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Matloff: This is part three of an oral history interview with Mr. Robert S. McNamara, held in Washington, D.C., on July 24, 1986, at 4:00 P.M.. Representing the OSD Historical Office are Drs. Alfred Goldberg, Lawrence Kaplan, and Maurice Matloff.

Mr. McNamara, at the end of our meeting on May 22, we had begun to speak about the role you played in connection with international crises and problems of one kind or another, and you had spoken about your role in connection with NATO and the Bay of Pigs affair. We would like now to move to the Cuban missile crisis. How did you first learn that there was a crisis? How did that come to your attention?

McNamara: I don't recall exactly. My recollection is that early in the morning of that Monday in October I was informed that we had received photographs taken by a U-2 on the previous day showing that Soviet intermediate range missiles, presumably with their nuclear warheads, had been brought into Cuba.

Matloff: What course of action did you favor when it became clear that the Soviets had placed offensive missiles there?

McNamara: The discussions which began that morning were carried on over a period of days, and the formulation of a plan of action evolved over that period of time. As I recall, my own thinking began with the view that the emplacement of a small number of intermediate-range ballistic missiles did not change the strategic balance in any significant way. Therefore, I didn't see the problem as a military one, at least not in the narrow sense of the term, but rather as a political problem. At

that time, we had something on the order of 5,000 strategic nuclear warheads and the Soviets had something on the order of 300. The fact that they had moved 20 or 30 intermediate-range missiles into Cuba and therefore had X-plus 20 or 30—say 300 plus 20 or 30—vis-a-vis our 5,000, did not change the military balance, even recognizing that those 20 or 30 were closer to the U.S. than the 300 which were in the Soviet Union or at sea. Nonetheless, I believed that politically we had to react forcefully to the Soviet action. So the question in my mind was how to react. We needed to persuade the Soviets to move those missiles out of Cuba, but by action that didn't lead to escalation in military terms. Very early in the week, I think on the first day, Ros Gilpatric and I had lunch together. Afterwards, as a result of our discussion at lunch, I suggested that we should respond to the Soviet action by establishing a blockade or a quarantine. This action would be in lieu of what was proposed by others: the use of air power, probably to be followed by a land invasion, to destroy the missiles.

Matloff: When you refer to the discussions and meetings, are you referring to the NSC, or the EXCOMM?

McNamara: The EXCOMM.

Matloff: Do you have any thought as to why Kennedy made use of the EXCOMM rather than the NSC for this crisis?

McNamara: The EXCOMM was both larger and smaller than the NSC. There were members of the NSC that Kennedy didn't think were needed in this crisis, and there were other people who were not members of the NSC who Kennedy did think were needed.

Matloff: He brought in McCloy, for example.

McNamara: Yes. So the EXCOMM was specially tailored to deal with the problem. I think the President was absolutely correct in his belief of how he should organize.

Goldberg: I think all the NSC members were present.

McNamara: Maybe they were, I've really forgotten.

Goldberg: It seems quite a small group by then.

Matloff: How closely were you in touch with the JCS during this crisis? Did you agree with their views?

McNamara: We were very close. The Chairman of the Chiefs was a member of the EXCOMM. To what degree did I agree with the Chiefs? I don't remember whether the Chiefs took a formal position on the response to the Soviet action, but I believe that the Chairman favored the air strike and recognized that the air strike very probably would have to be followed by a land invasion. In effect, he was recommending an air strike and land invasion, which I very much opposed.

Matloff: What differences, if any, developed with the Navy over the conduct of the naval blockade, particularly with Admiral George Anderson?

McNamara: The problem with George Anderson, who was Chief of Naval Operations, was that he, a very bright, able, and responsible man, had been trained as a naval officer to use naval ships as elements of military power, in military operations. In contrast, Kennedy and I conceived of the quarantine not as a military operation but a means of communicating a

political message to Khrushchev and to the Politburo. The political message was that we don't want war with the Soviets, and we're not engaged in or planning to overthrow Castro, but we insist that the offensive arms, which included airplanes as well as missiles, be taken out of Cuba, out of the hemisphere. We established the quarantine not particularly to stop the Soviet ships, but to convey as forcefully as possible the political message. The problem with George was that traditionally quarantines have been established to stop ships. The first ship was predicted to be at the quarantine line a few hours after a discussion George and I were having in "Flag Plot" I told them I didn't want that ship stopped by force without my personal approval. He considered that was contrary to established operating procedure for carrying out a quarantine.

Goldberg: Did the Navy go beyond its charter in sitting on the Soviet submarines?

McNamara: I know that's an issue of controversy at the moment, and quite frankly, my memory is not clear enough to say. I don't believe it did, but I'm not absolutely positive.

Goldberg: What about SAC, did it declare any alerts that went beyond what it was supposed to do?

McNamara: I'm almost certain it didn't. We took a lot of the SAC aircraft off their regular assignments and put them on photo recon.

Goldberg: There's been an allegation of high alerts.

McNamara: I suppose it's conceivable, but SAC was an extraordinarily well-disciplined force and I believe that we had procedures in effect for the declaration of alerts. I would be willing to bet 10 to 1 that SAC

didn't declare an alert that was not properly authorized. To the extent that the procedures allowed them to move to a higher alert status without permission from higher authority, they may have done so. But to the extent that the procedures required that the move to a higher alert status required permission from above, I am sure they obtained it. I'm almost certain that moving to any kind of an alert status that would have been visible to the Soviets would have required that permission.

Matloff: Did an exchange between you and Admiral Anderson on the night of October 24, 1962, stand out? What positions did you and he take?

McNamara: This was in the evening, around 10 or 10:30. I lived at the Pentagon, and slept there every night for 12 to 14 nights. In the evening I would go up to the flag plot, which was above my office, to be brought up to date on the events of the day and on the prospects for tomorrow with respect to the quarantine. The reason I lived at the Pentagon was that this was a very delicate operation. It was a means of communicating a political message to the Soviets. We wanted to be very sure that the message was communicated accurately and in a way that did not lead to consequences that we didn't anticipate or wish. It was a non-conventional military operation; in a sense we wrote the rules as we went along. On that particular evening I went upstairs to a relatively small room—there weren't enough chairs for all the admirals; there were perhaps 20 to 25 admirals in the room. I asked George to explain to me how the situation had changed since the previous evening. He said a Soviet vessel was moving toward the quarantine line and would reach it the following

morning. I asked him what he would do when it got there, and he said, "We're going to stop it." I asked him how, and he said, "We'll just hail it and stop it." I asked, "In what language are you going to hail it?" He said, "How the hell do I know? I presume we'll hail it in English." I asked, "Do the Soviets understand English? What kind of a ship is this?" He said, "It's a tanker." I asked, "Does the tanker crew understand English?" He said, "How the hell would I know?" I said, "If you're going to hail them in English and they don't understand English, they will sail on. What are you going to do then?" He said, "We'll use the international flags." I asked, "Suppose they don't stop?" He said, "We'll fire a shot across their bow." I asked, "What if they don't stop then?" He said, "We'll put one through the rudder." I said, "The damn thing may blow up." He said, "You've imposed a quarantine, and our job is to stop the vessels from passing the line." I replied, "Let me tell you something. There will be no firing of any kind at that Soviet ship without my personal authority, and I'm not going to give you permission until I discuss it with the President. We're trying to convey a political message, we're not trying to start a war. We don't know that that tanker captain has been instructed by Khrushchev as to how he should behave when he comes to the quarantine line. Khrushchev may not even know he's coming to the line. We don't know if the captain has radio communication with Moscow. We don't know that Khrushchev has had time, since he received our last message, to change the instructions of the tanker captain. We don't want to start a war because of a misunderstanding or lack of information." He said, in effect, "Mr. Secretary, the Navy has been carrying out

quarantines or blockades since the time of John Paul Jones, and we have been doing it successfully. If you'll keep your fingers out of this situation, we'll carry out this successfully." I replied, "George, there will be no firing on that ship without my permission. Is that understood?" It was not a very happy occasion, but the point simply is that he had been trained to use Navy ships for certain purposes and was quite right in saying that that training led him to conclude that under these circumstances he should behave in certain ways. But what he didn't fully understand was that this was not a typical naval operation.

Goldberg: There was also the issue of the line between civilian and military authority there, wasn't there? Isn't that implicit?

McNamara: I don't think so, really. I never had any problem with any of the Chiefs or the unified commanders objecting to an order from the President or from me, but there were frequent occasions when there was disagreement between me and the Chiefs or the unified commanders--over the bombing in Vietnam, for example, or in this case, in connection with the quarantine. Also, there were frequent disagreements between the military commanders and the Chiefs, so I don't think it was military versus civilian as much as it was just that George thought it was a stupid way to run a quarantine.

Goldberg: What I really meant was, where is the line drawn between the operational and the other end of the whole business? What is properly within the scope of the military? What is the operational authority? At what point are they on their own in making decisions as to what they do?

McNamara: I would say, when they are equipped to make sound decisions.

Goldberg: This is not what they were saying at that time, or subsequently, in Vietnam. Their position was: "You've given us a job to do; let us do it the way we know how to do it, instead of telling us how to do it."

McNamara: The job we gave them to do, in the case of the Cuban missile crisis, was to convey a political message without incurring unnecessary risks of military escalation. That was the job.

Matloff: What lessons did you draw from that crisis, in two respects: one, the question of how the national security apparatus was working, compared to the Bay of Pigs; and the other, what you learned about dealing with the Soviets?

McNamara: With relation to the operation of the national security apparatus, I think the lesson was twofold: First, get the right people in, in order to tailor the exploration of the problem to the circumstances at hand. That's why the EXCOMM was formed—in the Bay of Pigs we didn't have the proper group. Second, having tailored the group to the problem at hand, insulate it from the pressure of time and other pressures to insure it has an adequate opportunity to consider the problem fully and thoughtfully. That certainly was not done in the Bay of Pigs.

Matloff: In the Bay of Pigs affair the new administration was just coming in and people hardly knew each other, I imagine.

McNamara: Exactly. And also, in the case of the Bay of Pigs, it was a CIA operation, not a DoD operation. The group addressing the issue was neither tailored to deal with a CIA operation, nor was it given the time and the opportunity to consider it thoughtfully and fully. One should deal with the Soviets from a position of strength, but in ways that permit

them to modify their behavior at the lowest cost possible to themselves, consistent with the U.S. achieving its objective.

Matloff: What did you think was the decisive factor in Khrushchev's retreat?

McNamara: I think the clarity and firmness with which Kennedy stated his objective and intention in that cable that went out Saturday, 27 October.

Matloff: How did you view the rise of Communist China and its impact on conflicts in Southeast Asia?

McNamara: Wrongly. I think the heroes of the Cuban missile crisis—unsung heroes—were Messrs. Thompson, Bohlen, and Kennan. Kennan was then Ambassador to Yugoslavia; Bohlen literally went to Paris the Tuesday after the Monday that we received the information on the photos. So in a sense, they weren't full participants in the discussion, but their lifetime of scholarship and study of the Soviets was a basis for their contribution, through cable and otherwise. Tommy Thompson was with us literally 24 hours a day throughout the two weeks. He was tremendously valuable in explaining Soviet behavior, reasons for Soviet actions, and potential Soviet reaction to our alternative actions. This gave us a much sounder foundation for decisions than we would have had otherwise. In connection with China in the early to mid-1960's there were no Thompsons/Bohlens/Kennans. You can't name me a single senior official of the government with the knowledge of China that Kennan, Bohlen, and Thompson had of the Soviet Union. As far as I know, they had been forced out of the government during the 50s. The result is we were singularly ill-informed—particularly me, but not only me—on a correct appraisal of China's geo-political

objectives and the actions they would take in support of those objectives. I think we took Lin Piao at his word. If you read Lin Piao's writings or statements, they implied that China was going to use the power of the gun to extend its influence over the countries of Southeast Asia.

Matloff: Was any thought given during either the Kennedy or the Johnson administrations, from your perspective, to a possible tilt toward China? to play the so-called China card, as it was later termed in the Nixon-Kissinger period? Was this anticipated in any way?

McNamara: No, I don't think so. I think that we made great efforts, and this was a conscious policy and objective, to avoid: a) bringing China into the Vietnam War openly and with regular military forces, and b) pushing China back into the arms of the Soviet Union. Those were two clear objectives which we pursued—to prevent a war with China and to prevent the Soviet Union and China moving together.

Goldberg: Did you think that there was as much likelihood of the Chinese coming into the Vietnam War as there had been, for instance, in the case of Korea?

McNamara: I thought that there was considerable likelihood that China would come in, yes—particularly if we attacked China or attacked forces in the southern part of China that were presumably supporting Vietnam.

Goldberg: No, I meant just if we confined our efforts to Vietnam alone, if we did not make any aggressive moves against China.

McNamara: I'd have to go back and refresh my memory, but my recollection is that I didn't believe that China would come into the war with regular military forces if we limited our action to achieving our objective,

which was not to occupy North Vietnam and not to endanger the regime in North Vietnam, but simply to prevent North Vietnam from subverting South Vietnam. Under those circumstances, if we achieved that objective, I did not believe China would come into the war.

Goldberg: In retrospect, do you think that if we had invaded North Vietnam, the Chinese would have come in?

McNamara: Almost surely. That was the kind of an action which at times was recommended or considered, and which I opposed, because one of my objectives was to avoid open war with China.

Goldberg: Was this opinion generally shared in the administration?

McNamara: I think Dean Rusk, the President, and I shared it. It wasn't so much that others wanted war with China. I don't think that anyone wanted war with China. But others either believed China wouldn't openly enter the war, or they were willing to risk it, one or the other.

Matloff: What was your attitude toward our involvement in Indochina? What did you think was at stake for American security or national interests? Along with this, did you believe in the domino theory, for example?

McNamara: I think that early on in, say, 1961-62, there was reason to accede to Diem's request for assistance to help train his forces. I believed that to the extent that we could train those forces, we should do so, and having done it, we should get out. To the extent those trained forces could not handle the problem--the subversion by North Vietnam--I believed we should not introduce our military forces in support of the South Vietnamese, even if they were going to be "defeated". Consistent with that belief, some time in the latter part of 1963, following my

return from a trip to South Vietnam, I recommended to President Kennedy that we announce a plan to begin the removal of our training forces. There was great controversy over that recommendation. Many in the Defense Department, as well as others in the administration, did not believe we had fully carried out our training mission. Still others believed that, in any event, the South Vietnamese weren't qualified to counter the North Vietnamese effectively. They therefore concluded we should stay. I believed that we had done all the training we could, and whether the South Vietnamese were qualified or not to turn back the North Vietnamese, I was certain that if they weren't, it wasn't for lack of our training. More training wouldn't strengthen them; therefore we should get out. The President agreed. Then there was an argument over whether we should announce the decision. I thought that the way to put the decision in concrete was to announce it. So we did. It was agreed that it would be announced that day. I think you will find that, following the meeting, there was a public announcement which said that the U.S. mission in Vietnam was to train; we were completing that mission; therefore we would begin to withdraw our training forces; and that we would withdraw X by Christmas time. I believe we had around 16,000 men in Vietnam at the time and I think we agreed that the first withdrawal would be 1,000. Those who opposed the decision to begin the withdrawal didn't want it announced since they believed, as I did, that if it were announced, it would be in concrete.

Matloff: Had President Kennedy consulted with you on his initial decision to increase the number of military advisers? He brought it up to 16,000. Had you gone along with that, initially?

McNamara: Yes.

Matloff: You mentioned Diem—were you surprised when the coup against him took place?

McNamara: I don't remember the extent to which I, through the cables and through intelligence reports, had been informed of possible coups. I have no recollection of that. But I do remember very clearly being shocked at the death of Diem.

Matloff: What was the basis for the feeling of American officials in 1963 that Americans would be able to end their military role by the end of '65?

McNamara: Just as I have stated, that their military role was a training role, and there's only so much you can do to train. If the student can't learn, after the training period is completed, there's no use in your staying on. If he can learn, he will have done so by the end of the training period and you can go home.

Matloff: From your perspective in your dealings with Kennedy, how do you evaluate his role and objectives towards Vietnam?

McNamara: He believed that South Vietnam was a country seeking to move towards self-government and that North Vietnam was seeking to dominate it. South Vietnam had asked for assistance to train its forces to prevent North Vietnam from achieving domination, and it was consistent with our ideals and policy to provide such support. Particularly, this was thought to be true in an area of the world in which potential Chinese expansion was in prospect.

Matloff: Were you encouraged or discouraged about the American involvement, at the time of his death?

McNamara: I think you will find in my reports—probably in the one in October 1963, a month before Kennedy's death—evidence that I felt there was considerable doubt as to whether we had succeeded in training a Vietnamese force that would be capable of defeating the attempts of North Vietnam or China to subvert the government of South Vietnam.

Matloff: To get to President Johnson's administration, did he make use of you in any way differently from Kennedy, in questions of Vietnam?

McNamara: He had a totally different method of operating. I was close to both Presidents and both always solicited my views on what should be done.

Matloff: Did you find your role as troubleshooter, for example, expanding under Johnson?

McNamara: Johnson frequently asked me to undertake assignments not normally associated with the function of the Secretary of Defense. For example, on one occasion the Aluminum Co. of America raised the price of aluminum at a time when we were trying to avoid inflationary pressures in the society. Johnson called me and said, "Get that price down." It was obviously not a function of the Secretary of Defense to be engaged in price control, but that was an illustration of the way Johnson acted.

Matloff: I was wondering whether Johnson may have leaned on you more than Kennedy in connection with Vietnam.

McNamara: I don't think so.

Matloff: When did you first learn of the Tonkin Gulf incident, in August 1964?

McNamara: I was in Newport, on Sunday morning, and received a telephone call giving me the information. I went to the naval station and flew back to Washington.

Matloff: Do you recall any doubts about whether there were two strikes, one strike, and all that?

McNamara: Yes. I didn't know whether there were any strikes. It seemed such an absurd action and we wanted to be very careful in obtaining the facts. We went to great lengths to determine whether the North Vietnamese actually had fired on our destroyer. I believe I'm correct in saying that before we concluded that they had, we had actually received statements that pieces of metal that were part of a North Vietnamese shell had been recovered from the deck of our vessel. Therefore, we based our conclusion that they had fired, not on sonar readings or sightings, or anything else, other than this metal from the actual firing. I don't remember all of the details, but I believe that to this day there would be some question as to whether there was a second attack.

Matloff: Were you consulted at all on the drafting of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution?

McNamara: I don't recall.

Matloff: Do you remember any reaction to the resolution?

McNamara: What I do remember about those events are three points: first, I think it is absolutely incorrect to charge that Johnson, or Bill Bundy, or Dean Rusk, had in advance of the Tonkin Gulf incident conceived of the desirability of either forcing an incident or taking advantage of an incident, in order to obtain some blanket power from Congress to expand

U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia. I think that is absolutely without foundation. Second, I think it is totally false to say that the U.S. did in some fashion consciously lure the North Vietnamese into attacking the Maddox. Third, I think it is false to say that the U.S. administration, having lured the North Vietnamese into that attack, then sought to hide the action. The reason some of the charges were made—that the U.S. did lure the North Vietnamese into the action and then sought to hide it—is that we had been carrying on for some time, or assisting the South Vietnamese to carry on for some time, very feeble covert actions against North Vietnam. They included, for example, having a patrol boat go along the coast to put ashore two or three men to bomb a gasoline tank. They included as well the dropping of agents by aircraft. As I remember, every single one of these agents was rolled up, whether infiltrated by sea or air, and the attacks on shore installations by sea were negligible. The covert operations were totally ineffective, so it never occurred to me that those actions would have been the basis for the North Vietnamese attacking the Maddox. Nor do I know that they were. But I think what happened, in terms of time, was that about the time of the North Vietnamese attack on the Maddox, we had had one of these covert operations moving forward, a patrol boat of some kind, of which I suppose I had been informed prior to the time we received the information that the Maddox had been attacked. But it didn't enter my mind that such an operation was being carried on at the time. It never occurred to me that conceivably the North Vietnamese might have thought they were attacking part of that

covert operation when they attacked the Maddox. I don't know to this day that they thought that. I suppose by now there is some information whether they did or did not think that. But what happened was that when we began to testify before Congress, either then or later, we didn't mention the covert operations as having taken place at or about the time of the attack on the Maddox, not because we were trying to hide anything, but because it never occurred to us that that had anything to do with it. Later the Congress learned of this and believed that: 1) we had withheld the information from them; 2) the operations had been planned by us to draw fire from the North Vietnamese; and 3) we had then used this as an excuse to escalate the war. That is absolutely false.

Goldberg: Who in the administration conceived and pushed the resolution?

McNamara: I would imagine the State Department. I don't think anyone was particularly opposed to it. It wasn't thought of as a major event, except in the sense that the President had had the experience of watching administrations that had initiated military operations without congressional support and he did not wish to do so. He thought that he might have to escalate, and he wanted the Congress in the act. That was the purpose of the resolution. It was never intended as a broad authority to go to war, but rather the authority to carry out additional military action.

Kaplan: Do you recall if Fulbright's voice was an important one at that time?

McNamara: Yes, it was. He was chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee and he was the floor manager of the resolution. The time for him to have objected to the resolution was before he floor-managed it, not later. He

objected to it later, and he then explained his failure to object to it at the time on the grounds that he had been misled by the events, along the lines I have just recounted.

Matloff: Did President Johnson consult with you in 1965 on two key decisions: 1) to bomb north of the 17th parallel, and 2) to commit American ground combat troops?

McNamara: Absolutely.

Matloff: Did you go along with that?

McNamara: Yes. What I think happened was that early in 1965 I had come to the conclusion that our Vietnamese program was quite ineffective—it was not achieving its objective—and we either should get out or do more. It wasn't entirely clear to me which should be done, but to continue as we were was certain to lead to failure. I believe that, in the early part of 1965, McGeorge Bundy and I sent a memo to President Johnson saying this. I think there was then a discussion of the memo. I believe State, at the time, thought we should continue as we were. Mac and I felt that to do so would lead to certain failure. We believed we should either get out or pursue an expanded military and an expanded political track—endeavoring to move toward negotiations—that would ultimately lead to the withdrawal of North Vietnamese support of the attempt to subvert the South Vietnamese government. I went out to Vietnam sometime in the spring or early summer of 1965 and came back with the statement that if we were going to move forward instead of getting out, we should do it in the following way. I laid out a program which the President accepted, with

two notable exceptions. In the initial draft memorandum to the President I had said that if we pursued that program, we should call up reserve forces, and we should put through a tax increase. He decided not to do either one of those.

Matloff: Last time we touched on his position on the reserves and your advice to call them up and his refusal. That is a very key point for historians, because the record is barren on this.

McNamara: That's why I called them draft memoranda. So that if the President didn't agree with my initial recommendation, I could change it and there wouldn't be a memo on the record that in effect said the Secretary of Defense believed something should be done that the President didn't do. That can be disastrous in an administration. If such a memorandum were to be leaked, you would have evidence of conflict in the upper echelons of the administration and it would reduce the effectiveness of the administration. To avoid that, I used the device of draft memoranda.

Matloff: Was that your idea?

McNamara: Absolutely. I had been doing that for years. I did it through the whole seven years. However, that is the only time I can think of when I made a major recommendation, to either of the Presidents, that he didn't follow.

Goldberg: Before you went out to Vietnam, were you leaning one way or the other about intervention?

McNamara: I don't recall with certainty, but I don't believe so.

Goldberg: And after you went?

McNamara: I think the way I felt then was that we were on a certain course of defeat; that it wasn't clear to me that we could avoid defeat by any action in our power; that if we were to expand militarily, we must expand politically as well, because it wasn't at all clear that military action alone could achieve our objectives. Moreover, it wasn't clear that expansion of military action along the lines discussed in the memo would not have to be followed by still further military expansion. I did not believe then that military victory could be assured, and I wasn't certain that with additional military action we could even achieve what would be called a political success. So it was a dilemma, and there was no course that was desirable. Some alternatives were less desirable than others.

Matloff: Were you consulting with the JCS during these years from 1963 onward on military policy and strategy?

McNamara: Yes. Every visit I made to Vietnam was with the Chairman, either Max [Taylor] or Bus Wheeler.

Matloff: Were there any major differences in the approach to the war itself?

McNamara: I'm sure there were, but not great differences. There was a difference at various times on bombing, and later, in the latter part of '67, there was considerable difference between me and Westmoreland on the size of the force to be committed to Vietnam. Westy wanted to add 200,000 people, or something like that, to which I was very much opposed. I don't remember exactly what the Chiefs' views were on the 200,000. The Chiefs generally, or some of them at least, particularly the Air Force Chief, were in favor of a greater bombing program than I was. We were

frequently arguing about the targets, the size of missions, etc. But the magnitudes of the differences were not as great as one might suspect from reading the newspapers. It was not, for example, as great as existed between me and Admiral Felt. I think that he would have wished to go all out on the war, even if it brought in China. I don't think Bus Wheeler wanted to do that, and I don't think Max Taylor wanted to do that.

Matloff: Did your view toward the bombing campaign undergo a considerable change; for example, when you advocated a halt to the bombing?

McNamara: It didn't undergo a change. I had been an Army Air Force officer during World War II, and I knew something about bombing. I never did believe bombing could win wars--the kind of bombing that we were doing. And I didn't believe bombing could stop the infiltration, or "destroy the war-making capacity" of North Vietnam. I did believe that under certain circumstances the bombing might either force the Chinese back into the arms of the Soviets and/or lead to Chinese intervention. As to the bombing pauses, as I suggested earlier, I did not believe that it was likely we could achieve a military victory. I did believe that the military action should be used as a foundation for pursuing a political track. To increase the chance of initiating or achieving movement on the political track, I thought that we should experiment with a bombing pause--to see if that would stimulate interest in the North Vietnamese in political negotiation.

Matloff: Had you ever thought that military victory was a possibility in Vietnam?

McNamara: I don't think so. I think the memos of 1965 are critical. I think that you will see in them a sense of great uncertainty about achieving a military victory.

Goldberg: Why the delay in bombing or mining the ports?

McNamara: I think my belief was that: a) the mining of ports wouldn't stop infiltration because the North Vietnamese didn't need the ports to infiltrate the small amount of tonnage that was being moved in—it could be done over the beach; b) mining of the ports might well lead to an escalation of military action involving the Chinese and/or the Soviets.

Matloff: We were talking about your "disillusionment with the war," if you accept that phrase.

McNamara: I'd rather not use the word "disillusionment," but I don't think I ever believed that a military victory, in the normal sense of the words, was achievable. It became very clear that the South Vietnamese weren't capable with training alone to defend themselves. And it was not at all clear to me that, if we couldn't achieve a military victory by the South Vietnamese alone or with U.S. military assistance, military actions would lead to substantial political movement. Therefore it was a very difficult situation. I think that you will find in my memoranda to the President statements such as, "There is no good course."

Matloff: This would be early '65?

McNamara: I would guess you would find it in several memoranda. They were written very carefully and were quite controversial at the time. I have done more talking on Vietnam in this interview than I have ever done in the past 15 years, and I don't want this made public without my permission. I have tried to avoid public statements on Vietnam for the reason that I felt as early as when I started the Pentagon Papers—in the second or third quarter of 1966—that we weren't succeeding and that the nation

would need a retrospective look at the process by which we had gotten in such a hell of a *mess*. That retrospective look needed to be taken by scholars—by skilled political scientists and military experts who would need as raw material the documents, intelligence information, memoranda, notes and minutes of meetings, etc., that reflected our knowledge and our thought processes. These documents were scattered all over the government and might well be destroyed in the process of time. I wanted them pulled together. That was the origin of the Pentagon Papers. As it turned out, the man to whom I gave the assignment, John McNaughton, died shortly afterwards. I said to John that I didn't want to have anything to do with the project because I didn't want to taint the process by *my* participation. I didn't want anybody to think that I had selected the documents or in any way colored the information that was available to the critics. Therefore I wanted him to supervise it, and I didn't want to have anything further to do with it. When he died, the job was turned over to another person with whom I didn't discuss it. That person went beyond my intention of collecting raw material, and developed an analysis and evaluation of the materials. So the Pentagon Papers came out differently from what I had anticipated. However, they serve as raw material for historians. I don't believe that to this day there has been an adequate study and evaluation of the decision-making process in relation to Vietnam, nor have the lessons been drawn from it that can and should be drawn. Under these circumstances, I don't believe that a participant should be the source of comment and evaluation and, therefore, I don't wish my statements to be made public at this time. I have stated to you

what I believe today I believed then. But I know that, unconsciously, individuals tend to color their statements to be consistent with what they would like their behavior to appear. I have tried very carefully not to do that. I don't think I have. However, let the historians go back, examine the records, and draw their own conclusions.

Matloff: You may be interested in some of the speculation on the Pentagon Papers that Dean Rusk gave me. I talked to him last week in Athens, Georgia. He brought up the question of the Pentagon Papers and gave me a piece from the broadcast of 1977 on BBC radio, in which there were four participants, and the speculation on the Papers in that broadcast. The participants were Leslie Gelb, William Bundy, James Greenfield, and another party. Gelb offers three speculations. One was: "One answer might be that at that point in time, 1967, Mr. McNamara was deeply troubled . . ."

McNamara: In the first place, the point in time was 1966.

Goldberg: Yes, I was almost a member of that group.

Matloff: ". . . by that war in a way he hadn't been before and he was after answers to questions that he never asked himself before, however late it was to ask them." Gelb goes on that the other two possibilities could be that you were trying to do a favor for Johnson, who might be getting ready to run again, giving him ammunition to answer difficult questions about the war; or third, that you might have been doing it for Bobby Kennedy, for a Kennedy insurgency against Johnson for the Democratic nomination.

McNamara: What was Dean's point?

Matloff: He doesn't know.

McNamara: A) Gelb doesn't know; B) it's easy enough for Dean or Gelb to ask me, and not to speculate. I'm the one who started it and the only person that I can recall talking to about it, who had any reason whatsoever to understand why I did it, was McNaughton, and he isn't alive. I was deeply concerned about how we had gotten ourselves in such a awful mess. It was clear to me at that time that we were not achieving our objectives. Somebody had to stand back and say, "How did we get here, and how can we avoid ever doing this again?" That was the sole purpose of it. It had nothing whatsoever to do with Johnson or Kennedy because of the form in which it was to be done. The form was to be raw material, not evaluation, and all the raw material.

Matloff: I think what Dean Rusk has trouble understanding from his perspective is why he was never consulted for his position while the project was on.

McNamara: Because it was simply a raw material collection process. Perhaps I should have consulted Dean.

Goldberg: To whom did you turn it over after McNaughton?

McNamara: The Assistant Secretary after McNaughton, Warnke. You would have to ask him, but I don't think I ever talked to him about it, or had anything more to do with it after McNaughton got it underway before he died. I think Gelb was in charge of it, but I don't think I ever talked to him about it.

Kaplan: Did you object at any time to the new change?

McNamara: I don't think I knew about the change.

Kaplan: But after you had known about it?

McNamara: I don't think that I ever knew about it until I got a copy of the Pentagon Papers, which was after I had been at the World Bank. I didn't read them, ever, but I have since opened one volume.

Goldberg: They're not easy reading.

Matloff: I must tell you that I had a previous discussion with Dean Rusk, when I was teaching one semester at the University of Georgia. I was then Army Chief Historian on leave, and he asked me if I at any time had been drawn in on the subject. I said no. That was another question that mystifies him: Why weren't the official historical offices used?

McNamara: In the first place, I don't know if they were. I just said to John, "This is a damn mess. We must insure that those who at some point will wish to study the action and draw lessons from it will have all the raw materials they need. So collect all the raw materials and be sure they are available to historians. How he did it, I don't know. I was doing a thousand other things at the time.

Matloff: One thing you can anticipate in future years is there will be doctoral dissertations on this subject. There are now, already.

McNamara: Why aren't there dissertations or thoughtful, definitive studies of the process and the lessons to be learned from it? That's what needs to be done.

Matloff: What was your reaction to the Tet offensive? There has been so much writing on this subject.

McNamara: I think my reaction was that it showed that the North Vietnamese had a lot of fighting power left in them. I don't think I looked upon it

as a major defeat of the North Vietnamese, which would change my feeling that we couldn't achieve a military victory.

Matloff: Did you find toward the end of your tenure that your views and those of President Johnson and Dean Rusk were diverging more? If so, in what way?

McNamara: It was very clear to me that there was no military solution. I wasn't certain there was a political solution, but I felt we should put more emphasis on it. I shouldn't speak for the President or Dean.

Matloff: Rusk felt his views had not changed. He had a sense, possibly, of a change in yours, but from his own standpoint he didn't change his own views, apparently, as he looks back on it. I guess that he was more sanguine.

McNamara: I think he was, that's right. I think that he felt that we could achieve our objective. I felt that we couldn't. I was strongly opposed to enlarging the war beyond what we had. I didn't want to bomb southern China, or level North Vietnam; I didn't want to add 200,000 more men, as Westmoreland did; but I didn't have a military solution. It was very frustrating for the President for me to oppose the field commander on his plan, which the field commander implied could achieve a satisfactory military solution. I said that: a) it wouldn't, b) I didn't want to go along with it, c) I didn't have a satisfactory military solution. It was bound to be frustrating for the President. Therefore, tensions developed. There is no question about that.

Matloff: How useful did systems analysis prove to be in this war? Let me quote Alain Enthoven's book, the one he wrote with K. Wayne Smith, How Much is Enough? in 1971. "The Systems Analysis Office did not have a

prominent, much less a crucial, role in the Vietnam War. . . In Vietnam, no one insisted on systematic efforts to understand, analyze, or interpret the war. . . . this most complex of wars never got serious and systematic analysis." Elsewhere, he goes a little further and says, "The problem in the conduct of the war from Washington was not 'over-management', but 'under-management'." This I find puzzling, given the strong interest in effective management. Is this a good appraisal of that time?

McNamara: It's probably correct, but what stood in the way of him, or me, or anybody else carrying on a "systematic analysis" was that nobody knew how to do it. He was there. I didn't stop him from doing it. What are they doing about a systematic analysis of Nicaragua today? or of South Africa? These are tough things to "systematically analyze". I wrote a speech on South Africa delivered at the University of Witwatersrand three years ago. I read it the other day, and it almost exactly predicted what is happening. I said that the blacks were going to govern themselves down there, that it was going to come to a military conflict, and that South Africa was very likely going to ask for U.S. support. At that time I said they weren't going to get it, and they had better understand that and guide themselves accordingly. I gave a time period, and it has come at the short end of that time period. I mention all this simply to say that that wasn't "systematic analysis," but neither was it widely accepted three years ago. In Vietnam—read some of those memos. I had to read one for the Westmoreland trial, I think it was the June 1965 memo, and, with hindsight, I thought it was a very good statement. That was the result of the best analysis we could do, done by the brightest people I

had, John McNaughton and his associates. I remember talking to Dayan, the Israeli Defense Minister, and to the British officer who had been in charge of the troops in Malaysia.

Goldberg: Brigadier Thompson?

McNamara: Yes. I remember talking to Dayan and Thompson and anybody else I could get my hands on that could "help in systematically analyzing" the situation. The reason I was interested in body counts was, in a sense, to get systematic analysis. You had to have some means of deciding whether you were moving forward or not moving forward. We counted villages that were within our control. We did everything we could to try to determine whether we were achieving our objective and whether we should shift to some other form of military pressure and/or political move. It was not so much that it was under-managed as that there were mistakes in judgment. The reason I wanted the Pentagon Papers set up was so that historians, political scientists, and military experts could examine the mistakes in judgment and in a sense could carry out retrospectively the analysis that in the future could be carried out prospectively.

Goldberg: Did you pay much attention to the efforts to exploit the Viet Cong prisoner of war data and analyses?

McNamara: I remember very clearly at some point asking that the interrogation capability be expanded so we would learn as much as we could from them, yes. Beyond that, I didn't do too much with it.

Goldberg: Did you pay any attention to reports you were getting from RAND? Were you influenced by them?

McNamara: Yes.

Goldberg: There were stories that the President used to carry them around in his back pocket and haul them out and show them to people.

McNamara: What I did try to do that bears on this analysis point was to pursue analysis as fully as possible. I didn't believe DIA was fully capable of independent analysis, not because they weren't intelligent people, or responsible, but they were part of the department that was responsible for decision-making. You never should have the decision-maker judge his own performance. Somebody else should judge his performance. DIA in a sense was part of the decision-making process, and judging the decisions was not the role they should be in. Therefore, I asked the President to allow me to have the CIA set up a special analytical group to report on the progress of the war—which they did. I used their information as a basis for my judgment as to whether we were or were not making progress on bombing, or were or were not stopping infiltration, or whether pacification of the countryside was progressing. So an effort was made to intellectualize the approach, and to analyze the process and the alternatives, but it was so hard, for several different reasons. First, we didn't have the Thompsons, Bohlens, and Kennans and we misjudged the Chinese geopolitical objectives. That was a very serious error which was the beginning of an erroneous analytical process. Secondly, we didn't understand fully the incapability of the South Vietnamese even to maintain a government within South Vietnam that was independent of North Vietnam. Thirdly, I had some gut feelings—but I had no way of knowing the process of analysis by which we could establish what I think was a fact—that the

military tactics being pursued by the U.S. were ineffective in that situation. How we would have known these things at the time is not clear to me.

Kaplan: Did the counter-revolution in Indonesia in 1966 affect your judgment about this?

McNamara: Not in any way I can recall. On the process of analysis, one very important point I would urge you to study is the degree to which the alternative of withdrawal was adequately considered after January 1965. I don't believe the option of withdrawal was ever thoroughly studied. I think that was a deficiency and I think the Pentagon Papers would throw light on that—the raw materials would throw light on whether the option of withdrawal was properly and fully examined by the President and the NSC. To that extent, I think what Alain Enthoven said is perhaps correct.

Matloff: I hesitate to bring up this question, but I guess we must—would you want to comment on the role of the press in reporting about Vietnam during your tenure? How honest did you find it? how objective?

McNamara: I would say that the majority of the press reporting was objective at the time. I don't think they were consciously misreporting. It was difficult for anybody to get a comprehensive view. I had far more resources at my disposal than any reporter, and I had a hard time getting a comprehensive view. So a single reporter was going to have difficulty getting a comprehensive view. As I suggested a moment ago, I think all of us carry around unconscious value judgments that shape our comments or views on particular events. I'm certain that is true of reporters. The problem wasn't the press. The problem was that we had an ineffective program. It's true that the press might have made it more difficult to

carry out an effective program. But if we had had complete censorship, our program would have been ineffective. One comment on the press, however, is that the judgment—which was expressed in bold headlines at times, particularly at the time of the disclosure of the Pentagon Papers—that the difficulties in Vietnam were a function of leaders of government misleading the American public, is just not correct. If that were the problem, you wouldn't need the studies I'm talking about, because generally the American public is not going to elect leaders who mislead them. The problem is much more serious than that. The problem is not lying and deception, but rather misjudgment, and you are very likely to have leaders in the future who make the same mistakes in judgment that were made then, unless you learn from those mistakes.

Matloff: The question will be raised about whether it was a failure of national policy or military policy. What went wrong?

McNamara: What went wrong started with the elimination of our knowledge of those societies. That's where it began, and then that error was compounded.

Matloff: How about the factor of American public opinion? Was that taken sufficiently into account by the theorists as well as by the policymakers? How American opinion would react to a protracted war?

McNamara: In the first place, nobody in 1961–63 believed it would be a protracted war.

Goldberg: 1965?

McNamara: You'd have to read the memos. Usually in those memos, I think, I put in a projection for the period. Certainly by 1966 I was saying that

there was no good alternative: while recommending that we add 100,000 troops, I was saying to the President, if you do, I might well be back 12 months later suggesting another 100,000. By then we were beginning to think about protracted war, but there wasn't a lot of opposition then, in 1966. The first major incident on a campus on the east coast occurred in October or November 1966, when there was a riot at Harvard against me.

Goldberg: Is it your recollection that the military services at the beginning of 1965 were pretty confident that they could bring about a military solution in Vietnam?

McNamara: They were more confident than I was, that's for sure.

Matloff: Have you, in retrospect, had a chance to think about what the significance of Vietnam was for either strategic theory, or the limited war option on the part of the government?

McNamara: I don't want to speculate. To this day, there is still a difference of opinion between me and some of my associates about the purpose, the desirability, and the effectiveness of our operations in Vietnam, and I just don't want to get into an argument. You historians write it as you see it, without regard to my judgment.

Matloff: In the Berlin crisis, you recommended calling up reserves, and did. Do you remember any other recommendations, particularly when the wall was erected in August of 1961?

McNamara: I don't recall my reaction then. My belief today is that my reaction then was that there wasn't a lot we could do about it, speaking of the erection of the wall.

Goldberg: Do you remember that in the meetings and discussions of the period there was a feeling that you [RMcN] couldn't possibly think of an escalation to a nuclear level in connection with this?

McNamara: Absolutely. In this little book that I am publishing, in the first chapter I recall quite clearly that in the midst of the Berlin crisis I called in a very senior NATO officer and I said, "The Soviets have done A, we did B, they did C, we did D; how is this going to evolve?" He said, "I think they will do E and we should do F, and they'll do G, and we should do H." I asked, "What's going to happen then?" He said, "They'll do I, and we should use nuclear weapons." I don't remember whether Lord Mountbatten was in the city or whether I asked him to come to Washington—he was then Chief of the British Defence Staff. In any case, I asked him to come to my office and I put the same questions to him: How was this going to evolve? What would the Soviets do and how should we respond? He said, "They did A, we did B, they did C, we did D, they've done E, we did F, and they will next do G, and we should do H, I, J, K, and so on." I asked, "What then, what should we do after they do that?" Finally I said: "You haven't suggested that we use nuclear weapons?" He replied, "Are you crazy?" I fully agreed with Mountbatten. Never did I think at that time that we should use nuclear weapons, even though we had a tremendous numerical superiority.

Matloff: A general question along that line—did you ever, in any of the international crises, seriously consider the use of nuclear weapons?

McNamara: No, absolutely not. Never.

Goldberg: This is in general true of most people in the administration, wasn't it?

McNamara: I think so. I have heard it said that there was a plan for the use of nuclear weapons in connection with Berlin and that this was discussed with Kennedy. I don't believe that. I don't believe any such plan was discussed with me. And I'm sure that if it was not discussed with me, it wasn't discussed by anybody in the Pentagon with Kennedy.

Matloff: To go on to the Dominican operation, in 1965–66, that was the intervention in April '65 with troops. Do you recall what your role was?

McNamara: There my memory is very hazy, I'd rather not talk about it.

Matloff: How about the Middle East operation in June 1967, what roles you and OSD were playing during that period?

McNamara: I remember it well. We were intimately involved in it and very much concerned about it. I remember first, that our intelligence sources indicated that the Egyptians were building up; were probably going to move to attack the Israelis; and that the Israelis were very likely to preempt. For that reason, Johnson asked Dean Rusk and me to join him one evening on the second floor of the White house to meet with Eban, the Israeli Foreign Minister. At that meeting Johnson said to Eban that under no circumstances would we support a preemptive attack. If the Israelis went ahead with such an attack, in effect, we would deny them any support thereafter, no matter what happened to them. It was absolutely contrary to our advice and to our policy for them to preempt. I further remember that Prime Minister Wilson came to Washington in June 1967, before the war started (the meeting had been scheduled to discuss some other subject),

and I recall that the British and U.S. intelligence estimates of the Israeli capability vis-a-vis the Egyptians were almost identical. One service believed the Israelis would prevail in 7 days, the other service believed they would prevail in 10. I also recall that we very much wanted to avoid the war. We didn't know how it would escalate. We were concerned about potential Soviet intervention. We made great efforts to organize enough Western support, which meant NATO support, to Israel's cause, to deter the Egyptians from attacking. We had a terrible time gaining such support. We couldn't even organize a "freedom of the seas" intervention in the Gulf of Aqaba. The Europeans would not go along with that. It would not have involved any military action whatsoever, but would have involved maintaining the right of access to the Gulf of Aqaba. I remember, as well, that Dean and I went up to the Senate to talk to a group of around 40 senators to see whether they would support U.S. military intervention in the event that seemed necessary to maintain the independence of Israel. We got a very negative response. I recall that, after the Israelis preempted and appeared to be achieving a military victory, for the first time the hot line was used. The first message gave us some indication that the Soviets wished to avoid intervention in the war, if we stayed out. Over the next day or two events moved in such a way that we had another message that said: "If you want war, you'll get war." The reason was that we had had the Sixth Fleet moving west on a training exercise toward Gibraltar, but upon learning that Israel might possibly be faced with Syrian intervention, we turned the fleet around and sent it back toward Israel. Our purpose was not to attack Egypt, but to defend

Israel. The Soviets misinterpreted that as an indication of our intention to escalate the war, attack Egypt, and destroy the Egyptian government. It was at that point that the message from Kosygin came in saying if you want war, you'll get it.

Matloff: Did the President consult with you on the exchanges on the hot line?

McNamara: Yes, always.

Matloff: One other incident, the Pueblo, which came toward the very end of your tenure, January 23, 1968, were you consulted during that affair, and what did you recommend?

McNamara: Yes, my recommendation was that we would do what we did, which was, essentially, nothing.

Matloff: This is a good point at which to end this session.

Goldberg: I have a few more questions, if we can come back another time.

McNamara: Yes, I would be very happy to see you again. I want to repeat what I said before: please check all this; don't depend on my memory.

Goldberg: We always check, but there are things that aren't in the documents, which, together with the documents, certainly clarify and expand on them, so it's very valuable and useful to us.

Matloff: A perfect example is the Pentagon Papers.

McNamara: The whole purpose of the Pentagon Papers was to permit a retrospective look and the drawing of lessons.