

INTERVIEW III

DATE: December 16, 1969
INTERVIEWEE: JAMES H. ROWE, JR.
INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ
PLACE: Mr. Rowe's office, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

F: The St. Louis Post-Dispatch for December 15, 1966, has an article on page 28A by Richard Dudman, which throws some light on the topic we are about to discuss. Also, on December 14, 1966, Mr. Rowe had a memo which says:

Mr. Rowe telephoned George Christian, press secretary to the President, and repeated his conversation with Dudman. He told Christian the President had told him to inform Christian as soon as he talked with the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. Rowe said Dudman had called seven or eight times, and it was getting quite obvious that Rowe was ducking.

And here's a transcript:

Dudman: I'm calling about your trip to Rome.

Rowe: What trip to Rome?

Dudman: Heard you went to Rome on a presidential mission.

And I got it confirmed.

Rowe: Go back to where you got it confirmed and get your information. One, I didn't. Two, if I had, I would not tell you anyway. I might lie smack to your teeth.

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Three, do you know what a bilateral treaty is? Do you know about Italy denouncing these treaties?

Dudman: I do.

Rowe: I work for Pan Am. Italy has been denouncing a bilateral, a civil air agreement, because the Japs are flying the Atlantic and they don't want them in. State has been fighting for us. I went there to determine whether it is serious. You are talking to a private citizen.

Dudman: I was told you were there for a presidential mission.

Rowe: Ask it again, and if I was, I would lie to you in a completely relaxed frame of mind.

Dudman: Well, I can write that up.

Rowe: I don't want to read about Pan Am. Pan Am is a client and I don't want you to get this riled up. I will run my law practice; you can run the Post-Dispatch. I don't want you to mention Pan Am.

F: Mr. Rowe, in a recent interview I asked you about a secret trip you made to Europe during the presidency of Mr. Johnson, and so I came back today for us to talk about it. I am going to turn this over to you now.

R: Well, as I understand it, you have since got permission from the President for me to talk.

This was a trip made in November 1966, and the background is this: the President telephoned me and said he would want me to take

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a trip for him, not indicating where, could I do it, and I said, yes, I could. Later on he indicated he wanted me to go see the Pope.

F: How far in advance of New Year's, roughly, did he first call you?
How far ahead?

R: Listen, I flew to Italy on Thanksgiving Day.

F: And this was a little before that?

R: My memory would be that I didn't have much more than three or four days' notice, maybe a little more than that, but I don't think it was more than three or four days.

But distinguished from that clipping which I showed you in which it indicated that the President was undercutting his State Department, he told me to talk with Rusk, with Harriman, and with Bundy, all of which I did. Separate conversations. One first with Rusk, then with Harriman, and then mostly with Bundy who, I think, was the man who prepared the briefing papers and in effect told me what the attitude of the department was. Sometime later the President made a remark, which I don't think was serious, but he thought, well, maybe I should just have gone abroad without telling anybody of it. I don't know if this is annoyance with Reinhardt or the Embassy or what it is, but I don't know that he was serious about it. I just remember his making the comment.

I did set up the appointment, not through the Embassy, but through Jack Valenti, who called Monsignor Marcincus--does that name mean anything to you--who at that time was, well, he happened to be among other things the interpreter, at least for the Americans;

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I don't know for the English. He is a great big, handsome man who came out of Chicago. I have forgotten whether Marcincus is Polish or Yugoslav, or what it is. But I said to the President, "He looks like a football player," and the President, who met him when he saw the Pope in New York and later saw him abroad, said, "No, he looks more like an actor." Very big, handsome man who is now a bishop and in charge of the propagation of the faith. But he has been among other things, and I would guess would continue to be, the chief advance man for the Pope, not only when he came to this country, but when he goes to Turkey or South America. He seems to have some particular genius at organization and handling people. A very attractive man. Valenti had met him somewhere, I don't know where, maybe when he was there. Valenti Called Monsignor and said I would be turning up and I would be at such-and-such a hotel.

Just for procedures, as long as I got on it, I got in very late at night, and the Monsignor was on the phone very early in the morning and said the Pope would see me, I think, two hours or an hour after he called, or an hour and a half. So I had to move rather swiftly. Not too much sleep.

F: Just as a matter of procedure, why send you instead of working through the State Department or through your ambassador in Rome?

R: I don't know what his reason was. This came out of a meeting, and I picked this up just outside. Someone was at the meeting once that this was discussed at, that small group that talks foreign policy: the President, the Secretary of State. . . .

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F: Secretary of Defense.

R: Defense, and I have forgotten who was in it from the White House. One of the members was indiscreet enough to say to me a few days later, "I understand you are going to make a trip." I said, "How do you know?" He said, "Because it was discussed at the meeting."

One reason I think the President may have thought it would be better to send his own emissary--

F: Somebody who was direct from the President.

R: Yes, and I was a Catholic. I think this had some basis in the President's thinking, because I remember he jokingly said, "Are you still in good standing?" at one stage in the procedure. I think there were two main purposes. This has been some time, and I can't read my notes too well. But I think what the President wanted was to get the Pope to make an appeal for peace, as he usually did around the Christmas season, but to do it early enough so that the President could respond.

(Interruption)

The President wanted the Pope to make this appeal so he could announce the Tet and Christmas truce, that they had been beaten to the punch the year before, and therefore he would like to have the Pope make the statement far enough ahead so he could respond to that. He wanted also for me to explain to the Pope that we could do it on a very limited basis, we could only do it for two days, or three days, or whatever it would be, that the year before we stopped bombing for--well, I will get to the bombing later.

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But there were so many violations by Hanoi of the so-called truce the year before that we wanted to limit our own troops, for their own protection, just for two or three days. That was item one.

It so happened, I think I was on my way when Hanoi announced the truce ahead of us anyway, before I even got to see the Pope. I remember later on when I went down to see the President, he was still angry about this and believed, I don't know why he believed it, but he indicated there was some leak out of our department that some way or other got over to North Vietnam, whether through the Russians or whatever he thought, he didn't say. But he was convinced that some way or other they knew about my movements and where I was going, which surprised me. But then later when a newspaperman finds out about it--this is some time later, of course--the President said, "Everything leaks out of that department." After all, I did talk with three or four people and I assume other people knew about my talks. Bill Bundy, who is a very close friend of mine, said he was sure there was no leak, but there we go.

The other point was that at some stage the Pope was having a man go into North Vietnam. His name, I think, is mentioned somewhere here in the later story, I think Monsignor Hussler, who was a German. He was going over with the Reverend Martin Neemuller, whom you may remember as the German pastor, the submarine captain, and so forth. I think the President received some word that he was going to try to explore with the North Vietnamese the possibility of peace. He wanted me to ask the Pope what had happened to that,

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because nothing had happened. Those, I think, were the two points, and then to assure the Pope that, as he had said many times publicly, he would go anywhere and do anything for peace, and also explain to the Pope why he couldn't call off the bombing unilaterally, which was the State Department's and, at that time, his attitude.

Well, I just got in an airplane quietly, and I used as an excuse for going, if anybody was interested, I did some work for Pan American Airways, and at that time the Italians had just renounced the bilateral treaty. The way you work in the international airline business is we do make a bilateral treaty that we can make so many trips to Italy, and the Italian airline, which is a government airline, can make so many trips here. The Italians wanted more trips here and for some reason we refused to give them any. So they did, which one has to do, renounce the treaty, which means you have to let a year go by before you can do anything. The Italians had renounced the treaty, and it was giving, obviously, Pan Am some concern, and still is. I don't think they've settled this matter yet. But I used as an excuse for going that this was why I was going to be in Rome, and as a matter of fact, I got my tickets from Pan Am. I just got someone who is rather experienced and said, "I have to have an excuse, and this is my excuse. Please give me some tickets." And off I went as a Pan Am lawyer. I think the only thing I did about that was talk a little bit to our own ambassador about where it was, so that if anybody ever said, "What

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were you doing," I said, "Ask the ambassador," who was, I don't know, what was his name at the time? Reinhardt.

F: Reinhardt.

R: I did get over and as I say, although I got in quite late, it seems to me two in the morning, maybe three in the morning before I got into my hotel. The Monsignor called me the next morning and said I should turn up in an hour, an hour and a half, I can't remember, and told me to get a cab and tell the cab driver a certain entrance.

F: There had been no problem at all in getting the Pope to receive you?

R: Evidently not, no. The only thing that happened was the call from Valenti, to which I listened. I didn't listen to it, but I was in Valenti's house when he made it. I don't know whether the Monsignor had so much power, but you know Jack said, "The President is sending Jim Rowe over." And I didn't have any problem, not at all. And went to a certain entrance, I don't know where it was, but we went way in the back. Do you know the Vatican at all?

F: No.

R: Well, we went sliding back through a lot of back entrances into what I would call the working part, got out [at] an entrance, and I was taken to Monsignor, who was a big, handsome American. Fifteen minutes later we were in talking to the Pope, who was most friendly, genial is a rather strong word; it is hard to describe a Pope as genial, but he was most friendly.

F: Not any great difficulty to sit down and talk with him?

R: Not a bit, no.

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F: Talk things through.

R: He understands English, and I am sure understood mine, but I would say a few things, and then Marcincus would translate very carefully what I had said. I would guess the Pope understood what I said, but also had a chance of getting it in both languages. I made the two points, one about the Tet offensive and, of course, indicated by then that they had announced, the North Vietnamese had announced their truce.

F: You knew this?

R: I think my memory is that I did know. Maybe I didn't. Maybe this happened afterwards. I'm not clear about that, but it does not show on my notes. In fact, my notes do show that the Pope said he could make an announcement--I have some note here in which I pointed out the Pope had made the statement December 19 of the year before. And we suggested, my notes indicate, that December 15 would be a good date for our purposes. So I just told him what our problem was, and I wasn't so blunt as to say, "Will you do it earlier?" I said, "Will you tell us what your date is so we can plan ahead?" The reason being that it took a long time for us to get the word down to our troops in the field, evidently, so we did have to have time well ahead of Christmas to get the word down to all the troops, and the Pope did indicate, I can't remember what he indicated, that he would do it as early as possible. I think we did suggest that ideally the fifteenth would be the perfect date for us, and I think he said he could do it, and as I remember did do it. But in the

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meanwhile. . . Maybe it was after I departed that Hanoi beat us to the punch. I just can't remember.

F: At least you didn't have any reciprocity problems there.

R: No, no. Then the President wanted me to tell him, among a number of other things, that if the Pope pressed on the bombing, in fact not to let him press about stopping the bombing, but to explain our position, which Harriman had already done, I think, a few months before. Which was that we just felt we could not stop the bombing without some indication from Hanoi that they would take some kind of reciprocal action, that the year before we'd stopped for thirty-seven days and absolutely nothing had happened, and we felt that Hanoi regarded this as a form of weakness that we had stopped that long. We also felt that extending a truce for a great length of time, that Hanoi would regard it the same way, so that is why we wanted a limited truce around Christmas and New Year's, and that was it. We indicated that we just had to have some kind of an indication from Hanoi that if we did stop bombing, they would take some kind of action and so forth.

As you know, we followed that policy, I guess up until right before the election in 1968, didn't we? As I remember, the President did stop it, and I think he must have had some reason to believe that something would happen, and obviously something did happen. But he wasn't going to do this unilaterally anymore. He had done it once and he had to get something coming back. Also, my instructions were to say that we were working all over the world probing every

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possible source for peace and we were making contacts with everyone we could to see if any kind of reciprocity on the other side was forthcoming, and that the President had said this had been intensified the last few weeks before I did the talking. Then I brought up the question about what had happened to Hussler, and the Pope said that Neemuller had been sick and that had been postponed, but that Hussler was on his way and would be going over ostensibly to see how the Catholics were doing, but also to probe, for the Pope, the possibilities. In fact, he did later go and I think nothing came of that. But most of it was to explain our problem of protecting our troops.

I think the Pope indicated at one stage that he was not a military expert and he couldn't pass on this kind of judgment as to what we could do or couldn't do, that was our problem. In fact, I found that meeting quite good. The Pope did indicate that he had great belief that we were trying to do something.

F: He wasn't denunciatory.

R: Not a bit, no. He said he understood the President's position and he really felt the President had been trying to do everything and was continuing to try to do everything within reason to get peace. He didn't have any problem about that at all. He understood exactly what had been going on, and he was most sympathetic and most friendly and said he wanted to do anything he could do to be helpful on it. He would cooperate obviously on the business of the Tet truce, and

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sent all kinds of messages back to the President saying he would do everything he could. That is about where we ended up.

F: On something like that, for duration of truce, do you negotiate with Hanoi, does someone just make a simple announcement, and the other country can take it or leave it?

R: I think that's what had been happening, yes. I think what the President was really trying to do was beat Hanoi to the punch this particular year. He had been beaten the year before, but he wanted to hang it on to the Pope's request, and he knew the Pope, as he always did, would make a request. Therefore he was suggesting to the Pope, "Will you please make it a little early so I can make mine? I have to have time so I can get the word to all my troops in the field." This was all worked out very nicely, except for the fact that some way or other Hanoi jumped first again.

F: Right. About how long were you with the Pope?

R: I would think it must have been about an hour, at least an hour and maybe more. But I think I confined myself to doing this talking, the Pope answering my points. I think it was almost a presentation. I started right from the beginning, did my talking, and the Pope answered. He's very bright, covered everything, it seemed to me, that I had mentioned. Just for the record, later on Marcincus asked if he could tape my notes, which I didn't have any notes, and make a record for the Vatican.

(Interruption)

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I said I had some notes at my hotel, and if he wanted to come over, I would record those. So he came over, and his recorder didn't work, so he had to take all my notes down freely and not shorthand; I don't think he took it. I made my speech again to Marcincus with my notes in front of me, which I had memorized. Then we went out and had a very pleasant dinner, and that was it.

F: Did you ever inform the Ambassador of what you were doing?

R: I did. I went after the meeting.

F: Up to this he probably did not have any idea?

R: No, I think Bundy had said he was sending him a cable that I was coming. I think this was done. And this was all done through the State Department machinery. The President didn't tell me to talk to him or not to talk to him or anything else. He once said, "You should have just gone over. You and Valenti arrange it," and so forth.

F: That's a little difficult.

R: It seemed to me so, but I had seen the Pope before I got back, and I did call when I got through with the Pope and got back to my hotel. I was at the Excelsior, which is right near the American Embassy. I went down, called and asked for an appointment, and the Ambassador did see me.

F: He did not feel that he had been given the runaround?

R: If he did, he did not indicate it. I imagine he might have. Of course, as you know he is not accredited at the Vatican.

F: Right.

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R: And I gather, I have a note that he deals with Dela Acta, who at that time was what we would call the secretary of state. I think he is quite old. I think they had meetings somewhere or other. Maybe our ambassador would go and see the Secretary of State, but he supposedly doesn't. It is all informal.

F: The charge that you undercut the State Department just doesn't hold water.

R: No, and I reported to the Ambassador, and we sat down and worked out a cable back to the State Department, in effect what I had said and what the Pope had said. This may have been where the leak came from. Once you get a cable wandering through that department and so forth. It was a cable back to and it was an "eyes only" to Secretary Rusk, and then, I presume, it was to go to the President. That was sent. I didn't go into too much detail, but enough so the message would make sense. Both of us edited the cable right in his office. I found him an intelligent fellow. I had never met him before or since.

F: Was Averell Harriman aware of what you were up to?

R: Yes. I had talked with Averell before. I think I talked first with Averell, then--and this was only when these people were available--with Dean Rusk, and then with Bundy. I talked several times with Bundy, just to make sure I had learned my lessons.

F: We are talking about Bill Bundy, not Mac.

R: Bill Bundy, yes. Mac wasn't there at the time. This was Bill Bundy, who was assistant secretary of state for the Far East.

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I had several meetings with Bundy, and Bundy's group prepared these position papers and talking points, out of which I made these notes. Then out of these notes I memorized sufficiently so that whatever I was saying was an official point of view, although I was saying it privately.

F: Did you report personally to the President on your return?

R: I came back. I took a long weekend in London, and I came back, and then the President was down on the Ranch. I called Marvin, and said, "Marvin, I'm back." I can't remember if Marvin knew I had gone, but I said, "I have just done something for the President, and I'm back. Will you ask him"--he is down at the Ranch--"does he want me to do this on paper or by telephone?" Marvin called in about an hour and said, "He wants you to come down and talk at the Ranch. As long as you're coming, bring Lib and bring Tommy," my law partner. So all three of us went there.

F: One more trip?

R: Yes, and it was a little embarrassing, because I hadn't told my wife where I was going, except that I was going to Rome. And Tommy didn't know, I don't think he even knew I was out of the office, so I was a little embarrassed when the President said, "All right, go ahead, report." I did at some length in his office in Austin. We went out to the Ranch after that. Then I suggested that he write a letter to the Pope, which I did a draft of and I think he changed a little bit, just saying that he received the message from me

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and he wanted to thank the Pope. I think there are one or two points that he made quietly, and just mailed off the letter.

F: Was he satisfied with the mission, under the circumstances?

R: I think so. He was cross about the leak, not the paper. That came, as I remember, afterwards. He was cross that Hanoi had beaten him to the punch, and he thought it was a leak out of the department, but other than that he was pleased. Obviously he was pleased that the Pope was friendly and complimentary and knew the President was trying to do everything he could to bring this thing to an end. There wasn't any problem on that. The Pope emphasized that a great number of times, that he thought this man was a man of peace and wanted to get it done, and that he wanted to be helpful.

F: Within your knowledge, did President Johnson ever consider a full-time ambassador or some other emissary to the Vatican?

R: I don't have any knowledge of this. We may have talked about that, but you know because of his age and my age, we went all through this as young men with Roosevelt. Remember Roosevelt had Taylor over there.

F: Myron Taylor.

R: Stettinius, and the President, even as a young congressman, I guess he was then, must have got a hell of a lot of unfavorable reaction out of Texas.

F: Right. It was there, I can assure you.

R: And the President kept moving, trying it, and then Truman tried it. Truman even got to the stage of announcing it. I think he was going to send somebody and he pulled his horns back. So I think

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that Johnson, having looked at this background, realized there wasn't any real mileage in this and that he couldn't do it and didn't try, to the best of my knowledge. I notice Nixon is now fiddling with it a little bit, but I can't remember that the President ever seriously concentrated on this one. I think he was too experienced from the Roosevelt and Truman experience to even--despite the change that Kennedy--think it would work.

F: Does this about wrap this up?

R: I think that does it.

F: Thank you, Mr. Rowe..

R: All right, sir.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview III]

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