INTERVIEW I

DATE: July 29, 1969

INTERVIEWEE: BROMLEY SMITH

INTERVIEWER: PAIGE E. MULHOLLAN

PLACE: Mr. Smith's office, Department of State, Washington, D. C.

Tape 1 of 1

M: Let's get your identification on the beginning of this tape. You're Bromley Smith, and your official designation during the Johnson Administration, as indeed during the Kennedy Administration as well, was as executive secretary of the National Security Council from 1961 to 1969.

S: That's correct.

M: You had been a career Foreign Service officer in various capacities with the Department of State.

S: That's right.

M: Had you in any of your earlier career, before 1961, had personal contacts with Mr. Johnson?

S: No, I don't believe I did.

M: You were, of course, a senior staff member of the NSC during many of the Eisenhower years. Did Mr. Johnson participate in NSC affairs during that period?

S: That I can't answer. I just didn't know of his activities as a Senator.

M: Right. How about the staff work? Did staff work frequently get prepared for the consumption of Senate leaders, that you were involved with?

S: In the period from 1953, when I first came with the Council, until 1959 when I left to go with the Operations Coordinating Board, as far as I recall we did not do this. The White House liaison with the Senate was not done by the Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. It was done in a different way. The person who could answer that question would be Bryce Harlow, who was on the White House side.

M: Right. You've mentioned already a couple of times the general subject of the organization

and the way the staff was organized. Perhaps it might be a good idea, since it has changed so much and since you have seen it through most of those changes, to sort of describe the way it was organized when you became executive secretary; and if you think it's of any interest, how that was different from the previous practice of the Eisenhower years.

S: That's probably a more complicated subject than you want to get into. The Eisenhower system was set up by Robert Cutler. He studied previous practices and made a report to President Eisenhower. President Eisenhower adopted that report in 1953. During the campaign the candidate, General Eisenhower, had made a great point of how the Democrats had not used the National Security Council, but he was going to use it; he was going to have a national strategy. So this was carrying out a campaign commitment.

General Cutler set up a rather complicated piece of machinery. I was brought over in 1953, having worked for Dean Acheson as a staff officer when he was Secretary of State, to create the first independent substantive staff that the Council had ever had. The Council staff thus had the capability of making an independent review of policy papers coming from the State Department or the Defense Department.

Later, I became the executive officer of the Operations Coordinating Board, which was an organization charged with reviewing and overseeing the implementation of Council policies.

M: But still an arm of the NSC.

S: At that time the OCB staff had been integrated into the NSC staff. Elmer Staats was my predecessor.

When the Kennedy Administration came along, the decision was made that coordination was going to be continued, but would be done in a much less formalized fashion. The Operations Coordinating Board was abolished. I liquidated the OCB staff. McGeorge Bundy asked me to work with him--to follow those policies in which President Kennedy was personally interested. In May, I believe, after the Bay of Pigs and as part of an effort to introduce more organization into the White House staff, we moved from the old Executive Office Building to the West Wing basement of the White House. We set up the Situation Room, providing information and intelligence to the President and the White House policy structure.

The fact that I was named executive secretary of the NSC was only incidental to the work I was doing. McGeorge Bundy asked me to take this title and fill the statutory slot because he didn't want to leave it open and possibly get somebody put in it he didn't know.

M: You were kind of anticipating the first question that I had, which was your relation to

what came to be called the "Bundy Shop."

S: The relationship was very close. Bundy came into my office in the Old Executive Office Building one day and said, "Come on, we're going across the street." I thought it was just for a meeting. We never returned to the Executive Office Building. We had adjoining offices in that slum area in the West Wing basement long before we had the upper part which we later negotiated to get. We started systematizing the movement of policy actions to the President and organizing the National Security Council staff.

Because President Kennedy did not feel at ease with the existing Council machinery, and because several people, including Richard Neustadt, were of the view that his role as president was going to be quite different than President Eisenhower's, the whole Council structure was "stood-down." It was only partially reconstructed.

At that time there were three military aides and each was a source of intelligence and information, although one was supposed to be in charge. For some months for this and other reasons there was a sizeable amount of confusion as to how information got to the President.

McGeorge Bundy had quite a different role than General Cutler although he had the same title. The earlier Council system was not part of the day to day activity of the president. The Council was thought of as a separate piece of machinery to help Eisenhower make decisions but it did not get into all national security decisions. President Kennedy was going to have many meetings which might, in the Eisenhower Administration, have been called NSC meetings. They were ad hoc or informal. Organizing those meetings, seeing that the papers were there, seeing that the right people were there, seeing that decisions were made and accurately reported back to the departments, was the Bundy operation.

The Council itself played a rather unimportant role, although it was used by the members to discuss some national security issues.

One of the assignments we picked up at this time was briefing Vice President Johnson. I felt a special responsibility for the Vice President, because the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense and the Director of the CIA had huge staffs. They always came with briefing books and all kinds of papers. The Vice President had a small staff and there wasn't the attention given to briefing him that was given to every other participant in the Council. I believe he had Colonel Burris on his staff at the beginning. We made it a point in those early days to see Colonel Burris never less than once a week, always to see him before an NSC meeting so that he could brief the Vice President. We provided information; we saw that the Vice President's office got the papers; tried to give Burris the informal background that is absolutely essential if an aide is to do his job for a principal. On occasion, President Kennedy during an NSC meeting would look across at the Vice

President and ask his views. This is not abnormal and was later done by President Johnson to Vice President Humphrey. It wasn't quite fair to the Vice President, if he were not fully informed or fully briefed, to be asked these direct questions.

M: Was there a regular liaison man who did this for Colonel Burris regularly from your operation?

S: No, I usually did it personally.

M: You did it personally?

S: That's correct. I would try to reflect to him more or less the views of the various agencies involved, State, Defense, et cetera.

M: Did you have some personal contact with Mr. Johnson on those occasions, or usually with Colonel Burris?

S: It was always with Colonel Burris. We made a special point to see that the Vice President had at least the NSC papers, the latest drafts. How this fitted into the Vice President's staff system, I do not know.

The relationship between any President and any Vice President is very complicated. For example, in those days the Vice President was chairman of the Space Council, a new organization created by Congress. The congressmen who created it didn't fully understand the relationship between the Vice President and the President. The Space Council was chaired by the Vice President and its members were the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, NASA, the AEC, CIA, et cetera. It is rather difficult to confront the President, who has not participated in the process, with decisions on space made by a Cabinet-level body.

Jim Webb, who headed NASA at the time, realized that any action of the Space Council had to be presented to the President in such a way that it did not raise the question of whether the President controlled the space program. Its product in a sense had to be introduced to the President in such a way that the President--or his staff--would not think that his powers were being jeopardized, or his prerogatives were being infringed by the Vice President.

President Johnson dealt with this in a more satisfactory fashion. It was quite clear to Vice President Humphrey that the Space Council was a place where policies could be discussed prior to sending them to the President for decision.

M: Maybe because Johnson had occupied the position and realized--

S: I think that's probably true. At one point, for example, President Nixon, when he was vice president, either thought up the idea or was persuaded that it was a good idea, to become the chairman of the Operations Coordinating Board. Scotty Reston of the New York Times took this up and thought it was a good way to use an active man. What was at issue was giving the Vice President the chairmanship of a very powerful piece of governmental machinery without any easy way of fitting it in to the President's operations.

M: Did this problem arise between Mr. Johnson and Mr. Kennedy on substance over the space program?

S: It was never allowed to. But I think probably that the principals appreciated the problem and therefore dealt with it in an adult manner rather than let it be handled at the staff level and become acute. Mr. Webb, I think, felt he was the bridge. Whatever he was going to say in the Space Council as head of NASA--he wasn't on the NSC--he would explain to President Kennedy. He wanted to be certain that anything he did did not contribute to creating an awkward situation between the Vice President and the President.

M: Of course he had been in the White House himself under the Truman years and knew--

S: He'd been in the Bureau of the Budget; he'd been under secretary of state; and he was aware. He was loyal, and he was performing more as a government officer than as a political appointee.

M: What about Mr. Johnson's role in the vice presidency? You said that President Kennedy liked to use something less than the full NSC meetings. Did Mr. Johnson usually get invited to these smaller groups, smaller collections of people on important matters?

S: I know he was in many major meetings, and I know that President Kennedy asked to see him personally and consulted him personally--just the two of them.

M: Privately?

S: Privately--at times after he had gotten a recommendation from the government. There is no question but that there was hostility between the White House staff and the Vice President's staff.

M: You are talking about hostility by the personal staff.

S: By the personal staff of the President. You should try to find out whether this was only a staff reaction.

M: How did they manifest that kind of hostility that's so clear, by excluding the Vice President or by demeaning him?

S: The White House staff felt they had to come up with ideas as to how to keep the Vice President busy, and yet busy in a way that did not jeopardize what they wanted to do for the President. One of the ways was to suggest that he travel. This worked both ways. If the Vice President's staff proposed a trip, the White House staff would try to downgrade it or postpone it or alter it in some way. This did not, of course, include trips which the President asked the Vice President to make.

M: I know Mr. Johnson later became so suspicious of the press, based partly on what he thought were unfriendly leaks by Kennedy people. Did this begin while President Kennedy was still alive?

S: I didn't know any of the Kennedy people well enough to know. I was totally unknown to the entire staff. I scarcely knew Mac Bundy. I came over as a kind of a neutral government character.

M: A lovely position to occupy in that case.

S: Our job was to concentrate on trying to pick up the wreckage of the national security machinery, retrieve pieces of it and fit it into a system which President Kennedy found agreeable.

M: Did Mr. Johnson invariably attend the NSC meetings when he was in town?

S: Invariably. I don't think that he missed any NSC meetings; and it was important that he be there. But I repeat, President Kennedy sometimes would not call the Council together for weeks at a time. He could never understand why people who didn't have a direct interest in the subject wanted to be at a meeting to hear the discussion and hear the President's views. His immediate reaction was "Haven't they anything to do! Why would they want to come and waste their time at this meeting?" He did not use the Council in the way that President Eisenhower did as one way of conveying his views to his ranking cabinet members.

M: And decisions weren't really being made at the NSC meeting level.

S: That is correct. On numerous occasions there would be major discussions, but it was not used as the sole decision-making body. It was only one of the ways in which major questions could be brought up, so that it was impossible for the Vice President to feel that he was fully participating in things if he came only to the NSC meetings.

There was an ad hoc attitude toward some of these informal meetings. On occasions when the Vice President should have been invited, he was not because of the pressure of events or because somebody at some level didn't comprehend that this was a presidential team and the Vice President couldn't be the only one who wasn't "in." If a

vice president gets completely out of line, he can't be fired as the secretary of state can. This sets up an awkward relationship between the president and the vice president.

M: Did Mr. Johnson, when he attended the NSC meetings, act as an active participant, or did he sit quietly and sort of be an observer only?

S: It's impossible to generalize. When he was asked he always responded--fully and in a well informed fashion. But he did not, as far as I remember, volunteer very much. He may have preferred to talk directly with the President.

M: All of this is relevant to the big general question about which the critics have made quite a lot. Was it Walter Lippmann who wrote, right after Mr. Johnson became president, that he simply didn't have half of the qualifications, he didn't know anything about foreign affairs?

S: That was really very far out of line. On occasions he would meet with a presidential advisory group--during the Cuban missile crisis, for example--when it was meeting at the State Department. Some of those preliminary meetings were held without the President. The group would go later to the White House to meet with the President. The Vice President was always deferential to Secretary Rusk in those State Department meetings. He would literally have to be pushed to chair the group when it was meeting outside the Cabinet Room.

M: But he did go.

S: He did go, yes.

M: And he did at least show evidence of having mastered some of the details of the problems?

S: No question about that.

M: So any suggestion that he was a novice in foreign affairs because of his background is an exaggeration?

S: It's just inaccurate. He missed no full meeting of the Executive Committee during [the] critical period of the Cuban missile crisis. Numerous writers have said he didn't take much part in the Executive Committee. The records show otherwise.

M: The Executive Committee now, is it correct that that designation was used for the single instance of the Cuban crisis?

S: Yes, in effect.

M: That was not an institution that went on and on?

S: No, it was a grouping. It was the National Security Council with some non-members added. The full Council met on the Cuban missile crisis twice even before the Executive Committee was created. The Executive Committee or ExCom, as it later became known, included every NSC member except the director of what is now the Office of Emergency Planning.

There was a very strong desire on the part of several members of ExCom to continue it long after the Cuban missile crisis. You could not have that group of men working exclusively on any but the most critical problem. Far better to put this mechanism in cold storage and at a later time, God forbid, if you had a comparable problem, you could then appoint an executive committee to handle it.

The National Security Council can be used or not by the president. I have doubts whether the Congress constitutionally can tell the president how to do his business. The law did provide a framework and a small budget for a small staff. But the president can use it or not as he wishes. There's no sanction if he does not. The mystique of the Council is a plus that a president can use. If he finds it easy to work with, he uses it.

M: Of course he could make his appointments to the various statutory positions on it with the view to having them on the National Security Council. That would require sort of a long view.

S: I don't know how interested you are in organization, but we had decided that the head of the Office of Emergency Planning would cease to be a Council member. We made this proposal only to discover that in reorganizing the Office of Civil Defense, whatever it was, the Bureau of the Budget had put in a basket clause which said that the director of the new organization would have all the rights, prerogatives, et cetera, of the prior one. This had gone through the whole White House machinery and was lying before the Senate as part of a reorganization plan. We were thus in the awkward position of asking President Kennedy if he would disavow a reorganization plan that he had sent to Congress. He took a dim view of this. So it was dropped. But each time the President asked why the OEP director was on the Council, he got the full answer. And each time he said, "Well, when we have a change of directors, I will make it clear to the new director that he is not to sit on the National Security Council."

I believe that President Johnson had this feeling but I understand fully that in the effort to recruit a good man for the job, his staff called attention to the fact that he was going to sit on the National Security Council. Although the director changed several times, each time the recruiters would make clear to him that he would be a member of the Council. OEP was the vestigial remains of an earlier cabinet-level coordinating agency. It was somewhat awkward to have a person in intimate Council discussions who had almost

no responsibility in the matter and little justification for participating.

M: During this late Kennedy period then, did the Bundy operation just grow more or less by happenstance, or was that a conscious decision on the part of President Kennedy to add bulk in the form of more assistants to Bundy? By the time President Kennedy was assassinated, he had a fairly large staff, Kaysen, Komer, and some others were--

S: When the OCB was abolished in 1961, we liquidated that whole OCB staff--some fifty people. We kept the National Security Council bureaucratic structure, the positions and the budget, but changed almost all the people. In effect the new officers became Bundy's people. One of the reasons he acquired greater authority was that he had quite a few people behind him to whom he could delegate assignments and get back papers and memoranda, drafts of speeches, et cetera, which went to the President in Bundy's name.

M: I was going to say, did all of the memoranda go up in Bundy's name?

S: The Council staff members were in effect White House staff members, although they were paid by the NSC and their line to the President was usually through McGeorge Bundy.

This didn't happen all at once. In the early days there was some confusion. Walt Rostow, a deputy special assistant, had direct access to the President. Bundy's gaining control of national security affairs and doing an orderly staff job for the President was not accomplished overnight.

We used several devices to try to coordinate the White House. We worked toward some kind of a system for President Kennedy, even though he didn't think he needed much of a system. We had to have more than he really wanted in order to do the job he wanted done.

Professor Richard Neustadt recommended dismantling the NSC machinery. Then he took a sabbatical and left all the broken crockery around the White House.

M: That's a good thing for professors to do. That's how we get along.

S: He was happy in England while we were trying to sort out the pieces. I had a rather dim view of Neustadt then but later we reached a meeting of the minds. I have no question about his intelligence, ability, and sincerity.

He is quoted as saying that in his recommendations on organization he had aimed at Eisenhower but hit Kennedy. That was his shorthand way of acknowledging that he should have tried to persuade President Kennedy to accept more organization rather than less.

M: How much actual resistance to all of this was there on the part of the State Department as the Bundy operation grew over the first two or three years?

S: It's hard to evaluate. Actually, the State Department benefited to a certain extent because those in State who understood did not resist the creation of a staff or of Mac Bundy, because he helped them get their business done. When they tried other channels, they just came a cropper. The State Department works best when it has one point of contact at the White House where information and papers can move back and forth very easily. It was essential under President Kennedy and also under President Johnson to have a special assistant to the President who had close and friendly relations with the various cabinet secretaries and with their immediate staff members.

M: So these various press stories of bitterness between the department and the White House operation were exaggerated, as far as you were concerned?

S: As far as I'm concerned, they were exaggerated. They reflected the views of officers down in the State hierarchy. I think Bundy had some problems with Secretary Rusk, and Secretary Rusk had some problems with McGeorge Bundy, but they were not the kind that the press reported: namely, that there was rivalry. It was all Washington gossip. Many times principals will not talk about such things. Staff will, and staff never really understands. This is one of the criticisms I had of the Institute of Defense Analysis study.

M: That's out now in public print. Somebody has come out with it.

S: A staff man can write a good paper, but it certainly shouldn't be read by historians as an adequate explanation of a system. In your work you should make a point of getting on this subject with the principals so that when all of the record is put together you'll have what does not now exist, namely, how Rusk found the system and how Bundy and Rostow and McNamara found it.

M: Yes, it's one I've tried to bear down on hard with the people that you've just mentioned, and also with some of the staff people further down. Was there a lot of the subordinates going around the principals, causing difficulty? McGeorge Bundy's operatives going to the State Department without going through the Secretary, for example, this type of thing?

S: There was a sizable amount of that. When they did go, the result depended on the person. A good staff officer could establish good relations with his opposite number--say, an assistant secretary or whoever had the action. He would insure that Bundy knew what he was doing and how he was going about it. It required officers who were in a sense martyrs, who chose to be anonymous and who didn't consider they had a personal role to play, but were trying to advance the President's interests. But the description of the people on that staff is complicated. It's very hard to generalize because to a large extent

the relationship turned on the individual.

M: I can see it would be very easy to get proprietary about "your" geographical bureau in the State Department, for example. "I own you, assistant secretary of so-and-so."

S: Or to pass the kind of gossip that's very harmful, namely, that an assistant secretary is a stumble-bum and should be doing this and not that. Only great discipline keeps a White House staff officer from running the end, in the sense of putting up a memoranda or doing something that makes it almost impossible for the State Department or the Defense Department to retrieve the situation. It's a long and involved subject, a fascinating one. I think it turns primarily on the special assistant.

It is true that, although State officers had the authority they did not exercise it. They did not exert leadership at the various levels. Therefore, when the President had to have something done, it was almost easier for McGeorge Bundy to call a meeting in the Situation Room, bang all the heads together and get things going. The tendency was to do it that way.

We often said that the size of the NSC staff depended on the State Department. If they would do their job, then you really didn't need as much backup in the White House. The size indicated the extent to which they were doing their job.

There are those who for years have maintained that State should exercise the leadership and, therefore, nothing should be done in the White House to make it harder for State. We ran the Council with this in mind at one point.

There are others who say State never can do it, and you might as well give up and just jump in and do it from the White House. I belong to the former school. I think you need a government-wide reorganization if you're going to have a national staff in the White House.

President Johnson established a national security system which assigned responsibility to the Secretary of State and the Secretary delegated authority to the Senior Interdepartmental Group. This was, I think, organizationally the most intelligent thing that has been done in a long time.

M: But apparently that never got really off the ground as far as operating was concerned.

S: It's very hard to deal with an organization in the abstract. Admittedly, it wasn't the best time in the world to launch the system. There was criticism that it should not have been tried then, but that's by people who never really have lived in the marketplace--I mean, the timing is sometimes one that you cannot choose.

General Taylor was then a White House adviser. He saw the problems that needed to be dealt with. Alexis Johnson was in the State Department. Approval of the new system by the President came out of that. Harry Schwartz was working with General Taylor at the time.

When President Johnson tried to force state to use SIG, State mistakenly got the idea that SIG was a presidential instrument. They began sending papers from the Senior Interdepartmental Group directly to the President, shorting out the Secretary of State. In effect this wrecked the system because the papers were to go from the SIG to the Secretary of State first. The Secretary of State then had an option as to whether he wanted to talk to the Secretary of Defense or anybody else or whether he wanted to present the issue to the President. As it developed, it was not a satisfactory procedure.

M: A good attempt that didn't quite make it.

S: It didn't quite make it. In part State was at fault. When the system really wasn't working, the correct decision was made that the special assistant's office, then headed by Rostow, had to pick up the ball and put questions in shape so the President could deal with them.

M: So, by the time Mr. Johnson left office there really still hadn't been a satisfactory resolution of that whole problem area.

S: It was working well in certain areas. Toward the end they made some gestures that could only be described as futile. But by that time you had the Tuesday lunch for Vietnam and some other major issues. The President and his top advisers could talk very easily and informally, and accomplish a great deal of business, which they did every Tuesday.

M: That's a good place to go back to then when--what happened to the utilization of the National Security Council, as compared to President Kennedy's use, when Mr. Johnson became president? Did he change anything of any importance in connection with the Council's use?

S: No, it was used a bit more. But the machinery by then was so rusty that President Johnson wanted to use it more than he had an opportunity to. The government was not organized to produce papers that the staff could suggest the President spend thirty or forty minutes discussing. On numerous occasions President Johnson said, "I want the Council to meet every other week." We would then try to crank up the State Department and the Defense Department. There was no machinery. The Planning Board had been abolished.

M: Right, President Kennedy did that.

S: Just by not calling it together. It just didn't meet. There was no machinery to put together papers worthy of the President's attention. We just hammered and hammered at the State

Department, saying, "President Johnson is prepared every other week to spend forty minutes talking about a subject. Now, why don't you exploit this time which you can have?" It would improve for a little while. It was the NSC staff's responsibility not to throw something to the President that wasn't worth discussing, or hadn't been discussed outside the State Department.

Walt Rostow was convinced that the Council should not be a place where decisions were made. For quite some period, discussion papers were used. They could serve a purpose if the NSC staff watched carefully. From a NSC discussion of say a paper on Indonesia, one could get a feel for the President's reaction to the problem as well as an exchange of views. The State Department then had some general guidance.

Occasionally, the President would use the Council to brief the other members on decisions he was on the verge of making. On occasions it would be called together more or less to ratify a decision so that the President could say, "on the recommendation of the National Security Council."

M: But really a pro forma performance in that case.

S: Yes, actually. And I think the reason was that every Tuesday there was a meeting where a cabinet secretary could bring up what he wanted to bring up--where there was an agenda, where there were papers as necessary, where records were kept. The cabinet secretaries knew they always had access to the President at least every single week. They knew they couldn't schedule anything else for Tuesday lunch. Once when one secretary couldn't come the President cancelled the luncheon. It was necessary to do that only once or twice. The group got the point. We relayed the information that the President's office wasn't in a position to understand why a secretary would schedule something on Tuesday noon if there was to be a Tuesday luncheon at the White House.

Those meetings were closely structured, highly valuable. The Tuesday luncheon was one of the most valuable pieces of machinery that I've encountered.

M: No difficulty in determining after they were closed what had been decided?

S: The public record on this point is very poor. It's true that secondary officers in the departments sometimes were not satisfied because they didn't get a full read-out, or they didn't get something in writing immediately. But Rostow was quite good in getting back to the various departments with the decisions that had been made.

In addition, particularly on Vietnam, you had the <u>action</u> officers there--the Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the Director of Central Intelligence.

The luncheon meeting was gradually built up over a period of time when the mechanism was found useful to President Johnson. It was converted from just a luncheon on one day to "do you want to meet the Secretaries next Tuesday?" The third time around it was, "Is the regular Tuesday luncheon on?"

M: A long-standing two-week tradition.

S: Actually it went this way: "If we're going to talk about Vietnam, wouldn't it be a good idea to have the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs there?" And he was added. When the Director of Central Intelligence started attending, you had the NSC in fact.

M: What about implementation then? Did your staff follow up on implementation decisions?

S: Rostow was always at these meetings. We often worked out an informal advance agenda. It was strikingly similar to the off-the-record luncheon of the old Operations Coordinating Board. One of the reasons why they were so effective was because they were unreported. We would circulate orally a tentative agenda. It did not box the President in, but it did give the members of the Tuesday luncheon an idea of what was probably going to be brought up.

M: There was no conscious attempt to imitate the old informal luncheons that you describe of the OCB?

S: No. As executive officer of the Operations Coordinating Board, I made a mistake when I never put on the public record the tremendous value of the under secretaries meeting weekly without staff, but with an informally arrived-at agenda. Members would go back from the meeting not saying, "The OCB ordered so-and-so," but for example, the Deputy Secretary of Defense going back, calling his officers in and saying, "I was over seeing Under Secretary Herter and he has a real problem with our proposal. Let's look at it again because I now don't want to do what we proposed."

Such meetings make the staff miserable because they're not participants--the middle level bureaucrats will attack any system which does not give them a full read-out or get something in the record that is meaningful to them. I understand their point of view, but, being terribly biased toward the presidency, this is a price they ought to be willing to pay.

M: So this is where you think most of the criticism of the Tuesday lunch came from?

S: There is no doubt about it in my mind. Again, in a huge bureaucracy I admit that you need to have guidance. No bureaucrat likes to stick his neck out unless he knows what he's supposed to do. It's very hard to run a bureaucracy without written documents.

The criticism of the Tuesday lunch comes not from those who participated in them. I'd love to have you try to challenge that generalization.

M: I think that's true, based on the ones I've talked to, that is.

S: It was useful to them. And frankly, in the modern world, I am not too unhappy that the middle-range bureaucrats are unhappy, except insofar as they talk to the press and that may jeopardize the President's image.

M: Where in all of this business that you've been describing does the face-to-face dissenter get heard, or did he?

S: I recall one Security Council meeting--it must have been in 1965--prior to the time that President Johnson decided to deploy substantial forces to Vietnam.

M: The summer of 1965.

S: There was a meeting in the morning in which the various participants stated their views. George Ball stated his dissent. The President said, "We will adjourn this meeting and this afternoon we will meet again. George Ball will present his full-argument against this action. And then the Council can think about, and I will think about it, and we will meet the following day and I will reach a decision on what we shall do."

There was a case, unique as far as I know, where a president called a meeting for the sole purpose of giving the stage to someone who was stating the case of the opposition to a policy which was later adopted but which had not then been adopted.

M: But which--that's the key--had not then been adopted? In other words, this still was an open case.

S: No question about it. George Ball stated the dissent. He was given a full meeting to do nothing but state his case and then defend it against those who did not agree, including Secretary Rusk.

M: But it was possible at several of these levels, Tuesday lunch, or NSC meetings, or various meetings, for someone who disagreed to say, "Mr. President, I--"

S: Oh, good Lord, these Tuesday luncheons--that was one of the great values of them. Cabinet secretaries can say to you, "Well, frankly, I disagreed with the President and I stated my disagreement." Often a cabinet minister would say, "Well, I do not think that's what you ought to do, Mr. President, but I can live with what you propose to do." When you get that close to dissent with a president, the whole question of whether a man continues to serve arises.

One of the great values of these very small meetings with no staff is that a principal can, without embarrassment, come off his position. If you have a meeting and advisers are right behind the principal passing him notes and saying, "Don't let them browbeat you on that, Mr. Secretary; here's the answer," et cetera, it makes compromises very difficult. But with a very small group it is much easier for people to speak frankly. Even Secretary Rusk would speak frankly in those meetings. He was most reluctant to do so in a larger group because two or three days later he'd often read in a news column what it was he'd said.

It's very hard to stop this, very hard to prevent it. I'm sure it made President Johnson miserably unhappy on numerous occasions when a discussion in front of the President would leak in the press. He would say, "I trust every man in this room, and therefore I do not want you to tell even your assistants or your deputies or your aides the nature of this discussion." His feeling was, and I think correctly, that the principals didn't leak but they would debrief and someone else would race out and soon it would be all over Washington.

M: But all of this doesn't mean that Mr. Johnson was insisting on a sort of consensus among these very small number of people?

S: Not at all. What he was insisting upon, and what he got out of the Tuesday luncheon, was no public knowledge of the discussions and of the various positions taken. On numerous occasions Secretary McNamara would say, "From a military point of view this is what the Chiefs would like to do. Looking at it from where I sit as Secretary of Defense, this is what I think you ought to do. But because it has foreign policy implications, I defer to Secretary Rusk and to his judgment as to what ought to be done." This is what makes for a team. If a president can have this, he can operate.

The Tuesday luncheon was not a staff exercise. These are the principals. It won't work for a lot of things, only for major issues. The ideal would be to have a president do only those things that only he can do. There can be a whole range of decisions that can be taken without his knowledge--not that he wouldn't be informed or not that he'd want to get right into it if he were informed--but that really do not merit his attention. But for something like Vietnam, to have a group such as this is invaluable to the President.

M: That's about the most articulate defense or justification for the Tuesday lunch that I've run into. I'm glad that you went into it that way.

S: I don't think the case has been made for the Tuesday lunch. And, too, you can't defend it with generalizations. You've got to put life and blood around a skeleton, otherwise no one's interested. You cannot talk in public about what was discussed at these luncheons, and therefore their true value is never accurately stated. The government, as a whole, understood very little of all this. The fact that there was a scheduled meeting once a week

meant that, on numerous occasions, the Secretary of Defense would say, "I'll bring that up at the Tuesday luncheon." Well, that might have been four days before Tuesday. It was a peg on which a secretary could hang something. You have to have meetings of the president and his secretaries on a regular basis. Somebody has to review papers. The informality of a Tuesday luncheon meeting is absolutely indispensable.

Now frankly, I just don't think you ought to do business at lunch.

M: A Tuesday coffee or a Tuesday tea would have done the same thing.

S: Exactly. But it was the regularity of it. Also, it's the president's decision. What works for him is what a staff ought to provide. You can't go to the president and say, "How do you want to run this thing?" You have to do it by trial and error. When you're wrong, you hear about it. You certainly did from President Johnson in any event. Therefore, you need somebody who's listening very intently to get a feel for how a mechanism is doing--whether it fits the president's requirements and the way he works.

A good illustration is how three presidents reacted to briefings. General Eisenhower had been brought up in the military tradition. He knew all about briefings. He absorbed a lot of information quickly by having a man fully prepared spell it all out.

We tried that on President Kennedy. He nearly walked out. He was rocking in his chair. We handed him something to read and saved the day. We couldn't say to President Kennedy: "You just sit still and just listen." This was an option the staff doesn't have. But we never tried briefing again because we were never certain he would not get up and walk out.

President Johnson had greater sympathy for briefings, but the system was shattered. We were so nervous about it we'd always have a dry run before we tried it on President Johnson. There wasn't the expertise and experience that went into the performances toward the end of the Eisenhower Administration.

The whole art of staff work is to figure out how one thinks the president wants to work and then try to adapt the machinery. It works or it doesn't. You quickly can adapt the machinery to his needs and his requirements. He's the president. The object is to save his time, get him briefed, help him make decisions--and make better decisions--then record the decisions so the huge bureaucracy knows.

The bureaucracy has an attitude toward the President. Neustadt has made this point and I agree with it. There's a basic hostility between the bureaucracy and the president. They know he's only going to be there a while and they will go on after he's gone. He asks, "Where are these levers of power, where are the buttons you push?"

M: "Here I have it and now what do I do!"

S: Organization and information can ease things.

I remember what a terrible time we had with an assignment the communications people had been given to find out the President's information requirements. They came over and they said, "What are the President's requirements for information?"

I said, "Well, what are we supposed to do, go up and say, 'Mr. President, what are your requirements for information?' Do you want a list of what I think the President's requirements are? That isn't particularly helpful to you. You go back and say: 'Under the Constitution and under the laws, the Secretary of Defense has certain responsibilities,' and you decide what the President must know for you to carry out your responsibilities under the Constitution and the laws. We'll tell you whether it makes any sense or not. But no one can go to the President and ask him. What is it that you feel he must know! And when? How soon, and in what detail? You let us know. We can add the other ingredient that you don't have, namely, how a president absorbs information"

M: In line with that, what happened to the operation that Bundy had already built up by the time President Johnson assumed office? Did he try to downgrade this initially?

S: Bundy had a very strong position because he was asked by President Johnson to stay on. He decided he ought to stay, and that he wanted to be part of the transition. The staff machinery was changed very little. It all back-stopped him.

Only a few staff members had a direct relationship with President Kennedy. Under President Johnson, some officers would send memoranda on national security matters to the President without going through Rostow. Then President Johnson would say, "Walt, what do you think of this?" Rostow was relaxed in that he didn't care who wrote memoranda to the President as long as all memos came downstairs to him before being acted on. The only disadvantage is that when someone comes forth with an idea that looks great but really can't be done, you have to handle it with some care lest you become a "no can do" staff.

M: Right. But by that time they were already developing the custom of sending memos up from the operatives below Bundy and later Rostow directly to the President?

S: When we first set up the shop over there, we did two things: we moved in to gain control of communications, and we opened up the channel for the first time fully between the State Department and the White House. We rode piggyback on the military's command and control communications system. Very quickly State was giving us automatic relay of practically all State cables. Then gradually we pushed into the Defense Department. We centralized CIA inputs.

Policy memoranda which came over from the Secretary of State were intercepted and staffed on their way to the President. That has to be done with some care because if a secretary gets the idea that somebody is between him and the president, then he has problems and you can't get a good man to be secretary. On the other hand, if the paper goes right into the president, then the staff hasn't performed its job in helping the president deal with a proposal which may have been cooking in the State Department for weeks--or Defense, or somewhere else.

M: And may represent a special position by the State Department, too, as compared to Defense.

S: That's correct. The president needs to be protected by his own staff. The president's staff can look at incoming recommendations from a presidential point of view. That's just different--at least it is in my experience. And few officers in the State Department can be expected to look at it from the president's viewpoint.

Occasionally you'll get Defense saying, "Well, this is what we'd like to do, but politically it's impossible." They make the judgment as to whether it's politically possible or not, which is a judgment they shouldn't make. They thus deny the president a judgment that he alone can make.

This is the eternal problem in getting things to the president. You can give him all options. This is not particularly helpful. Some winnowing has to take place. The problem is not to have the wrong guys making the judgments--that's the point--because, in effect, they're preempting the President's decision.

M: Even preempting his opportunity as to their advice of what the best course of action is in some cases--if they winnow it out first.

S: Exactly. If it's strangled in the crib. Now, an awful lot of ideas aren't worth putting down on paper, to be honest about it, and there are a lot of ideas that should be strangled--suggestions and proposals that just simply do not make sense. But what you have to do is cherish those few that probably do have merit. This is a problem in any large organization. It's not unique to government.

M: Did President Johnson have a personal relationship with people below Bundy on that operation? How much personal contact did you have, for example, with the President, as time went by?

S: It increased as time went by, but our effort was to stay as far below surface as we could. It was only gradually over a period of time that anybody would have understood what was being done. President Johnson followed things very, very closely; and he would feel free to call anyone to get additional information, or to ask that this be done, or that a check be

made.

M: I was thinking in terms--you said while ago, when you didn't do something that you were supposed to be doing, you heard about it. Did you hear about it directly, or did you hear about it through Bundy? Not just you, but any of the people.

S: It depended on the individual. Rostow developed a very close relationship. The President would call him on all kinds of things. Rostow would fan out the work.

M: The President said, when Bundy left, that he was not going to replace Bundy. I think he didn't give Walt Rostow the title that Bundy had had. Did he try to downgrade it at that point?

S: Be sure that the record on this is straight--and my view of it may be very prejudiced. When Bundy left there was a feeling in Washington--partly in the press, and maybe in the President's mind, I don't know, that Bundy thought he was indispensable to the President, and that the President had delegated more of his authority to Bundy than any one man should have. I'm convinced in my own mind that he felt that one way of indicating that "Bundy could stay or leave, it really didn't matter to us," was to create the impression that nobody was going to fill his job when he did leave. It was clear to me that President Johnson was giving Walt Rostow all the authority and power that Bundy had, plus. And the thing to do was to get this out to the bureaucrats so they wouldn't fall on their faces if they were reading the newspapers. And this was what we proceeded to do.

M: But not to get into the newspapers!

S: But not to get into the newspapers. And it was a successful exercise. And it turned out to be correct. You see, he didn't even give Rostow the title. This is pure speculation on my part, but it was clear to me that this was done by the President for reasons other than the operation of the office or the way that he wanted Rostow to work.

The special assistant should be pretty anonymous lest he become a lightning rod and enemies attack the President by attacking him.

M: Certainly they did that with Bundy and Rostow, both.

S: The theory was that the special assistant's greatest usefulness to the President is to be absolutely neutral so that the principals have full confidence that their views will be presented to the President straight, and that the assistant is not taking advantage of his position by introducing his own views. Once uncertainty develops, then it's a very difficult situation.

M: Is that what happened with Bundy?

S: I don't know. On Vietnam, for example, some people in CIA reportedly said Rostow was sending only certain information to the President. Dick Helms told Rostow that he didn't believe this accusation, and that he was convinced that nobody in his organization put this story out. Tarring of Rostow in public reduced his usefulness because some people thought that Rostow publicly identified with a position, therefore must be using his job to advance his own policy views. Now this was not true but this was the story.

M: What people think is sometimes as important as what's true.

S: That's right. For this reason the special assistant ought to be nearly anonymous. It's very hard to get a person who will be that kind of a martyr.

M: When they're calling someone the "Dean of the World" in the press, it's almost impossible. Did this make it difficult for Bundy, in his day, to establish a close relationship with the President like Rostow was able to do?

S: I think there was a different relationship between Bundy and President Johnson and Rostow and President Johnson. I'm obviously not an authority on that, but Bundy was a carryover. He didn't appoint Bundy, he inherited Bundy. There was a feeling among correspondents that he'd be doing terribly if Bundy wasn't there, which was not true. But, again, it was what people were thinking. I go back to what I said earlier, that this may be the explanation of the Rostow case in which the President said he didn't need a replacement for Bundy.

M: Right. He didn't make the great attempt to keep Bundy on in early 1966 when Bundy got ready to leave?

S: I don't know.

M: Sometimes a neutral third party has a better idea of what went on than the participants themselves.

S: There was a different relationship between Bundy and President Johnson and Rostow and President Johnson. It's a difference in personality. Rostow's a mighty different person than Bundy.

M: You were in a position to know. What about the President? You mentioned President Kennedy's personal staff a while ago in connection with their view of Mr. Johnson. What about Mr. Johnson's personal staff? Did they meddle in the foreign policy side--Valenti, Moyers, Busby, et al?

S: I wouldn't describe it as meddling. Yes, they were in it.

M: That was on purpose, I mean, there was no prohibition of this?

S: There was some static, certainly. It caused problems, but one more or less learns to live with those problems.

M: I was thinking particularly of Patrick Anderson's charge that Moyers was developing, or had developed, sort of an anti-Vietnam network that was operating outside of, or not along with, the national security staff.

S: I think there was quite a bit in that. I ran into this in connection with the Dominican crisis when Bundy was away. The President named Moyers as coordinator. That was my first knowledge that there were differing sources of information. But this is always true in any White House.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

Gift of Personal Statement

By Bromley Smith

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, Bromley Smith, hereinafter referred to as the donor, hereby give, donate, and convey to the United States of America for deposit in the 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 the terms of the instrument available for research in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library. At the same time, it is his wish to guard against the possibility of its contents being used to embarrass, damage, injure, or harass anyone. Therefore, in pursuance of this objective, and in accordance with the provisions of Sec. 507 (f)(3) of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, as amended (44 U.S.C. 397), this material shall not, for a period of five years, be available for examination by anyone except persons who have received my express written authorization to examine it.

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 by Bromley Smith on August 1, 1974

Accepted by Harry J. Middleton for the Archivist of the United States on August 20, 1974

Original Deed of Gift on File at the Lyndon B. Johnson Library, 2313 Red River, Austin, TX 78705

ACCESSION NUMBER 75-14