

Harold Wilson (Wilson of Rievaulx) Oral History Interview –JFK #1, 3/23/1964
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Wilson, Harold (Wilson of Rievaulx); Member, House of Lords. Prime Minister, First Lord of the Treasury, (1964-1970); (1974-1976). Leader of the Opposition, (1963-1964); (1970-1974). Wilson discusses his meeting with John F. Kennedy [JFK] on April 2, 1963, and how JFK held himself as a politician, as head of state, and as the head of his respective administration. Wilson also discusses the Multilateral Force proposal and the Nassau Agreement, among other issues.

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Harold Wilson (Wilson of Rievaulx)

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Oral History Interview

with

HAROLD WILSON

March 23, 1964
London, England

By Richard E. Neustadt

For the John F. Kennedy Library

NEUSTADT: Mr. Wilson, according to the records available in Mr. Kennedy's file, your first meeting with him was on April 2nd, 1963, or some two and one-half months after you had taken leadership of the Party. Could we start by asking the circumstances of your trip to America at that point?

WILSON: Yes. I had actually met President Kennedy when he was a Senator, very

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briefly, for a handshake, in the Senate Building. And as a matter of accuracy, I did meet him the night before April the 2nd. I met him backstage at the theater, where he and Mrs. Kennedy and I, together with the British Ambassador, had gone to see the first night of a British touring company in an eighteen century play, "School for Scandal," and I met him backstage. He referred then to the speech I had made at the National Press Club, of which a copy had been in his hands within an hour of delivery. He had seemed very pleased with it and said he wanted to discuss it when we met the next morning.

The way the trip came about was this: I had actually been in the

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United States, in New York, on my way to Washington, when my predecessor, Hugh Gaitskell, died. I returned immediately to London, and on being elected leader of the party, I had a press conference in London the night of the election, and I was immediately asked about the projected visit of Hugh Gaitskell to the Soviet Union. He had been invited by Mr. Khrushchev [Nikita S. Khrushchev]. Was I going to take this up? So, I said if the invitation was renewed I would go, but that I felt I should go to the United States first, since I was actually there at the time of Hugh's death. Feelers were put out, and, of course, one of the protocol difficulties is that a head of government, a head of state,

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can't ask a leader of the opposition, and so as I had a lecturing engagement in mind, it was arranged that I should take this up and then while there go to Washington and ask to see the President. It was also intimated to me that it would be helpful, as it were, if I didn't go to the Soviet Union within days of my visit to Washington, and that was, in fact, postponed for two months. When I met the President on the 2nd of April, as usually happens, I met him outside and went in, and we got down to business straightaway. There was no time wasted on...

NEUSTADT: Were there just the two of you there?

WILSON: Just the two of us there. Though I had, of course, shall we say, been

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probed in depth for the preceding three or four days.

NEUSTADT: I recall that there were more dinner parties and things of one sort and another.

WILSON: I've a lot of old friends in Washington, including some former pupils of mine from Oxford days, who are now high in the Administration, and they and old friends like Averell Harriman and others had given dinner parties and lunch parties, going on for our hours -- six hours in one case -- and so we had pretty well exchanged views of policies. And, also, I was on the record publicly both with press interviews and my major speech to the Press Club. He got down straightaway to that and one of the main themes of that had been some proposals, not exactly new, but

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fairly topical about widening the flow of the world liquidity because of the problems Britain and the United States were facing in underdeveloped countries, and immediately the President went right into that question. Like a bomb, he went straight into the middle of it.

He had obviously been that morning on the telephone, I suspect to the Under Secretary of the Treasury, and the first question he put to me was, "Do you think I ought to call a world monetary conference?" because I had suggested we ought to be working to one. I said that I thought it was desirable, fairly urgent, but that it did need a little preparation first. He then put on eor two very probing questions as to whether this wouldn't be inflationary, which I think I was

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able to answer to his satisfaction. And we then got on to problems of internal monetary management. I said, as a visitor can, what I know he knew and his advisors kenw, that the problem of deficit financing, the problem of a balanced budget, was preventing the breakthrough they wanted in production. And he asked me quite a lot about our system here, particularly about our system of national income accounting and things of that kinds. We went right over the whole field. Russian relations, more particularly, which was very topical of that time, French relations -- he was extremely frank about de Gaulle [Charles de Gaulle] -- and something about Canadian relations. He was extremely

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frank about the situation there.

NEUSTADT: He was very unhappy with...

WILSON: The election was on that particular week. He wasn't taking sides, but one could see with whom his sympathies lay. We had quite a long talk about the de Gaulle situation, and then we got onto Defense matters. He didn't need to ask me too much about where we stood because I think he had been fully briefed as a result of the previous three or four days about our position, but we did get on to the mixed-manned force, the MLF [Multi-Lateral Force.]

NEUSTADT: What did he have to say to you about that at that juncture?

WILSON: He put it, in a sense, rather diffidently, as though to say -- I

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can't remember his exact words -- this was an occasion when the United States did not put forward a cut and dried plan. "We put forward," he said, "an idea for discussion and wanted Europe to take it up and throw the ball around from one to another and get something to emerge which the United States could then discuss with them on the basis of equals. If it has gone wrong, well, then perhaps it was because it was put forward in that way." That their prestige wasn't as committed.... It was

implied that their prestige wasn't inexorably involved in it, but the thing had now gone so far that it would be good to make progress. I gave him the position of the Labor Party

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on this, and it seemed to me that this was one of the moments -- after all, Washington did go a little hot and cold at various times last year on this -- this was one of the moments when the temperature was a little tepid, or lukewarm, rather than one of strong pressing. But what struck me throughout -- we were together nearly an hour and discussed every subject from Southeast Asia to world liquidity -- was the tremendous speed of his mind. One never had to explain anything, never had to go back over the previous sentence to say, "Well, that wasn't quite what I meant," or anything of that kind. It was -- the reception as well as the transmission -- very fast. I said

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afterwards outside to the press that I felt we had got through as much in an hour as most places you would expect to get through as much in an hour as most places you would expect to get through in three hours, simply because of the almost unspoken acceptance of certain facts, and the lack of need to explain in detail. We were able to get straight to the point. It was remarkable...

NEUSTADT: Was the reality somewhat different than your expectations?

WILSON: No, I had been told what to expect. It was different only in the sense that I think the speed of his reaction was over quicker than I had expected. The other thing that struck me was the extent to which, while being keen and on the ball the whole time, he was personally relaxed. And I kept

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feeling, you know, here is this young man, younger than myself, with probably the most tremendous power of anyone in the world and what a good thing it was that he seemed to know the whole background on every single topic. It wasn't like some heads of government I can think of where they would have to be briefed on the issues. He knew it; he had lived with each problem.

Now we know more about how the Kennedy Administration worked. What some of his junior colleagues have told me at various time and from what I have read in books published since, I can see how it happened. He was with each problem at the very beginning, seeing its development,

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not just waiting while it emerged from the various departments and then getting briefed on two sheets of blue foolscap telling him the latest position. Therefore, he was personally identified with every problem. And, world liquidity or Berlin, he was equally well-informed.

NEUSTADT: Of course, on liquidity, with which he began really, he'd been educating himself. I don't think the process was over when he died.

WILSON: It wasn't over, but he had gone a very long way and, indeed, one could see that he recognized that the language I was speaking was the same as the language that he was getting from Walter Heller and so many other people and perhaps a little different

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from the language he was getting from certain people high up in the Treasury with whom I had discussed it earlier. Through I gather that since then they have pretty well got religion, too, on this question.

NEUSTADT: The de Gaulle business is interesting because you saw him after he had had time to assimilate the shock of January 14th.

WILSON: Yes, he asked me what I thought ought to be done. I said that I thought we shouldn't do too much appeasing; that we should recognize that we had some very strong cards in our own hand; that while we shouldn't play them, we should at any rate start brandishing them, flourishing them, and suggested that there were things we could use. For example, the way in

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which the Common Market was developing in agricultural policy was contrary to the spirit of GATT, [General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs], as the American Secretary of Agriculture had said a few weeks before, and it wouldn't do any harm to say it to the Common Market countries, including de Gaulle. That while we weren't taking any action in GATT this year -- that was May 1963 -- if by May '64 they hadn't become more outwardly orientated, looking towards the world's liberal economy and not an autarkic one, then we would start to use the power of GATT to veto their agricultural arrangements. That would give them a year or fifteen months to get used to that idea, and this would have strengthened,

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of course, the hands of the other people in the Common Market against de Gaulles's autarkic policies. I think that was the main problem we discussed.

NEUSTADT: When you left him, or after you left him, since you at this time must

have foreseen a much earlier election here than actually occurred, did you come away with any thoughts about the relations you and he were going to have or what this represented to you in terms of utility or disutility?

WILSON: Yes, I was very optimistic about the relations had we had the election and had he lived. I was very optimistic because I felt there would be in a sense a new kind of relationship between heads of government. In a sense, a partly intellectual one.

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And second, a relation based not on, as I say, briefing but on defense in depth, the head of the United States Administration coming in at the end of having been briefed on what to say, but dealing all the time with problems with which he was intimately associated. And, of course, myself, too.

NEUSTADT: You, too?

WILSON: Yes.

NEUSTADT: In this rapid fire communication, which was one of the keys to the man, I take it you found it easy to feed that fire.

WILSON: Yes, but one didn't need to feed it. Even with Khrushchev-- I've had a number of talks with him, and he has a very quick mind -- there you are feeding it to some extent. You are,

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if I can go into tennis terms, serving up a ball for him to sort of play back. With Kennedy it was more like net play. I mean, you didn't have to think, "Where is the conversation going next?" It just went.

NEUSTADT: You mean...

WILSON: Yes, and the ball never bounced at all, and you were too much involved in taking up the last ball to come over.

NEUSTADT: One of the difficulties for some people was maintaining that with him. The danger always of losing his attention if one's response were cloudy. People whose minds worked in sort of a semi-circular way. He had trouble connecting.

WILSON: It connected every time.

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NEUSTADT: Right. This means that shorthand...

WILSON: Nor was there a point, for example, when he said something and I thought to myself, "Well, I didn't really want to get onto that, let's get back to so-and-so." There wasn't really one point. This is very rare in talks with heads of government.

NEUSTADT: Then you were talking shorthand, too.

WILSON: Yes, we were both talking shorthand. Behind each sentence was a paragraph or a chapter that didn't need to be said.

NEUSTADT: It was remarkably effective. It's a pity because it was with people like you that he communicated most effectively. He was always charming.

WILSON: Yes, he was very charming. But, in a sense, while I heard a lot about

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his charm, he seemed more interested in his subject than in being charming. And unlike many interviews that chaps have, especially those who have a busy schedule of dates, one didn't feel that he was getting bored. He had obviously planned a full hour, and we were getting a full hour's worth of him.

NEUSTADT: Did he use the technique on you of asking your questions?

WILSON: Yes, he did. Mainly about where we stood. Very often he broadly knew but wanted it firmed up or wanted it from me. But, one or two questions, as I say, like, "What are we going to do with de Gaulle?" and questions of that kind.

NEUSTADT: And on something like the multilateral

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force, I take it, there was no posturing.

WILSON: None at all. No.

NEUSTADT: He was uncertain in his own mind and wanted to let you know.

WILSON: And again, he must have had full reports on all I'd said on that subject.

NEUSTADT: Yes, if you had to put it in English political life, how would you characterize him?

WILSON: Do you mean party-wise?

NEUSTADT: Party-wise, I could say class-wise, but you can't make that direct translation. We'll start with party-wise.

WILSON: I don't think you can, simply because of the differences between the two countries. He could have been radical here. It was also said that he could

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either be called left-wing conservative or progressive, modern conservative, or right wing labor. I wouldn't call him right wing. I think he doesn't fit into those categories, which are rather static ones. After all, it was the dynamic that was the key to him. I would have said he'd have been very radical, very searching. Suppose he had come in the way he did, if one could imagine it in this country, and suddenly to the leadership of the party, under the government, he would have immediately, of course, been calling in question some of the sacred cows of whatever party or whatever government he was administering.

NEUSTADT: Tell me, backing off from him, what sense did you have of his feel for

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control over his Administration. You talked to an awful lot of other people.

WILSON: Yes, I did. And I've just been reading this last week a book about his Administration. I don't necessarily consider it a good book or a bad one in America, but I enjoyed it a lot, Hugh Sidey's *Portrait*.

NEUSTADT: Oh, yes. That was an early book.

WILSON: It's a journalistic book, but it added a lot to what I had already heard. And, well, first of all, what did he take over from? It was a revolution; it was a full-time active Presidency. The most full-time an active President's been in this century. Literally, I think. I don't think Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt] compared, from all that I've read

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about Roosevelt, in that sense. Taking over from a rather static sort of Administration. Obviously, a Washington Administration is, in our terms, chaotic. I mean, with all the divided responsibilities and, more often, the duplicated responsibilities. So that the first thing he succeeded in doing, even ignoring the chaos, was to see that if decisions had to be taken, they reached his desk in time and were fully documented. Being human, he was ever fallible and might take a wrong decision, as any human being would, though he probably had a smaller proportion of those than most. On the other hand, nothing happened through want of a decision. The decision was taken. It didn't just

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sort of boil up somewhere else and then he heard about it afterwards. And I think the greatest achievement, administratively, was to get that organization in such a way that decisions came onto his desk and were fully documented. Whether he got rid of the chaos, or whether any one man could in one Presidency or in a lifetime, at any rate he managed to find ways of cutting through it and short-circuiting the labyrinthian arrangements and, to some extent, the duplication. The other thing was what I talked a lot about here in broadcasts about our own intentions, the project studies, the way in which every project was looked after from an early stage. And by the time

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it began to build up, there were all sorts of different positions worked out on it, instead of letting the crises happen and then react to it in the passive sense which is so often the position here. And the contrast between the sharpness of the Administration in the high command of government and what has happened in this country with Macmillan [Harold Macmillan] and Douglas-Home [Alec Douglas-Home], I think is one of the really important contrasts of our time.

NEUSTADT: You were impressed by those young people?

WILSON: I was. As I say, many of them I have known for many years, and I was impressed by his selection of people. And I was impressed by the extent

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to which they were able to get their point of view across.

NEUSTADT: You were there at a time of considerable strain between the Roosas [Robert V. Roosas] and the Hellers -- that one I remember particularly -- and also a considerable difference of opinion between the State Department enthusiasts for a multilateral force and the Pentagon, which at that point had no

enthusiasm, as best I can recall. Were these differences veiled from you, or were they made clear to you as you went around town?

WILSON: They were not veiled at all. The dinner I had with Averell Harriman on Sunday night when he had most of the policy boys from the White House and the State Department lasted

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several hours.

NEUSTADT: I heard something about that.

WILSON: I was in on it. I didn't feel like a foreign visitor, it felt more like either a very sophisticated common room discussion, though on really practical questions, or the sort of thing we had during a war. I was Secretary to two of the combined boards in the war -- Anglo-American-Canadian -- and it really was like going back to those days. And I was just sitting there listening to the debate and joining in, for example, on the MLF, between the protagonists of different points of view and just joining in. And I didn't feel, and I don't think they felt, that I was a foreigner. But this gave

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me a very good impression of the quality of the chaps and the extent to which there were no sacred cows, no policies and things that you weren't allowed to mention. There was complete freedom and very sharp jarring of minds, one way and another.

NEUSTADT: Does anybody stand out particularly in your memory?

WILSON: The one I saw on my second visit -- I saw very little of him on my first -- was McGeorge Bundy, of course. I only saw him briefly on my last day; that was at the luncheon at the State Department. Well, economists like Heller; Kermit Gordon would be a good one. Tobin [James Tobin] -- I met with him separately, previously. I think pretty well the whole team of

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the younger State Department and White House people.

NEUSTADT: You saw Mac Bundy on a separate occasion when you were back again?

WILSON: Oh, yes, I spent much more time with him on my trip this year when I

went to see President Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson.]

NEUSTADT: This means that you saw him actually at the point of transition?

WILSON: Bundy?

NEUSTADT: Yes, you hadn't had a chance to watch him in that Kennedy relationship?

WILSON: No. Only to see him as a sort of guest at a Dean Rusk lunch, which was Dean Rusk, George Ball and others, which was rather different. One of the things that helped to formulate my views on this, I mean in relation

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to plans for this country, was an article by Harlan Cleveland in *Foreign Affairs*, which I think was one of the fairest articles in the July 1963 issue of *Foreign Affairs*. And this put some form in my rather loose thinking about how the thing worked. I think it was a remarkable description.

NEUSTADT: Well, this kind of churning you were thrown into was rather typical, I think.

WILSON: And this at a stage when there had been no final decision on MLF or IMF [International Monetary Fund,] no final position taken by government. It was in the formative stage when the argument was still going on pretty fast and furious.

NEUSTADT: Did you get the impression that he

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would have welcomed something else if something else were to come along?

WILSON: Well, of course, this is the line I was taking. I mean the MLF I regarded as a... Although the idea had gone back five or six years in history, the thing that had been sharpened up after January 14th and after Nassau. And since we had regarded Nassau as a backward step away from the original position of the US government, as best exemplified I think in the Ann Arbor speech of McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] in June '62; since there had been, as we felt, some recidivism from that, all the time of course I was trying to bring things back. Yes, I half felt that he might have felt that if we could get back to that

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stage, if we did have a pre-Nassau situation in which there were only two nuclear powers, it would change the position. Of course, a whole year has gone since that.

NEUSTADT: Did he talk to you at all about the inter-allied force, the combination of national forces and NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization]?

WILSON: Yes, because...

NEUSTADT: That was on his mind.

WILSON: Yes, and he was also very ready to listen and full of ideas, too, as many of his chaps were, about our ideas on tightening the effectiveness of NATO, not merely in the inter-allied sense, but a much more tight responsibility in targeting deployment and so on

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which we were putting forward then, and we still are as the alternative to the mixed man force.

NEUSTADT: Did he connect this with the de Gaulle problem in his talks with you?

WILSON: Yes, he did. We got straight onto de Gaulle from this.

NEUSTADT: Yes, because certainly later it was my impression that he had the sense of, in effect, being trapped with MLF because he couldn't make progress with NATO.

WILSON: I think he -- of course, you are a much greater authority on this than anyone in the world -- was worried about the whole Skybolt-Nassau story. But I think, in a sense, he was trapped by the unfortunate haste with which the Nassau agreement was signed.

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And from then on he was trapped by his own decision.

NEUSTADT: When you were there -- although I know your relationship with Averell -- did you get much sense of George Ball and Dean Rusk as operators in the spectrum?

WILSON: Yes, I knew both of them for previous visits, and George Ball I had met a number of times in other ays. And, of course, when I spoke to Dean Rusk, he was at some pains -- I think this was Monday after the dinner -- to say, whatever the arguments, "This is Administration policy." But one was in no doubt where the real center of government lay.

NEUSTADT: Did you meet Johnson at all on that trip?

WILSON: Not on that trip.

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NEUSTADT: And how about David Gore? Did you see anything of that relationship with Kennedy?

WILSON: Only what David told me. He told me a little bit about the Cuban situation. Apart from the meeting backstage at the theater, that was the only time I saw the two of them together.

NEUSTADT: Was there anything left unresolved in your mind about these people or that man...

WILSON: Not at all.

NEUSTADT: You really felt you had it?

WILSON: I felt -- not as a result of the hour, but partly as a result of everything -- that I had come back with a complete picture. I hoped also at that time that he'd got a fairly complete

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picture of what we stood for.

NEUSTADT: Had you intended to go back again?

WILSON: Well, the problem was, with the election coming up, I could hardly -- I felt it wasn't fair to him to even appear to involve him in our election and indeed I did miss one or two very important and good chances of giving lectures as a result of the tenth anniversary of the Fund for the Republic. I felt I couldn't go and speak in the United States without going to Washington and I couldn't go to Washington without asking to see him, and I felt it would be unfair to involve him. But after there was a change in Prime Minister here -- and with no immediate election -- and it became clear that Sir Alec Douglas-Home would be our Prime Minister, I

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was waiting to do it and, indeed, was planning to go about January or February. Of course, in the event, I only went to the funeral.

NEUSTADT: Yes. Let me turn off to another kind of question. The allegation was often made in the United States that Kennedy and his style and manner of public projection was having an impact on your politics. I'd be very much interested in your appraisal whether there is anything in that and, if so, what.

WILSON: Yes, I think he did. In the first place, he had shifted the whole concept of government by a generation. In this country, we're used to people not becoming heads of government until they are in the sixties, as happened

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with Atlee [Clement R. Atlee], Macmillan and Sir Alec Douglas-Home. And it shifted the whole idea to a younger generation. That was the first thing. The second thing was the system of administration, the questioning of everything, the basing of decisions on an intellectual process -- not of one man, but a team. I think it was having some impact here. And, also, the idea that you had a head of government who was actually alive, not half dead -- with no reflection to either any previous President or any Prime Minister here. Hugh Gaitskell, I think, saw this very early in Kennedy's Administration, and Hugh was pretty close to Kennedy. But others saw it, too.

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NEUSTADT: Did you feel it made it easier for you at your age?

WILSON: Yes. Certainly. Indeed, my one deficiency on becoming leader of the party was that I was already older than Kennedy. Only a year, but to the wrong side.

NEUSTADT: I take it that the administrative style, which interests you greatly, it would be easier to stir this system up if that were still on the scene and the living example was of help somehow.

WILSON: Yes, but one has picked up an awful lot from what happened and, after all, I know what one can still see in Washington although the system of government -- the President is a very different person. I mean the Kennedy

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revolution will remain. It may be changed a little and be more turned to the Roosevelt touch and all that. You may have a President who in a sense is intellectually less than a computer and who guides the country, as wartime pilots used to say, by the seat of his pants, but nonetheless effectively for that. But, in a sense, the revolution has remained. But with a different pilot.

NEUSTADT: The essence of the revolution as it seemed to you was this insistent reaching out to get your hands on things.

WILSON: Yes, that's right. First of all, the briefing of the central head and the fact that nothing goes on that he

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doesn't know about, or isn't capable of knowing about, that he ought to know about; and the fact that he is initiating all the time and asking questions; and then, as I say, the teams and task parties and the working parties and the rest. At the end of the day the decision is a central decision taken by one man who knows everything, or potentially knows everything, so that he is not taking a decision in one sphere regardless of how it affects another sphere.

NEUSTADT: Of course, that's partly a mental trick; not everybody can do that.

WILSON: Well, that's why I did use the word "computer."

NEUSTADT: That's right.

WILSON: I mean the ordinary individual can't

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do mathematical calculations as a computer can. A computer can store more in its memory, more in its process, work more than an ordinary human being. And to that extent, somebody like Kennedy, and with that sort of a team, is able to take advantage of that what you called mental trick.

NEUSTADT: Did you have a chance to talk... I take it you didn't talk with him about his working methods.

WILSON: No.

NEUSTADT: Did you have a chance to talk with any of his people about them?

WILSON: Yes, both on this occasion and on a previous occasion when I hadn't met him. When I was foreign affairs spokesman, I had met through

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Arthur Schlesinger a number of the White House team, and we spent a lot of time talking about his working methods.

NEUSTADT: It's interesting and useful that you should have more appreciation of that revolution than an awful lot of Americans did.

WILSON: Well, it's the sort of thing I'm interested in because of the Party, because of the....

NEUSTADT: Yes, it's a business matter.

WILSON: Yes, and the contrast between the running of No. 10 both in Macmillan's time and since. I think it's very striking when you consider the whole staff at No. 10 Downing Street is only 35 people.

NEUSTADT: Yes, I know. And most of those are

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secretarial, as I understand it.

WILSON: Four officials, four private secretaries, and about thirty girls.

NEUSTADT: Of course, he tried to keep our White House staff small, but that is small by our standards.

WILSON: Yes, it had always been fairly large, but what he did was to make it more effective.

NEUSTADT: Did he talk to you at all about a term, or touchstone for him called "keeping options open?"

WILSON: He didn't, but his people did. And again, this comes out very plainly in Harlan Cleveland's article in *Foreign Affairs*. And when you're really having a major confrontation, to leave a way out not only for yourself but, more important, for the other fellow. I think Cuba...

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NEUSTADT: Well, that was, of course, the classic case. I think the first Cuban thing had a tremendous impact on him. Some of this was formed before he came in.

WILSON: Yes. He could see the weaknesses in the machine and the need to get things even more tightly under control. But it wasn't until I read one or two books after his death that I realized to what extent he had been fully committed in the Bay of Pigs episode. One got the impression in this country that it had been done by some subterranean group and that he suddenly woke up the day after and found out what was happening, but now one....

[BEGIN TAPE II]

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NEUSTADT: This is the second tape of the interview between Richard Neustadt and Harold Wilson for the John F. Kennedy Memorial Library. You were aware, I take it, even though you weren't personally involved, after the Bay of Pigs, that Arthur Schlesingers's mission over here -- his appearance over here -- was, in effect, mending fences?

WILSON: Mending fences over here.

NEUSTADT: Mending fences with a particular kind of constituency.

WILSON: Particularly with the left, with the left and semi-left.

NEUSTADT: How did it work?

WILSON: Well, I think it had some effect.

[AT THIS POINT, THE TAPE TANGLED AND BROKE ABOUT SIX INCHES OF IT

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WAS RENDERED USELESS.]

...although highly critical of Bay of Pigs, at the same time were less critical and didn't scream their heads off as one might have expected. And I know that Hugh Gaitskell, who saw him, was also very restrained; he thought there had been a mistake and this wasn't the time to be rubbing salt in.

NEUSTADT: Would it have been harder without the Schlesinger trip?

WILSON: Yes.

NEUSTADT: That would suggest an interesting sensitivity.

WILSON: Yes.

NEUSTADT: Did you sense any special sensitivity about your constituency in his mind?

WILSON: In my constituency, you mean a

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sensitivity toward the left? I thought for a moment you meant my constituency in Liverpool. We did discuss that. I told you, in what proportions, that I represented more Irish in the House of Commons than he did when he was in the Senate. Yes, one did feel that he knew whom he was talking to. And also, at that time, and ever since, there was such a lively expectation that we would be coming in that I think he felt that he was, in a sense, preparing -- sizing up the man for one thing, but also having a trial run.

NEUSTADT: In the very early days of his Administration, before the Bay of Pigs, there was a sort of an outpouring of excitement here. This is what

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one sensed. And then it was checked, very shortly. What did it take him to re-establish a sense of confidence here?

WILSON: I think it was partly.... Well, it took both ways, the Common Market argument. It was known that he was pressing Macmillan very hard on that and that he was critical of the independent deterrent here. And one got the impression that the Establishment, which is slow-moving, though when it moves, it goes right over.... Once the Establishment had gone right over to the Common Market, they felt more identified with Kennedy's views on these things, though much less identified than the left were on the idea of an Atlantic economic partnership. I think in a sense we looked a little

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further ahead than the government here and even than the November '61 onward, such things as the Clayton-Herter report in terms of the inspiration of the Kennedy Round as the thing to be looking at the Common Market as a possible means towards that but possibly a means

against it -- a step in the wrong direction. And we, of course, felt that Kennedy represented our point of view on the independent deterrent, until after Nassau.

NEUSTADT: Well, Nassau was, I don't think, a change in his fundamental view.

WILSON: I got the impression he didn't quite realize what he had committed himself to. I think he was more surprised than anyone when Macmillan returned to this country and put the whole thing in terms of Britain having

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an independent nuclear potentiality. And indeed one statement he made in a press conference soon afterwards suggested that.

NEUSTADT: I'm not at all sure that in his own mind it wasn't a Churchill-Roosevelt business -- the destroyers for bases -- in which he knew he was going to say one thing and Macmillan was likely to say -- he would put the emphasis on one thing and Macmillan the other. But, I can't...

WILSON: Well, there were two clauses in Nassau. He was emphasizing the multinational clause, which we've never heard of since in this country. We've only heard of the right to withdraw the Polaris submarines for national purposes.

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NEUSTADT: That was a great disappointment to Kennedy -- that that aspect of it died away. He did, however -- however lively his interest in current issues -- tend, it seems to me, to keep his mind very open on the future. AND one thing we haven't covered is your sense of whether he had any precise notion in all the affairs -- international liquidity, the Atlantic or tariff, or the rest of it -- of where he hoped to be going. Did you get any feeling of direction?

WILSON: Yes, I think that the moment I saw him was an extremely good one because it was after he had got his confidence really established, the confidence of having stood up to the East; he could now look for opportunities of

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agreement with the East. After all, this was only two or three months before the Test Ban agreement. And I think, from all he said to me, he had a very clear idea of where he was going, and an equally clear idea of such impediments to it as de Gaulle.

NEUSTADT: How would you put it? What did you come away with?

WILSON: That he recognized that, despite uncertainties at home in Western Europe, we were moving into a period of greater agreement with the Soviets from a position of strength, which he felt, and rightly so, had been established. You see, I was in Khrushchev's room a couple of months later when the news had just come through of Kennedy's speech

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to your American University. And I was the first person, I think, to have a chance to ask Khrushchev what he thought about it. And I'm in no doubt at all -- as I said in a speech I made in Bridgeport this year -- that this had a real causal effect on Khrushchev in getting him to move much more towards the West, particularly with the start of the Test Ban agreement.

NEUSTADT: What were the things in the speech that seemed most to impress Khrushchev?

WILSON: Well, he had the wrong answers, of course. What impressed him was this, you see: he said that Kennedy having spoken out for peace, as he put it, meant that Kennedy, moving up to an election period, realized that peace

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was a vote winner and not a vote loser, and this showed the strength and feeling of the American people for peace. And that Kennedy was being, in a sense, receptive to that view. I put it quite differently. I said I thought it was a historic speech in the sense that for the first time Kennedy had challenged the holy-war people. There was a JOHN Foster Dulles approach to these problems and that he felt strong enough to be able to do it and to force them on the defensive and to force them to stand up and be counted. Whereas until then it had always been easier to make a tough speech and get acceptance for it. I thought it was a very great personal step

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forward, an act of great courage and a highly significant stand. Khrushchev took all that, but I think he still felt that Kennedy was being pushed by the anonymous forces for peace.

NEUSTADT: The framework of analysis.

WILSON: Yes.

NEUSTADT: It's scary, rather.

WILSON: Yes, it shows the kind of reports the Kremlin gets from its local ambassadors.

NEUSTADT: Well, that speech, or the idea of making it, was certainly in his mind in April.

WILSON: Well, he was talking relatively. He never mentioned the speech to me. One could see he was moving towards the.... He was looking for chinks of light all the time.

NEUSTADT: Well, I don't know if they had identified

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where he would make it, but the idea of a peach speech was in another...

WILSON: I've now gathered that from a book I read.

NEUSTADT: In fact, Mac dates it January or February. You did see him at a really...

WILSON: Formative moment.

NEUSTADT: Did you get any sense of where he thought -- I ask you this because there is great uncertainty among the people who are close to him -- this development might move next? What his next steps might be?

WILSON: No. No. I think he was still so much.... He didn't say anything to me about it. He was still so much dominated by the nature of the alliance and the de Gaulle problem and his worries

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about Canada that I couldn't look much further than some breakthrough on disarmament.

NEUSTADT: There's another thing of the same sort where there is great uncertainty among the people close to him, his whole outlook on the balance of payments problem and what he might do about it after the election. This was, for him, a year and a half before the election. Pretty early to get any.... I don't know whether you picked up...

WILSON: Not from him, but one heard on all sides that he was moving into a

period where, obviously, the election would be uppermost and that you would see the real Kennedy, that no one had yet seen in the first year after the

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election -- the first two years after the election -- the fifth and sixth years of his Administration. But I didn't see any sign of what was in his mind, except the little touches here and there.

NEUSTADT: Bundy says, you see, that as far as he can appraise it, this issue and a lot of others, all these things, had become packages to be put under the tree not to be opened until Christmas. And clearly that that act of putting things off to take a look at.... But nobody knows precisely, and, of course, I don't suppose he did either. He had to know the size of his victory and the terms of it. It's a pity that we have no...

WILSON: Has Bundy done a recording for this

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already? I mean, how many tapes...

NEUSTADT: He and I spent eight hours together over two or three days. One could have gone on forever. But there was no attempt to get him to characterize particular conversations except by way of illustration. It's extraordinary how much empathy there was on precisely the points you mentioned between those two. Stylistically, in terms of communication, this is a key, the key to him. But just that ability you stressed of talking shorthand was part of the thing.

What was your feeling those last months about the kind of relationship you could establish with these people? Last November you would still have assumed a June election,

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I suppose.

WILSON: Oh, yes, May or June. The first half of this year sometime.

NEUSTADT: But you were looking forward to a relationship with this crowd.

WILSON: Before their election.

NEUSTADT: Yes. A very different kind of picture now. Had you expected to do much business with them?

WILSON: We recognized that the last few months before, if we had the election in May or June, that one wouldn't get some big things before November, but I think we assumed that certain things were urgent, for example, the NATO setup. The whole NATO post-Nassau MLF thing would have to be gone through very, very quickly. We had assumed, I think, and we still do, that after

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election, the first few weeks would be sort of a mass visit to Washington.

NEUSTADT: Sure. But, of course, this was assuming that you were in, and we were in a period of waiting-for-election.

WILSON: Yes. Now the two are happening together, and it's pretty tragic.

NEUSTADT: Just awful. It seems to me very unhappy. Now these were all the questions that I have to cover. Is there anything you want to add?

WILSON: I can't think of anything. No.

NEUSTADT: Was there any correspondence between you?

WILSON: None at all, though I do know there was correspondence between my predecessor and the President. During the period after the President had decided in principle there were going

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to be American nuclear tests, and the resumption of tests, in April, when they took place, Gaitskell was over there and saw the President, I think in New York, and then sent him a very long memorandum which I saw afterwards.

NEUSTADT: Yes, I remember hearing about that.

WILSON: And the President took it extremely seriously. His mind was, as we know, made up. But he did take a lot of trouble with Hugh. And then I know that in the last three or four weeks of Hugh's life he had prepared a first draft -- it never went off -- about a seven or eight thousand word memorandum to Kennedy about the Labor Party's attitude to the COMmon Market. It was after Hugh himself had taken this position at the Labor Party

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Conference at Brighton in October '62, but he felt that our position wasn't understood in Washington. He himself drafted it, I think singlehanded. It was a very long memorandum. The last time I saw Hugh -- it was in the hospital -- he said he was having it typed out, and he wanted me to go through it. That was the 13th of December '62. I think he was intending to send it to the President, and I know he was planning to visit the President in mid-February of '63. But I didn't correspond with him at all. I had a slight sort of exchange through intermediaries at the time of his visit to Birch Grove in July '63. I was just back from the Soviet Union, and I talked with Khrushchev, where

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we had established for the first time that Khrushchev was now definitely not interested even in three inspections, but that he was for the first time willing to accept the test ban in the three environments. That is, everything except underground. But when we saw Khrushchev, he ridiculed that at first. We argued with him a long time, and then he said he was prepared to discuss it, and later in the week we saw his people turn right over. And, well, on Tuesday, when my foreign affairs colleague, Gordon Walker, met Zorin and Kuznetsov, they weren't prepared to discuss it, and on Wednesday they said, "I'm sorry, we hadn't seen the transcript of Mr. Khrushchev's talk with Mr. Wilson,"

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and then started to talk about it. When I saw Mr. Khrushchev at the end of the week, he was all for it by this time. We so reported to the British government, and I gave a full transcript to our Ambassador who said, "Is there any harm in this going to Foy Kohler?" I said, "It's entirely up to you to decide what you do with it." So I knew what would happen. It went to him, and I met Foy Kohler and gave him a full oral account. And I thought it would be useful while President Kennedy was over if we could see him. But the President was in this difficult position. It wasn't as though he was coming to London or coming to the Embassy, in which case it could have

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been arranged. He was going as the personal houseguest of Macmillan at Birch Grove. So he said I would have to talk to Macmillan about it. So we put in a call to Macmillan who said it wouldn't be possible. We thought Macmillan was too busy playing politics at that time to make it possible. At this stage, I got a message from the President suggesting that I saw Bundy on another issue, the matter for British Guiana. They were pressing the government on this question and felt it would be helpful if the opposition here didn't cause any difficulty with the government if the government did what Kennedy wanted to. So I had to say, slightly protocol-wise, that we were the

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opposition, the active opposition, and that since simply because we were the opposite, we weren't seeing the President and the government was seeing him, we couldn't see his representative, even Bundy, on a matter affecting our responsibility to the opposition. We could have it one way or the other, but not both.

NEUSTADT: I think it was perfectly well understood. This does raise one question, which is entirely speculative, but I would like to get your views about it. It had to be assumed you were going to come in. You were going to be a government, and he was a government. Had you given any thought to what kind of network of relationships, what use of the telephone,

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what use of ambassadors, what use of special emissaries, you wanted to see?

WILSON: Well, only to this extent, that we assume the first thing were we to make our numbers one and another, that we make the first visit to establish broad lines of policy which is always done. It was done very successfully between Macmillan and Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower], for example. And from that stage on, to work out what the other arrangements would be.... I may say, I always hoped then, and indeed hope now, that if there were so, one wouldn't be too remote. Indeed, I would hate to feel, if we win the election in October and I go to Washington, that I can no longer see all my other friends in Washington.

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I mean, I would still hope to meet the Harrimans, the George Balls, and all the rest of them at dinner parties, on an informal basis, even if one were head of government. That's what I was hoping would happen, which I think would greatly help, because then.... It's like the old wartime days, the old informal days, when you're in at the formative stage, well, not the formative stage, but when you're in on the informal discussions about what can be done without too much reference to clear government positions.

NEUSTADT: You didn't mind that sort of swirl of informality between London and Washington in which you were a part of the opposition?

WILSON: Not at all. I was brought up with

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it in the war as a civil servant.

NEUSTADT: Well, there's no doubt that....

WILSON: And to some extent, as a minister after the war. Our relations with United States then -- in Truman's [Harry S. Truman] Administration -- were not entirely formal.

NEUSTADT: Well, let me simply say that this concludes this tape.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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