

R: Well, of course, his interests had not been primarily in the foreign policy field, although when he was in the Senate--although perforce as being on the committees that he had been on, the Armed Services, as I recall it, and serving on the Space Committee, he had had many, many dealings with foreign aid bills and the legislative work of the foreign affairs field, which went up to the Hill, which were of course quite limited in terms of depth and breadth. The trips that he took as Vice President which we documented, we staffed, and what have you, I'm sure gave him a very, very helpful set of insights of the problems, but a limited one. And I think it would be foolish to pretend that it was otherwise because it wasn't. But a lot more so than many [who have entered] the office [of the presidency].

M: You described yourself apparently to the author of a recent book on the State Department, John Leacacos [Fires in The In-Basket, 1968], as a bottleneck in your present job. Is that how you see your position here?

R: Well, everything that goes to and from the Secretary is meant to go across my desk, and the great bulk of it does. And we attempt to follow up his demands and see that items coming back are responsive to his needs. And we also serve as the formal liaison channel short of the of course innumerable contacts between the Secretary of State and the President and memoranda that go from the Secretary to the President. The great bulk of material that moves to the White House goes over my name to the special assistant for National Security Affairs, and it's known to the President as the Read-Rostow channel. Before that, the Read-Bundy channel. There are many, many, many papers--some of importance, many of routine matters, but all sorts and conditions which do move in this channel. The contacts are quite extensive of course.

M: How about the other way--if you reversed it and said the Bundy-Read or the Rostow-Read channel--is that the way it's supposed to come back, too?

R: Well, in practice, of course, a great majority of points come back by phone. Mac Bundy and Walt Rostow after him, particularly after they had been in office for quite a length of time, did most of their business by phone with the Secretary of State and Under Secretary when it was of sufficient importance to warrant it. Again, however, on the great bulk of matters they and their subordinates would deal with this office that I had and the people who work in the Executive Secretariat of the State Department to convey routine actions and sometimes more than routine by the President, to levy demands and requests, et cetera. It's a constant flow in both directions. I'm on the phone with Rostow--I used to be with Bundy--many times, many, many times, daily.

M: How does the operation over there from your point of view over here differ as between

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the Bundy time and the Rostow time?

R: They're essentially similar. Of course, personalities have changed and there are many things that flow from that, but they basically served the same purposes. I guess if there is any one main characteristic that differs in the two operations--you're asking under Kennedy and under Johnson?

M: Well---

R: Or under Bundy and under Rostow?

M: It gets mixed up here. The difference between the Kennedy and Johnson operation and then the difference between the Bundy and the Rostow operation under Johnson is really two questions, I suppose.

R: In the Kennedy-Bundy period, and I only saw six months of it, but there was a far more detailed monitoring of Department of State business, down to really a very detailed level. We used to clear things with Mac Bundy and his people which I wouldn't dream of clearing today. They just do not warrant the attention of the President; we know they don't. And in that sense, there's a greater degree of independence and has been under President Johnson from the beginning. He has expected the Department to act responsibly and has been willing to permit it to do its own work to a larger degree. But this of course is a very crude comparison and not true in all areas by a long shot.

M: And then what you said earlier applies to the difference between Bundy and Rostow under Johnson?

R: Yes.

M: What about the tendency at any of the times for the White House National Security operation to go around the State Department by going to lower levels over here, Assistant Secretary levels or below, and making their viewpoint known?

R: That has happened under both Presidents. The staff of the Special Assistant in the White House, if it's on the ball, and both staffs have been on the ball, make it their business to have contacts at the working level in the Department and to know what's going on there. We do the same of course from here for the Secretary. This at times, of course, has tended to cause some conflict and some confusion, some overlap--not as much as you'd think, but there are occasionally times when a desk officer in the Department will get a request from a most junior-level fellow in the NSC system and will treat it as though it had to be answered above all other priority matters when it is, in fact, just the initiative of quite a junior man over there. But by and large, we've had few conflicts of this sort. There has always been quite a happy relationship between the Special Assistant and the top people

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here. And when misunderstandings have arisen, it's usually at a lower level and can quickly be resolved when it comes to the attention of the upper people.

M: Do lower level people over here ever get the idea that such-and-such a course of action is the "White House line" and therefore they adopt it for that reason?

R: Yes. That has been a problem on occasion, no doubt about it.

M: Can strong Assistant Secretaries, say, then go around you with success?

R: Well, they do it only at their peril, because just to follow a case example without names, if an Assistant Secretary attempts to deal independently of the seventh floor and the Secretary of State with White House staff completely, he's very apt to come a cropper or be highly embarrassed by the fact that when the matter gets to the President, if it is of such importance, President Johnson has just been just extraordinarily consistent in asking, "Well, what are the views of the Secretary of State?" And when he finds, or when an inquiry comes back to the Secretary about his views, and he finds that the Assistant Secretary has been dealing with the White House staff, obviously it's something in which the Assistant Secretary is a bit red-faced and is not very apt to do it a second or third time.

M: By all accounts, a lot of the crucial decisions particularly regarding Viet Nam and other things as well are made at the famous Tuesday lunches; then they come to you for action over here, I presume.

R: Yes.

M: What kind of decisions usually come out of those meetings?

R: Well, it might be just of interest to you to go back a step and on the Tuesday lunches which began, I guess, in '65 some time--I forget the exact date of when they did begin; but we did find that we just needed a regular occasion on which business could be attended to with the President in this field. And ad hoc meetings and NSC discussions weren't suitable to his particular needs and desires. So the institution started, and we usually a day before a Tuesday lunch, I will be in touch by phone with the President's Special Assistant and we'll swap ideas of what might go on the agenda and start the list and add to it in that manner. Before the day is out, I've usually checked with the Secretary--if Walt Rostow or Mac Bundy haven't directly, I have--to determine his wishes, both taking things off the list and putting them on again. It's a constant interchange and we supplement this process by a procedure in State in which the Secretariat officers contact each of the bureaus, maybe two days in advance or a day or so in advance at least, to get their ideas of what is of sufficient importance and timeliness to put on the luncheon platter. So it's not as unstructured as some of the recent newspaper accounts of the incoming crowd would have you believe. The staff work is done over here, in some cases for the President as

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well as for the Secretary, but in each case of course we attempt to give the Secretary a briefing paper and discussion if it's warranted on each of the items coming up. And I put that package together from material which has been requested from the bureaus or come up at their initiative--we have to reject a lot of it--on Tuesday morning and discuss it with him just before he goes over; if time doesn't permit an earlier meeting. Sometimes I have to join him on the Hill and ride with him to the White House and work it in in that too short manner. But there's a great deal of staffing which precedes it. After the lunch Walt Rostow has been scrupulous in calling me to run down the list of items, item by item, to relay any action instructions which may flow from the discussion at the meal. I get a double-shot at it because I talk independently to the Secretary and get his account as well. On occasions these accounts have not meshed, and you would think that they had attended separate lunches. But they're usually quite similar.

M: Are there written records being kept of the Tuesday lunches?

R: No, in the very beginning there were; but the President didn't want it, and it was discontinued.

M: So, when there are two different versions, someone has got to reconcile--

R: Yes, and that is where Tom Johnson's own account of the lunch has been most helpful. As you know, he attends and has attended in the recent couple of years. And he's an excellent note-taker. And frequently you'll get a third account from Tom which will be the accurate one. But it's my job at that point to relay to the action officers in State the items that may have been decided on by the President.

M: How widely are the Tuesday lunch decisions disseminated in State?

R: It's on a, as we call it, a need-to-know basis. If it involves Europe, I'll be talking to the Assistant Secretary for European Affairs; I'll relay all of the information I've gotten to the Under Secretary unless it's a most unusual matter. And I deal with the Assistant Secretaries primarily and they in turn, of course, pass it on to their people--the ones that need to act on it. It's done on a pragmatic need-to-know basis.

M: What about decisions that involve action by some non-State Department agency?

R: Well, if it's primarily a Defense matter, of course, I will have been given the same de-briefing by Walt Rostow and the Secretary. And if we were linked to it, although it's primarily a Defense matter, say, it's a Viet Nam item which will involve potential political embarrassment or possible difficulties, I will of course have relayed that action item to Bill Bundy, the Assistant Secretary for that area, and he will put his people--alert them to it--and they in turn will be watchful for follow-up problems that may arise.

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The process perhaps could have been done better if we had--if it could have been subjected more to writing. At the same time it's remarkable how well it has worked on this oral basis with all the possibilities for misunderstanding that it does permit. When it's written, it looks so often too hard, too fast, fails to take care of nuances and doubts that may remain, and this has given us--while it has given us some problems-- it has given us some added flexibility as well; and normally on any action item, you have many follow-up items that come right up to the top and have to be looked at again. And so if there are doubts as to what actually was decided, there are many fail-safe devices and checks that can be relied on.

M: You could always check back with the participants among other things.

R: Yes, and when they have disagreed, and I get disagreeing versions on it obviously, I go back to both of them with that--

M: That was my next question. Suppose you go back to them and they still disagree, and it's a point of substance? Then where do you go?

R: Then you go to the note-taker, if there was one. If not, and it's a matter of importance, you put together--if it's an action item for instance, you put together a cable based on one of the--maybe the version that seemed most probable and you check it with the President. You make sure it doesn't go out until his view has been established.

M: The National Security advisory people over there in that sense see themselves as communicators rather than as policy makers! In other words, do they see their job as to get to you the real viewpoint of the President and make sure that it's implemented, rather than helping him decide what his viewpoint is?

R: Yes, I think that's so; although, of course, in presenting options to him as they do, they set the framework for decision. I don't mean in any way to convey that it's a mechanical function. It's not. It's much more than that.

M: When you have to make a decision on traffic, do you ever get White House guidance on how widely cable traffic gets distributed within the State Department, for example?

R: Sometimes. In the normal course of events, no. We make the determination and we do it in our own judgment and at our own peril. On occasions the President has, when extremely sensitive matters have come up, he has told the Secretary that he wants the Secretary to handle this matter and not to have anyone else in the building knowledgeable of it. Well, if it involves cables it involves me, and when I get his wishes I handle it accordingly. In some extremely awkward cases, I've been the nursemaid to a series of sensitive channels for the Secretary which he has been instructed to deal with exclusively, and we've set them up on very, very tight bases.

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The most recent example of a very small circle of knowledge over here at the President's--and a case in which the President checked each name on those who had access--was the series of moves which led up to the bombing halt on October 31, 1968. When we really got into business in Paris on October 11 with the first serious discussion with the North Vietnamese and then through a three weeks of just round the clock work, the circle of knowledgeable in the Department of State couldn't have been smaller. It was the Secretary of State, the Under Secretary, Bill Bundy, and myself. And it was heavy going for three weeks time. That was an instance in which the President had personally approved of each person on the list.

M: That's just your irreducible minimum, about four then?

R: It is. It's just terribly, terribly difficult if you cut it down below that. There are cases in which it has been cut below that, but it's always at a loss when you have to get it down below that number.

M: That is easy transition into the matter of the so-called "peace feeler" committee, which is the term, I think, used by the [David] Kraslow and [Stuart] Loory book [The Secret Search for Peace in Vietnam, 1968]. In general, how accurate is that book?

R: Well, it's depressingly accurate in its major tale, which is the whole Polish "marigold" affair. At the same time, it's written with a pronounced bias, and the part that it omits is crucial to a fair and impartial account of the whole episode. Essentially, those two journalists, who did an extraordinarily competent journalistic job started with the detailed Polish version that the Poles put out in New York. They were obviously heavily-- the Polish account, of course, was heavily anti-U.S. in innuendo and put us at our worst advantage. They simply started with this and then built the most extraordinary series of conversations with people at all levels in this Department, in the Defense Department, in our Embassies abroad, in foreign embassies; they went to Warsaw; they went to Ottawa; they went to London; I suppose they went to Saigon--I don't know it as a fact. But I first became aware of what they were doing when memoranda of conversations started to flow into my desk from people all over the place who had given these fellows interviews. And in each case, they had started out--the journalists had--with their extremely detailed knowledge that they had been able to put together by just scissor and paste and overwhelmed the government officer with their own detailed knowledge of the events. And the temptation was always in this case, was to try and correct them for the record. And in the process, they'd get a little bit more. The essential fact is, however, that they started out with a strong feeling that the United States government had goofed, and that feeling never departed them. And they were looking for facts that would corroborate their views.

I had an amusing time with them because they pestered my secretary for weeks on end to see me. And finally I got on the phone with one of them and said, "I know all



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about what you're doing and I haven't any desire to see you, and won't see you until after your book is written so that I can have a completely free hand at torpedoing it." And so I became a sort of man of mystery to them. They wrote in very colorful language what I was meant to be doing in the whole chain of events. The Secretary never saw them either, I'm glad to say, and I steered him away from them. I don't know whether you want to get into the whole merits of this episode--

M: Well what would you say is the essential omission here in this episode--

R: Well, it is so hard--I haven't--here we are two and a half years later--If you really want to get into "marigold," I'd really like to refresh my recollection before we do so because they have gotten so much detailed information I wouldn't want to spread any more fog of misimpressions on the thing, and my memory is anything but sharp of the whole event. My main impressions are that they attribute a degree of bona fides to the North Vietnamese which just cannot be completely substantiated. And the U.S. bombing close into Hanoi which they attribute as the reason for failure of the whole venture may or may not have been. I don't think it's provable, and my own hunch is that it was not the determinative fact; that they were not really going to do business with us, but I don't know. I think the bombing was very unfortunate, and I want to say completely candidly I think that we should have suspended the authorization to bomb in perhaps a five mile circle from the center of Hanoi, or ten miles, whatever it would have been, while that venture was a live possibility, just to preclude having it being used as an excuse for failure.

M: That leaves the question, since it did occur, that can always be given as the reason for failure even if it was not a bona fide--

R: Yes, there's no question in my mind that the bombing was very unfortunate at that particular point. I remember one instance in which I found out that the couple of pilots that had been assigned a target at a cross-switch, perhaps five miles out of Hanoi center, on the Northeast spur, had actually mistaken their target and hit a cross-switch only two miles from the center of town. And on that occasion, some of their ordnance went ballistic and there is no question that Shrikes from U. S. planes landed in Hanoi, that much damage was done in Hanoi, a whole section of slum dwellings close to the river were burned out, pieces of shrapnel and tailfins with the ordnance markings and everything else landed in foreign Embassies and was observed by ICC observers later. I couldn't begin to reconstruct the precise date on which this occurred, but it was unfortunate. And it was a first for the time, for that period in the war, it was a new height of the bombing program.

M: They talk about the first bombings of Hanoi on December 2 and 4 of 1966, at the time when the meetings in Poland were just about to take place. And they talk about the fail-safe systems not working because people didn't know about them until they got to your desk, and you were the first one who could have. Is that an accurate--

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R: One of the inaccuracies of their book is that we didn't put the military track and the political track together. From the day that the bombing program against North Viet Nam began on a regular day to day basis, I had the military representatives in the Operation Center in the State Department prepare for me on a nightly basis a list of all "Op Ones," as they're called, which are the intended targets for the next twenty-four hour period. That list came up absolutely regularly, just like clockwork. And when there was a target on it of a nature to raise questions of possible political impact, and when it wasn't, we brought it to the attention of the Secretary and Under Secretary; it was just done with regularity and faithfulness. They are in error in the fact that these facts weren't known to the top elements. They were! In the case of the particular bombings of early December which became the subject of this contention here, they too were brought to the attention of the top people. They had been authorized, as I recall it, early in November--maybe mid-November--

M: Mid-November.

R: --and they had been scheduled and weathered out and scheduled and weathered out. New bombing proposals had been presented to the President in the interim, if I recall correctly--at the Tuesday lunch was the usual time. And I recall specifically that several targets that were really in close, closer than the ones we actually struck, were not approved at that particular period. Obviously, we were conscious of the political track. If the targets that had been scheduled were struck and not the unintended one, if ordnance had not gone ballistic, I think it's entirely possible that there wouldn't have been an issue here. But another factor which can never be underestimated when you view these things and have to judge them is the terrific damage that the defensive system itself can inflict on a city when you pump up hundreds of tons of ordnance to protect your city, in the form of SAM missiles and anti-aircraft shells that are going up at an incredible rate. And Hanoi's the most heavily defended city in the world today. It has to come down somewhere, and a lot of it obviously lands on the city. When you're an inhabitant of that city, you just assume when you get a close hit or you see destruction that it comes from enemy sources. And it just isn't the case. You can't put that many tons of ordnance up and not have it come down, so a lot of it was probably self-inflicted. There was accident on our part involved.

M: But the accident was not in the military-diplomatic dislocation, but in the actual execution of the plans here--

R: There was accident in the execution on one of those days. I don't remember which was the date. And I think, with all of the luxury of hindsight, that we would have been wiser if we had prescribed a circle which would have been wider and kept the planes away from the heart of Hanoi during this period, just so that it wouldn't be used as an excuse.

M: When the debate, such as it was, occurred then within the government-- State Department

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and elsewhere--after that, about whether or not to resume the bombing close in to the center of Hanoi later in the same month. Did President Johnson ever participate in that discussion in any way or make his views known?

- R: I'm sure he would have, but I don't remember specifically, because he was personally reviewing all in-close targets at that period. I used to load the Secretary down on these Tuesday lunches with very detailed memoranda of the volatile in-close targets with a discussion of pro and con of what the problems might be if they were struck and not struck precisely, as my Air Force friends always try to convince us will happen.
- M: Were there significant numbers of people over here who argued against bombing Hanoi again that month?
- R: Yes.
- M: Do Loory and Kraslow have the players pretty straight?
- R: I don't remember their lineup.
- M: They have you opposing resumption and Harriman opposing resumption and Chester Cooper opposing resumption; and they have Rostow favoring resumption and I believe they have William Bundy favoring, but not as strongly as--
- R: I couldn't begin to reconstruct it at this distance of time.
- M: What about after the event? Did the President ever give any indication that he was aware of the details here and interested in what had happened, what had gone wrong if you can phrase it that way?
- R: Well, of course, he did. He followed it very closely. He hovered over the cables. I'd get constant calls from Walt Rostow to see whether a cable we knew would be coming in, reporting an important conversation, had arrived, where it was--the President would want it, et cetera. He followed this enormously closely. I wouldn't begin to purport to say what went through his mind at that stage because I just don't know. And yet we never saw the whites of their eyes in terms of the North Vietnamese. We don't have any proof to this day that they had actually started to Warsaw, as one press account had it a year ago. And I don't think we'll know until war's end and considerably after whether this was really a tragically missed opportunity or not.
- M: What about the ones then following that--the other initiatives that Kraslow and Loory go into a good deal less detail about.
- R: Well, they have just minute fragments of other peace initiatives.

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M: Ashmore Baggs--

R: Well, that was never a serious thing, but there were many, many very serious, very carefully nurtured peace initiatives that followed the so-called "Marigold" initiative. And we agonized over this type of problem in each of those cases. On many occasions that I can recall, the President did authorize a suspension of bombing in five-mile circles, ten-mile circles, of their two principal cities just so that we could prevent any allegations of the sort that came out of the "Marigold" affair. If you look back over, I think it was the year 1967, if I remember correctly there were partial circles, or circles around one or both of those cities for perhaps more than 180 days in the year--there were always things that we hoped might come off, that we didn't want to jeopardize with allegations, rightly or wrongly, or give them a handle to hit us with when they might or might not have had any real intent to do business with us, which I personally doubt that they did.

M: What about the famous episode of the President's letter--February of '67?

R: Yes.

M: That corresponds with the Ashmore Baggs visit roughly, but it also corresponds with some negotiations in London. Are these fairly accurately described?

R: No, they have almost nothing of that whole episode; it was the so-called "Sunflower" episode. I don't know whether they ever got the code name--I don't think they did.

M: They said they knew it was a flower, I think was all--

R: That's why we went on to "Green Bay Packers," and other non-flower labels. Well, that was another period of just intensive diplomatic activity and immense patience on the part of the President--trying to nurse into being a diplomatic script with the North Vietnamese in Moscow, then in London, then back in Moscow. It never came off, but untold hours were spent trying to make it come off in political-military track, and trying to synchronize them was the subject of just immense care and concern over here.

M: How did the date controversy get started on the President's letter--the date as to when it was actually written, sent, received, and so on, that caused trouble.

R: I don't recall. There never was any controversy that I can recall except that it was drafted one evening, delivered early in the morning, and there were two consecutive dates which you could have chosen as the date of the letter. It may have gotten started that way; it wasn't a matter of any moment.

M: It wasn't a new draft of a previously drafted letter? Chester Cooper was in London apparently giving some kind of initiative to Wilson to give to Kosygin at the time.

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R: Chester Cooper was in Lady Gray's dressing room when the famous Kosygin-Wilson meeting was going on at the Prime Minister's country estate. And we had a telephone line rigged up to him which I can recall spending hours on the phone with him, telling him how deliberations were coming along here, getting the latest information from him about whether Kosygin's car was warming up in the courtyard and the blow-by-blow as the British gave it to him as they came up to the dressing room in the garret, where Lady Jane Gray had been incarcerated some centuries ago.

But at that time, for instance, one of the issues was British sensitivity about resumption of bombing. I think it was just after a TET agreed ceasefire, while Kosygin was still a guest of the English. And we agreed to defer resumption until after he had actually left the country because of British sensitivities.

M: But we didn't make an initiative at that point that then had to be withdrawn because of a changed position over here? I think that's the charge that was made--

R: Oh, they had it hopelessly garbled; they didn't know what they were talking about. There were problems with that initiative, but they didn't come close. It is another long chapter that you would want to get from someone who had just gone through the record, not someone with hazy memory like mine.

M: Then, later in the year the one that Mr. Kissinger participated in--did this one produce any--

R: That was Operation Pennsylvania. I named it because Pennsylvania is my home state.

M: I wondered how Pennsylvania got in there.

R: In that case, it began in July with a visit to Hanoi of two Frenchmen that Henry had become acquainted with through Pugwash and other meetings of international political scientists. And the entre to the North Vietnamese looked good enough to try sending back a message through Kissinger, who was our contact with the French intermediaries. As soon as they were asked to return to Hanoi to deliver this message, which they did, we put tight bombing restrictions into effect--I couldn't describe them precisely at this time. But long before we had any expression of interest or the fact that they were going to want to discuss this in any depth with us--the North Vietnamese--bombing had occurred in the in-city area. For instance, it was, as I recall it, the first strike against the Bridge in Hanoi--was in early July. Well, this was long before we had instructed Henry, let alone before the French had gone back to Hanoi. Well, much later in the game in the summer, they claimed that this was an escalation which torpedoed a going political initiative. Well it's just nonsense; it occurred before they had any knowledge that we were interested, before anything had actually occurred--was perhaps indicative of their willingness to use these military arguments in any case. And bombing problems were certainly not the cause

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of upsetting that initiative. We carried it out to its ultimate "No" from them early in October with infinite patience on the part of the President.

M: That was never leaked, either, I don't believe at the time.

R: No.

M: --so they couldn't claim that as they sometimes did. What then broke the ice finally--the events leading up to March 31st? Is there a series of initiatives there that are important?

R: There were a series of events. Of course, the most important one was the tremendous effort the Communists made at the time of TET and their country-wide attacks and the really immense losses that they sustained despite the damage they were able to inflict. And anyone who thinks it isn't the U.S. infantryman who brought the change of mind just doesn't know them very well. It was unquestionably events on the ground and nothing that was hatched in this building or elsewhere that put us in the position to do--in which they would be willing to do business on a diplomatic front as well as a military one.

M: So it finally did come down to an initiative from them that we picked up?

R: No, it was--I didn't mean to convey that. It was the President's own initiative in the March 31 speech and the partial bombing halt which that announced, which was the first round in that venture. Two days later on April 2 or 3, Hanoi radio, as you will recall, indicated for the first time their willingness to speak to U.S. representatives while the partial bombing program was continuing, which made them change their own posture very radically.

M: What went into the decision of the President to institute the partial bombing halt?

R: Well, it seemed worth a try. There were a number of people in the government who had advocated attempting either a complete bombing halt at that time or a partial one. We were aware of the immense losses they had sustained in the TET offensive. There were, if I recall correctly, certain heavy withdrawals from the country by their mainline units, as it turned out simply to refit and come back again. But it looked like a very good time to attempt a political initiative.

M: No specific major occurrence that set it off?

R: No one thing, other than the grueling attrition of the ground war.

M: Then what about the next key turning point, the decision that you mentioned earlier, the total bombing halt?

R: Well, that, of course, came after six months--seven months of endless discussion in Paris.

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And as I indicated earlier in this interview, in early October--October 11 to be exact--the North Vietnamese in Paris for the first time asked us a serious question. They said, "Would you stop the bombing if we sit down with the South Vietnamese to discuss a political settlement of the war?" They hadn't asked anything serious up till that-- it was all accusations and counter-accusations and dancing on the head of a pin. This looked like a real question and was a real question. It was indicative of a basic policy change--decision--in Hanoi. And after nursing that one for two or three weeks and getting a number of understandings quite clearly stated about what we would expect not to happen in the event of a complete bombing stand-down, we got the necessary assurances and the necessary acquiescences, by silence in several instances, that we had been looking for all along since the talks began, and the President was in a position to make the decision he did. He was agonized of course by the timing, not wanting to speed it by a day or retard it by a day because of the election cycle which was coming to its end here. He knew he'd be subject to criticism one way or the other, and yet he was determined not to delay it or speed it in any way because of the date of the calendar.

M: Was one of those acquiescences by silence that you mentioned our arrangement with South Viet Nam?

R: No. We had talked out in great detail with the South Vietnamese the understandings which we thought we had with the North Vietnamese; and we had gotten what we thought was such an understanding with them that had gone to the point of a dickering with them over the form of the joint announcement, which would be a joint South Vietnamese-U.S. announcement at the time of the stopping of the bombing. One day, I think it was October 25, they actually agreed to the text of that joint announcement. They came unhinged, as you well know--

M: They came unhinged then after that?

R: Yes.

M: But we thought we did have explicit agreement?

R: We certainly did, and we had good reason to think so. We knew that there were difficulties with the South Vietnamese, but we thought that--and we had reason to think that their top people were signed on to it.

M: Do we know what caused the unhinging?

R: We can only speculate. They were reading the U. S. election polls very carefully, they were having certain representations made to them about who was going to win here--this is just a personal opinion, I think that they began to play U. S. politics some time between the twentieth and thirtieth of October and decided they had more to win by gambling on

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four years of Nixon than the remaining two and a half months of Johnson.

M: What about in this last two and a half month period? The press has now made a major wrestling on mat or something or other between Secretary Rusk and Secretary Clifford regarding our proposed policy. How much is there to that?

R: Oh, it's vastly overblown in the press as you can imagine. The personal relationship between them is entirely correct and proper, and they have some differences. At the same time, I would be less than candid in not saying they have some differences in their approach. By and large, Secretary Clifford, wishing to use heavier ammunition to get them to the same result which Secretary Rusk wanted. Secretary Rusk's view being that as desirable as that result was, the heavy ammunition would slow them rather than speed them to get there. It's a purely tactical difference and hasn't had any deeper significance than that. They saw completely eye-to-eye on where they wanted to get the South Vietnamese, and it was simply a difference of tactics.

M: You've mentioned a couple of times the fact that a lot of this has to remain speculative--the whole area of peace feelers and America's willingness to undertake negotiations. Have we ever had any explicit information or indication that Hanoi was never serious about negotiating, never really interested in talking throughout the period up until the present?

R: Well, we had several flat "noes" from them at the end of these various trails.

M: From them?

R: Yes. Ho's letter to the President being an ideal example, back in early '66 ['67?]. The end of this Pennsylvania exercise I mentioned with Kissinger was involved in, it couldn't have been more explicit. They did not want to talk to us about anything at that particular time. It was just spelled out in very explicit detail. But we don't have real insights into their real motivation process--the internal discussions that led to these negative conclusions on their part.

M: What about the transition? Is it going forward as smoothly as the press would have us believe?

R: Very smoothly. I'm sure this is a record in that regard. It just couldn't have been done with more good will and cooperativeness on both sides, at least in this building, which is the only one I can speak for. I'm the coordinator for transition, and it has been really a pleasure to see it work, although I'm a Democrat and I was sorry to see the results in November. We couldn't have asked for a pleasanter relationship with the incoming people here--Mr. [William] Rogers and Mr. [Elliott] Richardson have been, I think, fully appreciative of all the efforts we've undertaken to get things ready for them--to brief them,



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to give them access to anything they want; to give them our best judgments on a whole range of the headaches which will be theirs next Monday.

M: As you know, preparing for one of these one is pretty much at the mercy of what is published; and I don't want to limit you by having not specific questions on things that are important. So are there any subjects on which you think you can contribute importantly here that we haven't talked about?

R: I don't think so. I think your questions have been good and have elicited a lot. Just a few fragments and vignettes might be of some footnote interest later on. Glassboro comes to mind. The two days' deliberation at Glassboro were conducted, I suppose 75 percent, in the form of tete-a-tete between President Johnson and Chairman Kosygin at which only the interpreters for the two sides were present. Then on the first day, I forget the fellow's name--on the second day, I think it was June 25, the interpreter was Alex Akalousky, who's our best pro. He's a foreign service officer of remarkable skill in this field, who attended the summit in 1955, the kitchen debate in '58, the Vienna meeting between Kennedy and Khrushchev--I saw him during the test ban negotiations--he has served in Moscow--he's just absolutely superb. He took the record. He took these elaborate notes, can do shorthand, and came back after the second day's deliberations, as the first interpreter had done the first time, and overnight in this office where we're sitting, in my office, with a battery of three or four secretaries who are our oldest pros we put together the verbatim record of those talks. It was a real odd detail because the President knew, of course, that this was being done, but he didn't want anyone to do it. And if I remember correctly, the Secretary was up in New York at the time, and I called him and asked him how he wanted it handled in terms of getting it over to the President and whether he wanted to do it personally. He said, "No, take it over in a sealed envelope and give it to Walt," and I did this. Of course, I had to go through the record in detail because it dealt largely with Middle East and Viet Nam, which the interpreter wasn't familiar with, and I needed to straighten him out on words and phrases and on what I knew and had some background on. And Walt, I guess, appended a note of some sort to it and sent it up to the President unopened. But the President just blew a fuse, because he didn't want anyone to see that transcript. Walt hadn't seen it in fact. Months after, he still hadn't seen it. But I was in this terribly awkward posture because I not only had seen it, but had worked on the thing, and I couldn't tell my boss and I couldn't pretend that I had any knowledge. And for months, in fact years afterwards, I was the only repository of knowledge in this building about what had actually transpired.

M: Did he call you up in that case?

R: No, but he called both Rusk and McNamara and chewed them. It was perhaps a worthwhile thing just to mention because it was a case in which Presidential confidence and privacy was kept absolutely above and beyond reproach. I still have in the file cabinet I'm putting a hand on the only transcript of that which is outside the White House, and

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that's in his own private papers. This will be the permanent government record, of course.

M: This will go into the Archives?

R: Yes. Well, I raised this question with him through Brom Smith to see whether the President has different views. I think we should keep a copy here with access limited to the new Secretary, because obviously those questions may come up again as long as the same team is in power in the Soviet Union.

M: This kind of vignette is extremely important. If you have others, don't feel like I'm rushing you at all.

R: This was really monstrously embarrassing, because months after, Averell Harriman would say, "Now, Goddammit it, all I know about Glassboro is what I read in the papers, but did Kосygin really say such and such to the President?" If he was really egregiously off, I'd sometimes be able to give him a negative, but I never was able to, until the negotiations were way underway in Paris, get a green light to really tell him what had transpired.

M: Do secrets like this affect--in that case, it seems to me it could very easily affect the work of the department negatively.

R: They can. You pay a price when you don't disseminate. And yet, in the judgment of the top people in this, it's so frequently a bigger price if they get too widely disseminated and the basic confidence in relationship is squandered and confidences would not be as forthcoming the next time if you didn't do it.

In one other file cabinet in this room, I have the so-called pen-pal book of all exchanges between the President--both President Kennedy and President Johnson--and Khrushchev and then Kосygin and the memoranda which cover their delivery at both ends, sometimes through Moscow--much more frequently through here. Some of these letters have been published--a great majority haven't. The Russians can deal with us in full knowledge that those top-level communications will not fall astray unless there's an understanding that they are published and intended for that purpose.

M: And they, too, will become part of the record over here so that--

R: Yes. Oh, they must, because there will be constant references back. If the President-elect should indicate knowledge of them in early stages, if there are carry-over subjects as there certainly are in the agenda that will be confronting him--

M: With the foreign leaders you've come in contact with, has Mr. Johnson been a good personal diplomat? Talking about these exchanges, for example.

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R: I think he has become better and better and better in the last year or two. He has really surprised some of the old pro diplomats around here with the immense background that he has acquired in their fields in talking to Chiefs of State, Heads of government. And he shows an impressive breadth at this point. He wasn't of course this way in '63. It would have been more than human to expect it.

Just one other vignette. It may be worth adding. Right after the assassination, right after President Kennedy's burial, on whatever it was, the twenty-fifth of November, '63, we had a reception--well, we didn't even call it that--on the eighth floor of the State reception rooms over here for the incredible throng of dignitaries that had come from abroad in honor of President Kennedy: de Gaulle, Halle Selassie, Mikoyan on and on and on--Prince Philip, if I recall, just probably the great panoply of dignitaries of the international scene that had been assembled since the--what was it, the burial of Edward VII. The President had had a terribly busy day, seeing state governors, doing a thousand-and-one things that he needed to do in those desperate early days. And the briefing time was just non-existent. Working through Lee Stull and Angie Duke, we were able to put on little 5x8 cards the essence of what we thought would be useful for him to say to U Thant, to de Gaulle, to Mikoyan, the Soviet representative that had come to the funeral. And when he was receiving upstairs this incredible panoply of leaders, we would put these little cards into his hand just moments before he would be greeting these people. And he handled it just extraordinarily skillfully, never ostentatiously reading things to them of course, but grasping the essence of it he would work into the conversation points which we had suggested. And then after the reception was--as it was concluding-- he retired down to the seventh floor office of Secretary Rusk and met five or six of the real heavyweights in private session here. We had really quite a sight. I remember de Gaulle in one anteroom and Halle Selassie in another. And they were really just falling all over each other. The President had his private time with them in the Secretary's room, and we'd have to interrupt and say, "de Gaulle is ready," and he'd say goodbye to the King of Belgium or whoever it might have been. It was done with real skill by him under the maximum of difficulties. It left us with the greatest feeling of admiration. Bill Moyers was in here with me at the time and just marveled at how we could hope to have him do all these things, but he did it and then some. It was quite a show.

M: One more question that that final statement of yours suggested. One of the recent books on the President's staff has suggested that Bill Moyers led a sort of anti-Viet Nam network for the White House. Is there anything to this, by the time he left?

R: No, not in such black and white terms at all. Bill's circle of acquaintance and close friends was such that it brought him into contact with many people who had basic doubts and reservations about what we were doing in Viet Nam. And he was able to get from them their best inner thoughts and judgment; there's nothing illicit about it; there was nothing disloyal or improper in any sense of the word as I see it. He was the President's eyes and ears and the President was entitled to dissenting views as well as majority views. Bill

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facilitated his getting those in the best sense of the word. In my own personal view, he was a very useful channel for thought that had deep conviction behind it which might not have gotten to the President's attention otherwise.

M: I certainly thank you for your patience. (End of tape)

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By Benjamin H. Read

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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, Benjamin H. Read, 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:

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