George H. Decker Oral History Interview – 9/18/1968
Administrative Information

Creator: George H. Decker
Interviewer: Larry J. Hackman
Date of Interview: September 18, 1968
Place of Interview: Washington D.C.
Length: 45 pages

Biographical Note
Decker, General and Chief of Staff of U.S. Army (1960-1962), discusses the Joint Chiefs of Staff Laotian policy, the Joint Chiefs' role in the Bay of Pigs planning and execution, and the Joint Chiefs' relationship with Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, among other issues.

Access
Open.

Usage Restrictions
According to the deed of gift signed March 26, 1970, copyright of these materials has been assigned to the United States Government. Users of these materials are advised to determine the copyright status of any document from which they wish to publish.

Copyright

Transcript of Oral History Interview
These electronic documents were created from transcripts available in the research room of the John F. Kennedy Library. The transcripts were scanned using optical character recognition and the resulting text files were proofread against the original transcripts. Some formatting changes were made. Page numbers are noted where they would have occurred at the bottoms of the pages of the original transcripts. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy, they are encouraged to visit the Library and consult the transcripts and the interview recordings.

Suggested Citation
George H. Decker, recorded interview by Larry J. Hackman**,** September 18, 1968, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

Gift of Personal Statement

By GENERAL GEORGE H. DECKER

to the

John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library

In accordance with Sec. 507 of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, as amended (44 U.S.C. 397) and regulations issued thereunder (41 CFR 101-10), I, George H. Decker, hereinafter referred to as the donor, hereby give, donate, and convey to the United States of America for deposit in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library, and for administration therein by the authorities thereof, the tape(s) and transcript of a personal statement approved by me and prepared for the purpose of deposit in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library. The gift of this material is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

1. Title to the material transferred hereunder, and all literary property rights, will pass to the United States as of the date of the delivery of this material into the physical custody of the Archivist of the United States.

2. It is the donor's wish to make the material donated to the United States of America by terms of this instrument available for research as soon as it has been deposited in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library.

3. A revision of this stipulation governing access to the material for research may be entered into between the donor and the Archivist of the United States, or his designee, if it appears desirable.

4. The material donated to the United States pursuant to the foregoing shall be kept intact permanently in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library.

Signed George H. Decker

Date March 17, 1970

Accepted Herbert E. Angel
acting Archivist of the United States

Date March 26, 1970

George H. Decker

Table of Contents

Oral History Interview

with

General George H. Decker

September 18, 1968
Washington, D.C.

By Larry J. Hackman

For the John F. Kennedy Library

HACKMAN: Did you, General Decker, have any contacts with John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] before the ‘60 election, that you can recall? Or with members of his staff?

DECKER: No, I did not. I remember meeting him when he was a senator, but I never had any extensive dealings with him.

HACKMAN: Can you remember anything at all in the ‘60 campaign? Were there any briefings that took place during the campaign that the Chiefs of Staff got involved in?

DECKER: None that I remember.

HACKMAN: What about the period, then, between the election and the Inauguration? Do you remember getting involved in any briefings of the President-elect or of the new people who were coming in at Defense [Department of Defense], Secretary Stahr [Elvis Jacob Stahr, Jr.], Secretary McNamara [Robert S. McNamara], or any of these people?

DECKER: Well, I remember meeting with Secretary Stahr and Secretary McNamara. I don't recall any occasion when the Joint Chiefs met with President Kennedy before he was inaugurated.

HACKMAN: Any reactions to the Kennedy appointments in the Defense Department that you can recall, your initial reactions?

DECKER: No, I think not. I know Secretary McNamara made it a point to talk to the Chiefs of Staff quite frequently, expressing his thoughts and views on how the Department was run, and I thought these were very helpful to the Chiefs in learning something about Mr. McNamara and his ideas of how the Department should operate.

I recall that President Kennedy picked General Clifton [Chester V. Clifton, Jr.] to be his military aide. While I hated to lose General Clifton from the staff of the Army, I thought it was an excellent choice. I think it turned out to be one.

HACKMAN: What kinds of things would General Clifton communicate back to you from the White House reflecting the President's interests?

DECKER: Well, he would come over occasionally to get the Army viewpoint on certain things that were under consideration, either in the White House or possibly in some other branch of the government—the C.I.A. [Central Intelligence Agency] or the State Department—when there was an interest of the Army involved. These were usually informal discussions. I think General Clifton carried back to the President the impressions that he gained during these contacts in the Pentagon. I don't know to what extent he contacted the other military services, but I assumed where they had an interest in the matter he contacted them as well.

HACKMAN: Under General Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower], President Eisenhower, the Army aide, I believe, had been the senior aide. Was General Clifton still regarded as the senior aide, or was he regarded on an equal basis with Tazewell Shepard [Tazewell T. Shepard, Jr.] and Godfrey McHugh [Godfrey T. McHugh], who were the other two?

DECKER: No, I think General Clifton was the senior aide for President Kennedy. At least, I always considered him to be. He was higher ranking than the others, so I thought he was the senior aide.

HACKMAN: I'd wondered if there were any problems in working that out. I'm sure the other services...

DECKER: None that I know of.

HACKMAN: Yes. Can you remember specifically anything about this first series of meetings at the White House? The President had three fairly lengthy meetings with the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Do you remember how he conducted these meetings and what some of the topics discussed were?

DECKER: I can't really identify these dates and associate them with the meetings. I know that at that time there was considerable discussion about the U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia. Then, it was not Vietnam, but Laos that was under consideration. I remember several meetings at which we discussed the possibility of military intervention in Laos. I can't identify those discussions with these dates, however.

HACKMAN: I know there were.... Can you remember what your own feelings were about the Laotian situation as it was developing in the spring of '61, particularly some of the—General Phoumi [Phoumi Nosavan] and Prince Souvanna Phouma—and what our policy should be?

DECKER: Well, I recall one meeting in the White House at which the President—the head of the C.I.A. [Allen W. Dulles], the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense [Dean Rusk], the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and others were present. McGeorge Bundy was there, and General Taylor [Maxwell D. Taylor] was there. The President want around the room and asked everybody his opinion about whether or not we should intervene militarily in Laos. My advice at that time was that, to me, this seemed to be a political consideration. It

always is when you're about to commit military forces. When political machinery breaks down, then, of course, one has to resort to something else. But I said that Laos was the last place that I would like to see the Army committed; that it was not a good place for the Army to fight; the casualties would be heavy, not only from fighting, but from the climate and the disease that was rampant in the area. But I told them that, if it was deemed advisable to intervene militarily, the Army was ready to go. But I did add to the President the statement that "Mr. President, if you do commit the Army into Laos, I hope that you will see it through." In other words, what I was saying was "Don't get the Army in there and then get it bogged down," or, "Use all the military means at your disposal to resolve this situation satisfactorily."

I don't know whether my advice had any material bearing or the decision, but, at least the decision was not to intervene it Laos, which I subscribed to wholeheartedly. At that time, of course, General Phoumi appeared to be the fighter in Laos. I, for one, and the other Joint Chiefs of Staff, thought that we should give him more support. But, as you know, he eventually faded out of the picture, and Souvanna Phouma took over and, I think, has done a reasonably good job in a country in which it very difficult to do any kind of a job because of the division of the factions in the country.

HACKMAN: Can you remember the viewpoints expressed by some of your fellow Chiefs of Staff during this period on whether to introduce American troops into Laos?

DECKER: Well, the Air Force generally took the position that you could do quite a bit with aerial bombardment; the Navy, somewhat the same. I don't think that they had any clearly defined position on whether the Army should go there or not. I think they thought that that more or less a decision that came under the Army, the people who were making the decisions. I would say that I can't recall any of them that, you might say, were overly hawkish about the situation in Laos.

HACKMAN: I had wondered if there was any difference—the first Chief of Staff to change was when General White [Thomas D. White] was replaced by General Curtis LeMay [Curtis E. LeMay]. Can you remember any difference between the Air Force viewpoint after this change was made, or was it.... There were really two periods when this was considered: the spring of '61 and then the spring of '62 after, I believe, General Phoumi had been defeated at Nam Tha, after we had airlifted some troops up and the Communists had scored a victory.

DECKER: Well, I would characterize General LeMay as being a bit more aggressive on this subject than General White had been, but I don't recall that General LeMay was a strong advocate of military intervention in Laos.

HACKMAN: Was there a problem in getting one single view to be presented by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, or was this seen as a problem? Was there any attempt to have General Lemnitzer [Lyman L. Lemnitzer] present one point of view?

DECKER: No, I don't recall any great difference of opinion on this subject among the Joint Chiefs. As a matter of fact, I think they were pretty much in agreement on this.

HACKMAN: I think General Lemnitzer took a trip out to Laos in the spring of '62. Can you remember anything about his impressions on coming back?

DECKER: No, I don't recall what, if anything, he did report to the Chiefs on his return.

HACKMAN: Several other people (including Roger Hilsman in that book that everybody talks about that he's written) have talked about rumors about problems between the C.I.A., between the Military Advisory Assistance Group, and Ambassador Winthrop Brown [Winthrop G. Brown], who was our ambassador in Laos during that period, in getting a unified policy in the field. Can you remember these differences coming up and the back and forth on this?

DECKER: Well, I do recall that there was some concern in the Joint Chiefs of Staff about Ambassador Brown's aversion to Phoumi. He apparently didn't think very highly of Phoumi, and this was reflected in his recommendations and also in the actions of the government toward Laos. I do recall that there was definitely some concern in the Joint Chiefs of Staff about Ambassador Brown and the way he reacted to Phoumi.

HACKMAN: Was this feeling extended, then, to Averell Harriman [William Averell Harriman], who was doing a lot of the negotiating for this period and was attempting to get the Geneva Conference going at that point?

DECKER: No, I don't think so. I don't think there was any real concern about Mr. Harriman. There was a bit of concern about the way things were being handled, particularly foreign aid. When you have a mission in the country whose business it is to deal with the local government and it can't do as much as a roving ambassador can do, it sort of undermines the confidence of the country in the representative that's there. So, personally, I felt that sometimes we made a mistake in sending these roving ambassadors around to give things that the local representative present isn't able to do. This seemed to me to be sort of a weakness in the way the government operates.

HACKMAN: Was this case ever taken to the President or to McGeorge Bundy? Can you recall the Joint Chiefs ever making this point?

DECKER: I don't think so. If they did I don't recall it.

HACKMAN: Sometime during that spring of '62—I believe General Boyle [Andrew Jackson Boyle] was our man in Laos for awhile…

DECKER: Yes, he was.

HACKMAN: ... and then General Reuben Tucker replaced him. Can you recall any reason, particular reason, for that move? Was it a regular rotation or...

DECKER: It was a regular rotation as I recall it. There was never any reason to bring General Boyle out of there except normal reassignment. We thought he was doing a fine job.

HACKMAN: Were the reports that you were getting, that the Joint Chiefs were getting, on General Phoumi's ability to fight or the effectiveness of his army contradicted by the reports the State Department was giving out? How, exactly, did this difference of opinion on him come about?

DECKER: Well, I think it came about largely through General Phoumi's contacts with Ambassador Brown. I think that Ambassador Brown was feeding information back to the State Department on Phoumi that didn't seem to agree with the situation as we understood it on the Joint Chiefs of Staff as to how Phoumi was conducting military operations. As I recall, that's how the differences of opinion grew.

HACKMAN: Were there any attempts made by you or by the Joint Chiefs to get instructions to General Phoumi to either change his performance in some areas or improve his rapport with Ambassador Brown? Could anything be done at all?

DECKER: I don't recall that we ever sent an emissary to General Phoumi to advise him that way. Of course, we had contacts with General Boyle, the senior military advisor. But I don't recall that we ever attempted to twist Phoumi's arm to have him change. As a matter of fact, we were, I think, as I recall it, convinced that Phoumi was probably doing about as good a job as could be done under the circumstances.

HACKMAN: The Joint Chiefs wouldn't have felt, then, that those, in most cases threats, but I think in a couple of cases actual cutoffs of funds were of any use in getting his performance changed?

DECKER: No. I don't believe that the Joint Chiefs ever subscribed to any effort to influence Phoumi by cutting off his support.

HACKMAN: One of the people in the Department of Defense who was involved in Laotian policy in this period was Admiral "Pickles" Heinz [Luther C. Heinz]. Do you remember working with him on this at all? And William Bundy [William P. Bundy] was working...

DECKER: No. I remember Bill Bundy was involved in it, but I don't recall any contact with Admiral Heinz on it.

HACKMAN: Can you remember, in your relationship with Bundy, were there any problems in working out a unified viewpoint of the Joint Chiefs and the Department of Defense? Or were the two somewhat at odds on this?

DECKER: No, I don't recall that we were at odds with Bill Bundy on this. I think our digressions were more with the State Department than they were with Bill Bandy, who was then in the Department of Defense.

HACKMAN: You were discussing earlier the meeting at the White House when some sort of intervention was being discussed. Can you remember who was in favor of

an intervention on the ground of sending some troops, I believe, to—I'm not sure I've got the pronunciation right—Luang Prabang, or something like that, in the northern part of Laos, one of the major cities.

DECKER: I don't recall that anyone spoke out strongly in favor of military intervention. No one that I could identify.

HACKMAN: Other people have talked about Walt Rostow [Walt William Rostow] and, at that point, Vice President Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] of being more inclined to this. And among the Joint Chiefs, I've heard that General Lemnitzer and Admiral Burke [Arleigh Albert Burke], who was there in '61, were particularly inclined to view things this way, as opposed to other people.

DECKER: Well, I think that both General Lemnitzer and Admiral Burke felt a little more strongly than General Shoup [David M. Shoup] and I did about the value of military

intervention, but I wouldn't say that they strongly favored it. They leaned more that way than we did, but they were not strong advocates of it. And I don't recall at the White House meeting that either one of them spoke out strongly in favor of it.

HACKMAN: Do you recall Mr. Rostow's view or Vice President Johnson's viewpoint expressed on that?

DECKER: I don't think Vice President Johnson said a word at that meeting. And as for Walt Rostow, I don't recall that he said anything either.

HACKMAN: In May of 1962, after General Phoumi had suffered the defeat at Nam Than our move then, to indicate to the communists our mood, was moving, I believe, approximately a thousand troops to the Thai border and moving the fleet into the Gulf of Siam. Can you remember anything about working this policy out? Were there problems in getting State and the Joint Chiefs and anybody else... [Interruption]

DECKER: No, I don't recall any difficulty in working this out. A display of Military strength in the area seemed to be one way of possibly influencing the situation. But I don't recall any great difficulty in achieving this. Of course, we had been building up some military strength in Thailand for some time, in view of the possibility that there would be military action of some kind in Southeast Asia.

HACKMAN: Can you recall that after the Bay of Pigs in '61—when Laos was, in May, one of the major topics—do you think the failure at the Bay of Pigs was

reflected in the President's attitude toward the Joint Chiefs or McNamara's attitude toward the Joint Chiefs? Did you people have the feeling they weren't paying any attention to you on this?

DECKER: I would say that the President was let down rather badly after the failure of the Bay of Pigs. I would not say that he went so far as to lose confidence

[-9-]

in the Joint Chiefs of Staff, nor do I think that McNamara did either. I think the President learned a lesson the hard way from the Bay of Pigs. I don't know whether you know the whole story of what happened or not. You've probably heard quite a bit of it. As you know, this was a C.I.A. operation. The Joint Chiefs of Staff were asked to review the plan of the C.I.A. In order to get some concept of what the plan was, we sent a major general over the C.I.A. to bring us back an outline of the plan.

HACKMAN: Was this General David Gray [David W. Gray] at that time?

DECKER: Yes. We reviewed this plan and made some comments on it. There were several conditions set out in our report to the Secretary of Defense. The first was that Castro's [Fidel Castro] air force had to be destroyed before the invasion was undertaken and before the troops landed and that surprise must be achieved. We made some suggestions for changes in the logistic support of the question. We were asked to comment on three possible landing sites, none of which was the Bay of Pigs. We selected one on the eastern end of the island which seemed to be the best place.

HACKMAN: Is this in late Eisenhower period or is this under President Kennedy in the very early days? Can you recall?

DECKER: As I recall, President Kennedy was in office. Well, anyway, we selected one of the places which we thought was suitable for landing of the type that was to be made. And this was far enough to the east so that Castro's forces, which were concentrated around the Havana area, couldn't get there very quickly. And if the expedition failed, the invaders could take off into the mountains and become guerillas as Castro had done.

HACKMAN: Yes.

DECKER: The reason that some of the Joint Chiefs thought that the operation should be undertaken was that this force had been training for quite awhile, and it was feared that here was an asset that, if it wasn't used, would be lost. So some of the Joint Chiefs of Staff favored going ahead

[-10-]

with it. They thought it had a reasonable chance of success. This was in our report that if all these conditions were met, the operation had a reasonable chance of initial success. Well, this is true of any kind of an amphibious operation because the element of surprise is with the attacker, initially. This shifts to the defender, though, after the landing is made.

As you know, Castro's air force wasn't destroyed; the landing site was changed to the Bay of Pigs; the provisional government which was supposed to be the rallying point for the people never got ashore. We had also said in our report that we could not assess the attitude of the civilian population of Cuba after the landing. We said this was beyond our capability to estimate. So the expedition was launched, and, as you know, the conditions weren't met, and consequently it failed.

I don't know who made the decisions that had such a significant effect on the operation. They were not made by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but by someone in a higher echelon. As a matter of fact, I was away from Washington at the time of the landing. I am not aware of all of the communications that went back and forth between the President and the Joint Chiefs. I know that Admiral Burke was very strongly in favor of committing the Navy to assist in the evacuation of some of the invaders from the beaches, but this was not implemented. I don't know, as I say, where these decisions were actually made, but they were made somewhere between the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the White House. And I think they were influenced largely by possibly a rather naive feeling on the part of some that we could avoid having the finger pointed at the U.S. as having participated in the operation. For instance, one of the things that influenced the selection of the Bay of Pigs was the fact that there was an airstrip there, an old one, but it was with the thought that by having the Free Cubans' planes come in and touch down on this airstrip and then take off you could create the illusion that they were flying from Cuban soil. Well, this, as I say, was rather naive thinking.

So many things went wrong in the operation that it turned out to be a complete failure, as you know. So this was, I think, a rather severe lesson to the President. He summoned the Joint Chiefs of Staff shortly afterward in a confidential session and told us that the next time there was a military operation it would be run by the military, not by anyone also. I think he was

a bit disappointed that the Joint Chiefs hadn't warned him more strongly against this, but I don't think we had very much opportunity to do it because the decisions were being made above our level.

HACKMAN: Let me just ask you a couple of questions on this. General Gray, who was working for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, when he went to the C.I.A. to do the review, was this just of the initial plan for an invasion or after the decision was made to go to the Bay of Pigs spot? Was he continually involved, or did he just make this initial study?

DECKER: Oh, no. He was continually involved. We were exchanging information. As a matter of fact, we sent three military people—I think it was three, or

more—down to Guatemala where this group was training to help them straighten out some of their logistic problems. So we were in pretty close touch with them. I think Gray's initial review was made before the Bay of Pigs was selected as the eventual landing place, and at that time they had these three other places on the eastern end of the island under consideration.

HACKMAN: The first selection before Bay of Pigs, I believe, was the site referred to as Trinidad in fact, if I remember correctly, on the southeast coast?

DECKER: Yes, it was quite well out toward the eastern tip of the island. I think one of the points under consideration was Trinidad. I don't remember if that's the one that we recommended first or not.

HACKMAN: Was there any problem in communicating with the C.I.A. on this? Were there problems because they were holding things too close? Or could General Gray find out what...

DECKER: Oh, no. Oh, no. We had no problems with communication at all.

[-12-]

HACKMAN: Can you remember the reaction of the Joint Chiefs when they first found out that this was being handled by the C.I.A.? Were people surprised that this operational responsibility had been given them?

DECKER: No, I think the practice had grown up of committing the C.I.A. to certain operations all around the world, and this was not considered unusual since, as far as the United States was concerned, it was considered to he a covert operation. No, we didn't consider this at all an unusual deviation from the pattern.

HACKMAN: Were the reports of the ability or the state of readiness of the Cuban refugees being trained in Guatemala different on the part of the people the Joint Chiefs sent down than they were from the C.I.A. people who ware on the scene?

DECKER: I would say that the reports that we got back indicated that these people were pretty well trained, but, as I said, there were some logistic difficulties that we tried to help them with. And that was the principal criticism that reached us about the group.

HACKMAN: Can you remember anything at all about the amount of, the extent of information that the Cubans were given concerning whether there would possibly be air support and how much American involvement would be? This has always been one of the debated points, as to whether they knew.

DECKER: As far as I know, they were never given any assurance of United States support of any kind, except the covert support that they were getting from the C.I.A.

HACKMAN: Can you remember anything about Secretary McNamara's initial reaction to the plan? How deeply did he try to got involved in the actual planning and assessment of this? Or was he inclined to completely accept the Joint Chiefs' viewpoint on this?

[-13-]

DECKER: I don't recall that he got involved in the details of the plan with the Joint Chiefs of Staff. I don't know what he did after we sent our paper up to him commenting on the C.I.A. plan. But he did not got into the details with the Chiefs.

HACKMAN: Can you remember any meetings taking place at the White House on the Bay of Pigs that you attended? Or was this always done through General Lemnitzer?

DECKER: No, I don't recall attending any before the Bay of Pigs. I did attend the one where President Kennedy had the Joint Chiefs together in a confidential gathering to discuss what we might do in the future. But before that I didn't attend any meetings. General Lemnitzer was over there several times. Admiral Burke was over there. But I was not present, so I can't say what happened.

HACKMAN: How closely was this held on the Joint Chiefs' side? For instance, could you talk to Secretary Stahr about this at all? Or was this strictly within the Joint Chiefs of Staff and General Gray?

DECKER: As I recall, it was strictly within the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

HACKMAN: Did the Joint Chiefs have any contact directly with the State Department on this, Assistant Secretary Mann [Thomas Clifton Mann] or—who was in the Latin American area?

DECKER: I don't recall any. If there were any, I can't recall it.

HACKMAN: Can you recall the Joint Chiefs having the feeling in this period that they should have been involved in discussions at the White House level more frequently as the Bay of Pigs was being considered?

[-14-]

DECKER: Yes. I think there was a feeling in the Joint Chiefs that they should have

been present when some of these decisions were made and they were not.

HACKMAN: Was this felt at the time or in retrospect.

DECKER: I think it was more in retrospect because, in some cases, we didn't know what decisions were being made.

HACKMAN: Was this because of confusion in the new Administration? Or was it a set policy? How do you explain this problem existing?

DECKER: Well, I think one of the problems was due to a new Administration coming in. But I think that one of the principal difficulties was in the fact that the Operations Coordinating Board, which had existed during the Eisenhower Administration, was no longer there to follow through on this kind of thing. Their presence, I think—well, their absence, contributed to the decision making failure. I think this was one of the difficulties. But my impression was that many of these decisions were made on the spur of the moment, based on information that had come in from some source, possibly the State Department or from the United Nations or in some other way. When a problem came up that required a decision, the decision was made off the cuff, you might say.

HACKMAN: Are you speaking specifically of Cuba, or are you speaking of things in general in this period?

DECKER: No, I'm speaking primarily of the decisions in connection with the Bay of Pigs, although the same considerations did apply in other areas, too. There was sometimes no follow through on decisions that were made. I remember occasions where the Joint Chiefs and the State Department would got together and would reach a conclusion on some matter, and when the instruction would go out, usually through the State Department, you sometimes didn't recognize the communication that went out as dealing with the same problem that you'd resolved with the State Department. This was something that concerned us a bit too. I'm not speaking now of the Bay of Pigs; I'm speaking about the general operating procedures.

HACKMAN: Was it things, you mean, being rewritten at State, or would they go to the White House and be rewritten there?

DECKER: No, probably in State.

HACKMAN: Yes.

DECKER: I think in most cases our problem was with the operating agencies in the State Department in trying to implement decisions that had been made. In

the past, the O.C.B. [Operations Coordinating Board] would have been the agency to follow through on this and see that everything was done that should have been done.

HACKMAN: Was this ever resolved to any extent during your time in the Kennedy Administration? Or did it continue all the way through?

DECKER: No, it continues all the way through. It seemed that the coordinating was usually done by McGeorge Bundy. He was one that did most of the coordinating, and it was just too much for one man to try and do.

HACKMAN: Did the Joint Chiefs ever make this point to Bundy or members of his staff, that things weren't being coordinated or that contradictory policies were being followed in some of these areas?

DECKER: I don't believe that we ever came out with a recommendation to reactivate the O.C.B. And I don't know whether General Lemnitzer or Admiral Burke ever discussed it with McGeorge Bundy. I never knew.

HACKMAN: Can you remember anything further about specific discussions that took place on the amount of air power that would be necessary to take out Castro's air force at the time of the Bay of Pigs?

DECKER: Well, as I recall it, there were about twenty-six planes that the free Cuban air force had at its disposal. I remember discussing with General White and the Joint Chiefs of Staff the timing of the air strikes. I suggested to him that they should be made a couple of days ahead of the actual landing. General White was of the opinion that they had enough air power to do it the day previous in one strike. I don't think there was ever any feeling that there wasn't enough of the free Cuban air force to knock out Castro's planes. Of course, they planned to catch them on the ground. Well, I don't recall that there was ever any discussion of the amount of air power that would be needed. I mean, everybody assumed that there was enough of it.

HACKMAN: Was there a clear understanding all the way through that under no circumstances would United States planes be sent? Or was there a problem on getting a clear understanding in this area?

DECKER: Well, it was my understanding all the way through that we had no plans for participation of U.S. forces. As I said before, it was to be a completely covert operation, so there was not anticipation of employment of American forced.

HACKMAN: You talked previously about the meeting that the President had with the

Joint Chiefs after the Bay of Pigs. What can you recall about the study that was done by Maxwell Taylor and Admiral Burke and Robert Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] and—I guess there was one other member—Allen Dulles, I believe, immediately after the Bay of Pigs? Can you recall how they went about trying to evaluate what happened?

DECKER: Well, I testified before the group and told them what I recalled about the actions of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, which are substantially what I've told you. I never saw the report of that group, and the only thing I recall was my own appearance before them.

HACKMAN: That's strange. I don't know if I assumed or if I had heard that the Joint Chiefs had seen the report that went in or the results of the report. Did anything come down to the Joint Chiefs after the report went to the President that you can recall?

DECKER: Not that I recall. If it came to the Joint Chiefs organization, I didn't see it, and I think I would have. And I might say that some of the substances of that was what President Kennedy told the Chiefs when he met with us after the...

HACKMAN: I guess that's how it was done.

DECKER: ... Bay of Pigs.

HACKMAN: What can you remember about the development of policy toward Cuba in the period after the Bay of Pigs up until the time you left as Chief of Staff, Army? A committee called the Mongoose Committee was operating trying to develop some policy an the Bay of Pigs. Can you recall anything about what the viewpoint of the Chiefs was as this developed?

DECKER: No, I really don't recall anything about it.

HACKMAN: I heard that General Lansdale [Edward G. Lansdale], who was working for Secretary McNamara as an assistant to Secretary McNamara of some kind, was involved in this. I didn't know if you remember any contacts with him on this or not.

DECKER: Well, he was sort of a specialist in Cold War activities of all types I think. I talked to Ed Lansdale, but I don't recall ever having discussed with him what our policy toward Cuba might be.

HACKMAN: Well, let me move on to something different. Maybe it won't require so

many specific recollections your part. Some of the Joint Chiefs particularly Admiral Burke in that early period and later Curtis LeMay, had problems in dealing with Arthur Sylvester on speech clearances. What was your relationship to his office and this area?

[-18-]

DECKER: Well, he would review speeches that I proposed to make. Sometimes he'd make changes in them. I never considered that I wasn't able to get my point across. These changes didn't bother me particularly. I had quite a discussion with Senator Thurmond [Strom Thurmond] on this when they held some hearings before a Senate committee, and I told them then that Sylvester never bothered me particularly. I was able to get my message across even with the deletions that might come out of the Office of the Chief of Information for the Secretary of Defense. So I never considered this a problem as far as I was concerned. I thought some of the changes were of a picayunish nature, nit picking, but they never bothered me particularly.

HACKMAN: Were the changes actually made in Sylvester's office, or would things go on to State Department and changes be made there?

DECKER: I think they were made in both places. I think Sylvester would probably take these speeches and refer them to the State Department and then incorporate whatever comment they might have. As a matter of fact, I think this review was probably desirable. I never objected to it.

HACKMAN: Were procedures any different in this area under Sylvester than they had been under his predecessor?

DECKER: I think that Sylvester was tightening up quite a bit on speech clearance over what had been done ahead of him.

HACKMAN: Why do you think that other members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff had so many more problems with him than you did? Just a difference in attitude?

DECKER: Well, I'm not sure. Perhaps the approach that they took. In being a little more aggressive, they generated more comment than I did in what I had to say. Both Admiral Burke and Curt LeMay are rather strong-minded people. They're inclined to be a little more on the hawkish side, you'd say. I don't want this criticism to appear; I'm

[-19-]

simply telling you what, in my judgment, is probably the reason that they objected more to this than I did.

HACKMAN: How would Secretary Stahr got into this process? Did his office also review speeches that you gave and your people gave, or would it go directly to Sylvester's office?

DECKER: No, they'd go directly to the Department of Defense. The Secretary of the Army didn't normally review anything that I wanted to say. If I was making a major point, I might discuss it with him and tell him what I was going to do, but he never had any review procedures.

HACKMAN: Did you ever got any comments, as some members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff did, from the White House through General Clifton or in any other manner on any of the speeches that you gave?

DECKER: I don't recall any adverse comment.

HACKMAN: What about contacts, your own contacts, and those of the staff under you, of members of the press? Were there any changes in policy that Sylvester got involved in during this period?

DECKER: Yes. I think the tendency was to tighten up an these things and for Defense to be informed on what discussions went on with the press. We were supposed to report on these discussions with the press so that Defense would be informed of what went on. I thought the policy was getting rather restrictive when I left the Department.

HACKMAN: What kind of problems, if any, did this create for you and what you normally had been doing in this area?

DECKER: Well, it didn't really create too many problems for me, except that you always had to be careful when you talked to somebody from the press that you didn't say

anything that was contrary to Defense policy. It sort of inhibited you from talking freely with a member of the press. This didn't prevent you completely from doing some off-the-record background briefing, which I think any of the military service chiefs have to do from time to time so the press understands what it's about. But these are not for publication.

HACKMAN: Were there any problems that you can recall in the way that Secretary Stahr dealt with members of the press, that presented problems to you as Chief of Staff?

DECKER: No. No, I didn't find any problems in his contacts with the press.

HACKMAN: Did you have any contacts at all with Salinger [Pierre E.G. Salinger] or anybody from his office over at the White House on press policies?

DECKER: No, No, I didn't directly.

HACKMAN: Did members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that you can recall, regard the White House as a leaky spot during the Kennedy Administration that created problems for you people?

DECKER: Well, we did consider that there were leaks. I know that Secretary McNamara become very much concerned about leaks to the press. We felt a lot of this occurred right in his own office. We wouldn't try to identify individuals. But frequently information that was contained in papers that originated with the Joint Chiefs of Staff would get out, and it seemed obvious to us that it came from somebody in the Department of Defense who had access to this kind of information. We were not too seriously concerned about the White House, but we were concerned about the leaks in the Congress. This is where a great many leaks occurred, too. After giving confidential testimony up there in a closed session, closed hearing, you'd find that it would appear in the press. And we were concerned about that.

HACKMAN: Can you remember any specifics in the Kennedy period that particularly upset you, about your own testimony or Army testimony?

DECKER: No, I don't recall any specific cases of this. I know there was a general feeling that what was said before committees of the Senate was very likely to appear in the press.

HACKMAN: Were there particular individual senators who were the culprits in most cases, or was this general?

DECKER: Well, I wouldn't want to identify those that were most apt to release information. There were some that you could depend on that wouldn't, but there were probably more that might not recognize the importance of the information or would purposely let it out.

HACKMAN: You were talking earlier about appearing before Senator Thurmond in what people have always referred to as the "muzzling of the military" hearings in '62. Do you recall anything about the events loading up to that? There're usually two things: Senator Fulbright's [J. William Fulbright] memo to Secretary McNamara about Army people and service people and retired service people getting involved in either speech giving or working with certain groups that Fulbright regarded as undesirable, and the General Walker [Edwin A. Walker] case. I wondered if you could comment on either or both of those, any involvement you had.

DECKER: No, I don't really recall the details of what generated those hearings. I think that it probably stemmed more from the objections of some of the other members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the censuring of their speeches, and I think that this is where Senator Thurmond picked up the idea that they were muzzling the military. I never felt that I was muzzled and so stated before the Senate committee. I don't know whether the record of that hearing is available or not. I assume that it is.

[-22-]

HACKMAN: Did complaints ever come to you from Sylvester's office or from the White House or Secretary McNamara about active or retired Army people getting involved in appearances of the type that Fulbright regarded as undesirable? Or do you remember this at all?

DECKER: No, I don't recall having any communications with Sylvester concerning anyone in the Army.

HACKMAN: Can you recall the discussions on how to handle General Walker when this came up first in '61, I believe? Were those decisions yours, or did McNamara and Stahr get involved in this to any degree?

DECKER: Well, the decisions were made in the Army and, eventually led up to General Walker's resignation. But this was an action that he himself took. He was relieved of his command of the division and returned to the United States. I talked to him at that time and told him that it seemed in the best interests of all concerned to move him that I still had confidence in his ability as an officer and that I hoped he'd go ahead and do the kind of a job that he was capable of doing. But he chose to resign, and it was accepted. He was not fired, in any sense of the word, from the Army. But he was a rather strong-willed person, too.

HACKMAN: Did you have any strong feelings in this area of troop orientation and changes that should be made?

DECKER: Well, of course, I'm a very strong advocate of troop orientation, to tell the troops what the facts of life are, but I thought that General Walker went too far in what he was attempting to teach in the Fifth Division, particularly in regard to communism, which was his principal subject. And it led to, as you know, quite a bit of trouble.

[-23-]

HACKMAN: Do you remember any indications of Secretary McNamara's feelings in this area? Supposedly, the President was very interested in the training of

military people. I'd wondered if General Clifton ever communicated anything on this, or the President himself?

DECKER: Concerning General Walker?

HACKMAN: Yes. And troop orientation programs.

DECKER: No. I don't recall having received any communication from General Clifton or the President on troop information programs. I did have some discussions with the President on the strength of the Army and the Special Forces. He was very much interested in the Special Forces. I have a book here of some pictures that were taken at Fort Brags when we went down there to visit the Airborne Division and the Special Forces. I thought you might take a look at that. Perhaps some of the photographs are available in the Department of the Army. If you want to include any of that kind of material in your writing, it might give you an idea of what pictures there were involving the President. But he was very strongly in favor of increasing the strength of the Special Forces, and he was very helpful in this, as far as I was concerned, because I felt the same way about it. I felt that they should be increased. And he enabled us to beef up their strength considerably.

HACKMAN: Was this an interest that was reflected in a very early period in your conversations with him, or did it only follow the Bay of Pigs and Laos as this developed? When did you get this indication?

DECKER: No, I think that he was interested in this from the time he came into office. I don't think the Bay of Pigs had anything to do with his interest in the Special Forces. It may have increased, but he always had it as far as I knew.

HACKMAN: Some people have said that Maxwell Taylor's book had some influence on his feelings in this area, *The Uncertain Trumpet*. Did he ever talk about that at all?

DECKER: No. I think probably Maxwell Taylor's book had some influence on his selection of Maxwell Taylor to be his principal military advisor, but I don't think this had any great influence on his decisions or his attitude toward the Special Forces.

HACKMAN: Some people have written since that some members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—and I've seen particularly General Lemnitzer mentioned and then some people on down the chain in the Army—felt that the Administration was oversold on the idea of counterinsurgency tactics, antiguerrilla tactics, and the use of Special Forces. Was this so? And did you have much of a problem in getting progress in this area?

DECKER: No. When you get the word from the top, you don't have problems. And the President was strongly behind the Army in trying to increase the strength of the Special Forces, so I didn't have any real problem in this area. As far as I recall, there was no one on the Joint Chiefs of Staff who objected to this. As a matter of fact, the Air Force tried to organize some commando units that would be Airborne, and they were a parallel of the Special Forces.

HACKMAN: Can you remember a discussion of wearing of the green beret which some people have said was the President's decision?

DECKER: Well, I think it was his decision. He liked the green beret very much. But then we ran into the problem where the Special Forces had it and the Airborne thought they should have it, too. So we did have a little flap about wearing the green berets, in the Airborne. We finally decided to leave it to the Special Forces. The President was very fond of the green beret.

HACKMAN: How did your relationship with Secretary Stahr and Under Secretary Ailes [Stephen Ailes] work out during this period? Was this a smooth relationship, or were there frequent differences of opinion?

DECKER: No. I think we had a very cordial relationship. At least, my relationship with both of them was, I thought, as fine as you'd want it to be. We had no vast differences of opinion. As a matter of fact, very rarely did we have differences of opinion.

HACKMAN: Was Secretary Stahr's method of operation different than—I believe Secretary Brucker [Wilber M. Brucker] was his predecessor that you'd worked with?

DECKER: Well, yes. I would say it was quite a bit different. Secretary Brucker was a strong advocate of the Army, and in advancing its case he gained the enmity of some other people, particularly the Secretary of Defense. Stahr was a bit more careful and tactful in his dealings. [Interruption]

HACKMAN: You had just been talking about Secretary Stahr's approach as a softer approach, or a more diplomatic approach. Did this put more of a burden on you to carry your case within the Department of Defense on certain matters?

DECKER: No, I wouldn't say it that way. I think Secretary Brucker carried the Army's case to a greater extent than Secretary Stahr did, and he, as I say, was very forceful in some of his presentations. Secretary Stahr was not quite so much so, but sometimes when we had a problem with McNamara, Secretary Stahr and I would go

up together. And he would talk about the political side of it, and I would talk about the military side of it. No, I don't think that there was much difference. I did the same thing with Secretary Brucker when he would go up there sometimes.

HACKMAN: Could you see that the role of the Army Secretary was changed under Secretary McNamara? People have talked about it as being less important.

DECKER: Well, I think it was becoming increasingly less important under Secretary McNamara because so many decisions were made in the Department of Defense. It

[-26-]

didn't have to be; some of them could have been made in the military services. But, of course, the secretaries of the military departments are cut out of the operating command, chain of command, and their usefulness, I think, went steadily downward under the present organization in the Department of Defense.

HACKMAN: Secretary Stahr was the first service secretary to leave when he resigned in '62. Can you remember, were there specific events leading up to this? Or was this a general dissatisfaction on his part?

DECKER: Well, I think Secretary Stahr was, in heart, an educator. I think the opportunity to become President of Indiana University was the thing that influenced him. Realizing that these government positions are rather tenuous, I think he thought this was an opportunity, and he took it. I think that possibly there were disagreements between him and Secretary McNamara and they also contributed to this decision to leave. But I had a very high regard for Secretary Stahr and thought he was a first-class secretary, and I'd say the same about Secretary Ailes. They're both fine people.

HACKMAN: Were any differences that he might have had with Secretary McNamara, procedural differences? Or were they on, can you recall, were they on specific issues?

DECKER: I think they probably would be on specific issues.

HACKMAN: Can you recall those?

DECKER: No, I wouldn't venture to name any of them because I was not present when some of these discussions were had. However, I gained the impression that there was some, well, call it lack of understanding between Secretary Stahr and Secretary McNamara. But I don't think that there were necessarily procedural differences; I think these were matters of substance.

[-27-]

HACKMAN: You had just mentioned that decision making in Defense was passing increasingly to Secretary McNamara and to his aides. Some of these decisions could have been made in the services. Can you recall how this developed, particularly in the very early period on some of the things that came up in '61? How was this...

DECKER: Well, I can give you one specific case of how the Department of Defense designed control. When General Taylor was Chief of Staff, the Army divisions were organized along what they call pentomic lines. When I became Chief of Staff, I realized that the pentomic division was inadequate in many ways; this view was confirmed by officers who had worked with the pentomic division in the field. So I tried to reorganize the Army divisions along lines that would give them more staying power.

HACKMAN: This is the R.O.A.D. [Reorganization Objective Army Division] concept, the reorganization of the Army?

DECKER: Yes. And this is something that should have been handled in the Department of Army. It shouldn't have had to be decided by the Joint Chiefs of Staff or the Department of Defense. But I had to brief both the Joint Chiefs and Secretary McNamara to explain what we had in mind. They seemed enthusiastic about it. But then, apparently, Secretary McNamara got a few questions from General Taylor, who was then over at the White House, about this. And Secretary McNamara didn't want to try to answer questions himself and he wouldn't call on me to help him answer them, so this reorganization was held up for quit awhile. Actually, I don't think General Taylor objected to it at all, but he was just asking some questions that Secretary McNamara didn't know the answer to. This is the kind of control that demonstrates how decisions that should have been made in the Army were affected by action or inaction by the Secretary of Defense. Of course, the strength of the Army was involved in this, and to that extent—the budget was involved, and the Secretary of Defense should, rightfully, get into that end of it. When it comes to the fighting organization of the Army, I don't think the Secretary of Defense should become involved to the extent that he did.

HACKMAN: In getting this reorganization, was it primarily a problem for you of just getting funds committed to this reorganization…

DECKER: Just the decision.

HACKMAN: Just the decision.

DECKER: It took quite a while to get the Army reorganized. I'm very thankful that it was done before our troops became involved to the extent they are in

Vietnam. Those pentomic divisions would have been very weak ones in the kind of slugging contest they have over there.

HACKMAN: One of the other reorganizations that started in '61, I believe, and developed in '62 was this reorganization of some of the Army technical services and the creation of Material and C.D.C. [Combat Developments Command]. Where had this idea originated for these organizations? When had the push come on it, and from where?

DECKER: Well, there had been many criticisms of the technical services over the years. And a lot of people thought these had become empires that were gradually becoming obsolete in the light of modern technology. A lot of pressure came from McNamara to examine the Army organization. And this we did. We appointed a committee headed by Larry Hoelscher [Leonard W. Hoelscher], who was the Deputy Controller of the Army. It was composed of the most knowledgeable people we could find. And after months of study, the committee came up with a proposal which was a functional type organization rather than the old type that followed the technical service line. Well, there was some limited objection to it in the Army, but I thought generally speaking that most of the people in the Army bought it. We had no problem getting this approved by McNamara. But it goes along the functional lines that the Air Force had had ever since its conception in 1974. I think McNamara was more familiar with that type of organization that he was with the Army type. So there was no real problem there. I think a lot of the pressure for the reorganization came from Mr. McNamara, but it's something the Army did itself.

[-29-]

HACKMAN: Were there problems in the early period for the Joint Chiefs of Staff in understanding McNamara's methods of operation and just getting in tune with the way he worked? Did he change procedures so quickly that things became very confused?

DECKER: Well, I thought that he implemented an awful lot of studies that increased the work load, not only of the Joint Chiefs, but of the military services. He had a study for almost anything that was proposed in the Department of Defense. To this extent, he was a change from the previous Administration. I thought that when Tom Gates [Thomas S. Gates, Jr.] left the office of Secretary of Defense that he was a very effective secretary. He would come down and discuss problems with the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Sometimes what we were suggesting wasn't, for some reason or another, acceptable to him, but we always had it out in the open and discussed it. I think some of the Chiefs had the feeling that, while McNamara would come down and discuss things with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that he had his mind made up, in many cases, before he ever appeared there. He met with us at least once a week, and he also had the council in the Department of Defense where the Joint Chiefs would meet with the service secretaries and the assistants in Defense. They met once a week. So there was a good exchange of ideas and information, but the principal concern of all the Joint Chiefs was the extent to which McNamara got into all kinds of

details, things which might have been decentralized to someone else. To that extent, I'd say he participated in the details of anything to a much greater extent than his predecessor did.

HACKMAN: Can you give me some examples in your own area of the type of things which could have been handled by the Army without this great detail involvement on his part?

[-30-]

DECKER: Military promotions, for instance. General officer promotions should, it seemed to me, be a service responsibility, but these all had to go up to the Secretary of Defense. Staffing levels, grades for enlisted men, things of this kind, they all had to go up to the Department of Defense. These are things that, I think, should be handled in the military services within the limits of personnel and money that's available. And then, of course, he had it that everything that went into the budget had to be programmed in such a way that he could understand it. These program changes caused an awful lot of work, and, in some cases, confusion. These are the kinds of details in which he became rather closely involved.

HACKMAN: Was your feeling, and other people's in the Army, primarily that he expected too much, he assigned too much work that the Army had not been used to doing, types of things—in other words, in the way you presented the budget—or that simply control was passing to the civilian side rather than the military side?

DECKER: Well, there was no question but that control was passing from the military to the civilian side in the Department of Defense. I don't mean that there were changes within the Army itself and the relationship between the chief and the staff and the secretary and the assistant secretary. It was gradually all flowing upstairs, up to the Department of Defense. That's where so many of these decisions had to be made.

HACKMAN: Were there any particular civilian aides of McNamara, the assistant secretaries or other aides, that you had particular problems in dealing with?

DECKER: Well, his analytical people were the ones that caused us probably the greatest problems. Everything the Army wanted to do had to be evaluated in the D.O.D. cost-effectiveness system, and this isn't always the best way to handle a military operation. That's where most of the difficulty was. We always had problems with the Defense comptroller in trying to get money, but I think this is something that's to be expected. On the other hand, I don't think

[-31-]

that cost-effectiveness should apply to military weapons in some cases and to military tactics in others.

HACKMAN: What about the relationship with Harold Brown, at that point, who's the engineering, research, and development man?

DECKER: Well, our relationship with Harold Brown was a good one, I thought. I feel that in research and development there is a need to coordinate the activities of the military services so that there isn't duplication in research that should he conducted and is conducted. You always have problems when somebody above you has to decide something, but I thought these were the normal operating problems. I wouldn't say there was any unusual difficulty there.

HACKMAN: I'd wondered if you could recall particularly the developments on the Nike-Zeus in '61 and '62 in order to get some, at least, the production…

DECKER: Well, the Army had consistently advocated, after the system was developed, that we should go into some limited production of the long lead time items because, at that time, it was estimated to take about four years from the time production was started until the system became operational. So we wanted to cut that short. We had evidence that the Russians were going ahead with this kind of a development, and we felt that we had enough knowledge to go ahead. This was always a matter of controversy between the Army and the Department of Defense. McNamara didn't think we should go ahead with it, and at that time we were not getting much support from the Joint Chiefs of Staff either. I think that situation has changed today. They're all unanimous in recommending that the system which we now have be constructed. There was always battling back and forth in trying to get money for the Nike-Zeus production.

HACKMAN: Can you remember, the first time that came up was in the Spring of '61. Then it came up again around Thanksgiving in '61. Did you ever have the feeling

that a final decision had been made against it? Some funds were left for continued research in connection with...

DECKER: No, I never had the feeling that the system was dead. It was just a matter of delaying it. And too, there were developments coming along which would improve the system. But it was a question of how long you can delay it. If it takes four years from the time production is begun until the system becomes operational, undue delay in deciding to go ahead could put the United States in a disadvantageous position vis-à-vis the U.S.S.R.

HACKMAN: I'd wondered if you regarded those continued small grants for additional research as more or less a sop given out when the final decision against it had already been

DECKER: I never felt that the final decision had been made. I thought it was just a delay to see if we can't improve the system before we go into production.

HACKMAN: Did you feel that those objections that Brown and, I guess, McNamara were making as far as the low acceleration rate and the other objections that they had were legitimate objections?

DECKER: Well, I think that they were based on fact, yes. We thought that they were holding out for too much perfection in the system that's bound to be imperfect in some way.

HACKMAN: Can you remember—I'm not sure if this happened in '61; I know it did in '62—the Joint Chiefs met with the President at Palm Beach to discuss the budget. Did that take place in '61? Can you remember going down there?

DECKER: Yes, I went down there. I think it was in '61.

[-33-]

HACKMAN: Yes. I'd wondered if you made any point of the Nike-Zeus to the President at that point? And can you remember any other things that you were particularly interested in? I couldn't find the meeting at Palm Beach listed there.

DECKER: Well, we did meet at Palm Beach, and I think it was in '61. We discussed the budget in general. As I recall it, I suggested we needed more strength in the Army. We needed to convert some of our training divisions into combat divisions. I believe the matter of production of Nike-Zeus was discussed, but it was decided to leave it in the development stage at the present. We had a nice meeting with the President. As an aside, Secretary McNamara apparently thought we were going to have this meeting and come right back. When we finished, the President sent us all out on the golf course. So Secretary McNamara who doesn't play had to wait until we were through. He hadn't planned to do that. No one had planned to play golf, so the President had to get us clubs and clothes and everything else that you need.

HACKMAN: Can you remember anything about his reaction to your suggestion on the training division to combat division move?

DECKER: No, I don't recall what his comment was. We didn't get the funds to do it, but I did point it out. And later on this did come to pass. I think it may have registered with him.

HACKMAN: Were the feelings of the Joint Chiefs, the dissatisfaction with some of Mr. McNamara's methods, was this case ever taken to him and presented to him?

DECKER: Not that I know of.

HACKMAN: Was this discussed and considered that the objections should be made clear to him? Or was it felt that it shouldn't?

[-34-]

DECKER: Well, it was sometimes discussed informally, you might say. It didn't appear in the Joint Chiefs of Staff record, but in talking with each other, we would comment on this. But you have to keep in mind that every action that was taken, particularly by the Congress, since the inception of the Department of Defense was to strengthen the hand of the Secretary. He had always been criticized for not having enough control over the military services. Well, McNamara got a hold of the handles of the Department of Defense much better than anybody had done so before. And then, of course, he was exposed to the opposite criticism, that he assumed too much power. Well, we didn't feel that we should really tell McNamara how he should operate. This was something that might be offensive to him. So we endured it as well as we could, keeping in mind that this was really the dictate, you might say, of the people and their representatives in Congress that he should run the Department, and that's the way he thought it should be run.

HACKMAN: How did you find Mr. Gilpatric [Roswell L. Gilpatric] to deal with? Was he much different than McNamara to deal with?

DECKER: He's a different type of personality and I thought much more sympathetic to the views of the military than McNamara was. He's a different type of person, a different personality, I thought a very smooth operator. I always got along real well with him.

HACKMAN: I was just looking at this schedule of meetings, and I noted that there were a couple of meetings with the Chiefs: This one in July of 1961, and then there's a lapse really until December of '61; and then in March and June of '62 he meets again with the Joint Chiefs. In the early period, he seemed to be meeting much more frequently. Was there any formal decision made not to meet that frequently with the Chiefs?

[-35-]

DECKER: No, [BEGIN SIDE II, TAPE I] none that I know of. We did meet in October at Fort Bragg. This was the trip the President made down there to look at the Airborne Division and the Special Forces. The Chiefs were there on that occasion. This was not a formal meeting of any kind.

HACKMAN: How did he usually go about conducting the meetings with the Chiefs of Staff? Did he go around the table and let everyone state their viewpoint on a

question? Or General Lemnitzer usually?

DECKER: Well, are you speaking about the Chiefs or meeting with Secretary McNamara?

HACKMAN: I'm talking about the Chiefs meeting with the President.

DECKER: Oh, with the President?

HACKMAN: Yes, as a group by themselves.

DECKER: Well, usually, the President would speak to us and give us his views on certain problems of the day, and he'd also ask us for our views. Each Chief would be given an opportunity to say what he had to say about it. Sometimes there might be a decision main, and other times it would just be a discussion of some problems. But they were, generally, very informal. So far as I know, no records were kept of many of these meetings. In some cases there was a record when, for instance, there'd be C.I.A. and State Department and others represented. I guess McGeorge Bundy was the one who kept the record of the meeting, but in many cases thorn was no record kept at all.

HACKMAN: Do you feel that when he met with the Joint Chiefs by themselves that he had any problem particularly in communicating with them or talking with military people? Some people…

DECKER: No, none at all.

[-36-]

HACKMAN: None?

DECKER: No, I thought he did very, very well with the military. It seemed to me that there was rapport and understanding. He seemed to relax and be able to express himself in terms that we could understand. When the Army commanders would come in for their meetings in Washington—we'd bring them in twice a year—he'd usually invite them to come over to the White House, and he'd greet all of them, possibly give them some comments on what the Army was doing. He was always very cordial and friendly on these occasions and seemed to like Army people.

HACKMAN: I'd wondered if you had any problems in getting him out in the field on occasion. I know he was—as a Navy man, very fond of going to sea; he was less inclined to go with the Army or the Air Force.

DECKER: Well, of course, it's hard to get him out anyway, but he did make this trip to Bragg, of which I have the pictures, and he seemed to enjoy it thoroughly. He was in good humor and enjoyed talking to the officers and men,

particularly with some of the enlisted men. You can see from some of the pictures that he's getting a big kick out of some of the things that went on. I never thought that he was partial to any of the services because of previous service in the Navy. He was always very friendly and interested in the Army. As a matter of fact, the Army did better under him than it had under his predecessors. And I think some of the credit for this should also go to Secretary McNamara. I think he recognized the Army was needed, that we weren't going to go to an all-out nuclear war to settle all our problems. And he was helpful to the Army, too, in getting funds for additional troops, although he did slow us down a bit in reorganizing, as I have said. But I'd say, generally speaking, he was helpful to the Army.

[-37-]

HACKMAN: Do you think that the fact that the Army was, to some extant, on the way up, as compared to the other services, led to some of the problems that the other service chiefs might have had with him that you didn't have?

DECKER: I think this had a bearing. Of course, this is where the military services part ways, in the fight for resources here in the Washington area. Out in the field there's no problem at all; the services cooperate and fight well together. But in Washington where everyone's fighting for part of a limited budget—this is where the services fall apart. And the problems are usually those of resources.

HACKMAN: I'd wondered if you can recall any specific success you might have had in getting support from the other Joint Chiefs? You mentioned the Nike-Zeus where there seemed to be a problem in getting support. Were there others where you were more successful?

DECKER: Well, I thought the Chiefs supported the concept of the R.O.A.D. revision very well, no problem there. They were favorable toward the increase in Special Forces and this kind of thing. I supported General LeMay in his effort to get the money for research and development of a new bomber airplane because I thought this was something we should have. No, I can't recite any other instances.

HACKMAN: What about the question of reorganization of the Reserves and the National Guard which was beginning in this period? The plan was submitted to Congress in the spring of '62, I believe, before you left.

DECKER: Yes, this, of course, has been a controversial issue. I think Secretary McNamara was trying to cut down on the expense of maintaining such a force which, in some cases, wasn't too well qualified to do properly the job that it was designed to do. The Reserves were very much upset by the way he was advocating a change in their status. And I remember when General S.L.A. Marshall [Samuel Lynn Atwood Marshall],

[-38-]

who's a writer in Detroit, gave one of the strongest speeches I've heard in which he deplored McNamara's approach to this. So there was a lot of reaction in the Reserves about his protocols, but these hadn't been fully implemented by the time I left the Department so I don't know what the attitude is there at the present time.

HACKMAN: I'd wondered if there was any problem in working out a position among yourself and McNamara and his people—and Under Secretary Ailes was involved in this in the Reserves plan—in working out a position to present when this legislation was sent up in April of '62? Were you in disagreement with the legislation? Or were you in favor of it, can you recall?

DECKER: Secretary Ailes was the one who testified. I was with him at the time. The principal concern of the Congress at the time was where did this plan originate? Actually, it originated in the Department of Army, with some prodding from the Department of Defense. I remember when Steve Ailes was testifying, they asked him the question, "Where did this plan originate?" And he said, "Well, what difference does it make? If we found it in a bottle in the bottom of the Potomac and if it's a good plan, why not implement it?" I said to Steve, I said, "Steve, I can see the headlines tomorrow, "'Army Finds Reserve Plan in Bottle.'" But we testified in favor of the plan at that time, at least he did.

I don't think that this is really the best way to organize the National Guard and Reserves. It seems to me that if we ever become involved in any kind of an all out nuclear war that the recovery effort in this country is going to be one that demands an awful lot of money, resources, training, everything else. For instance, we're going to need engineers; we're going to need communications people; we're going to need medical people, and all those. It seems to me that this would be, possibly, the best utilization of the National Guard, the elements that are here in the country on the spot, scattered around the country, well disposed to operate in those fields. It would seem to me to be better to have combat troops that are going to have to go out of the country and

fight organized in the Reserves so that they could back up the active Army. This would be my concept of how it would be better to organize the National Guard and the Reserves than the way it's done now.

HACKMAN: Did you present this viewpoint at all at the time? Would anyone have been receptive to it at all?

DECKER: I don't think that anyone would have been receptive to it. I discussed it with Secretary Stahr and Secretary Ailes, but, politically, it's something that would be pretty far out. It would be such a major departure from the present status of the National Guard that it probably wouldn't be acceptable.

HACKMAN: Did the plan that was presented in '62 create a lot of problems with the Reserve Association [Reserve Officers Association of the U.S.] and the National Guard Association [National Guard Association of the U.S.], people like this?

DECKER: Yes.

HACKMAN: How did you field something like this. What kind of problems did it create for you particularly?

DECKER: Well, it created an awful lot of dissatisfaction in the civilian components. Although they went along with it, they were not at all happy with it. They seemed to recognize that they'd been overtaken by events. While there was both open and covert opposition to it, they eventually acquiesced in it.

HACKMAN: Can you remember anything about your viewpoint at the time the Reserve call-up before Berlin was being considered? I had heard that the Navy was opposed to the call-up of Reserves. I'd wondered what the Army position was.

[-40-]

DECKER: Well, we felt then that the situation was such that we should do something to increase the capability of the military. At that time, we still had four divisions that were in a training division status, and so we thought their conversion was necessary. As you know, there was a lot of opposition, particularly in the unit called. They didn't like it. And I had to write some rather strong words to some of our commanders to have them explain to the men why they were called up, what the issues in the Cold War were all about. I visited a number of them personally. I think, generally speaking, after these discussions that most of the men accepted it. Some were still disgruntled, but they were in the minority. I was pleasantly surprised by capability of some of those divisions. One training division stationed in Camp Chaffee, the 100th training division, was a real professional outfit. It was first class. It was designed to take the load off, increase the capability of the training establishment in case of mobilization, and they were doing a perfectly fine job.

HACKMAN: I'd wondered how you felt because there was a lot in the press at the time criticizing the performance of the Reserves.

DECKER: Well, this was a Reserve division, and it was a real good one. I complimented them very highly, both publicly and to their faces. There was always a problem getting the National Guard trained because they at that time and still do have men that are not trained. They don't have the amount of basic training that they should have. But I thought those divisions, too showed promise. They weren't ready, by any means, to be committed to combat, but they were coming along. We felt that

this situation was a good thing to do at the time because of the tense situation that existed over Berlin.

HACKMAN: Can you remember anything about your viewpoint at the time the Reserve call-up before Berlin was being considered? I had heard that the Navy was opposed to the call-up of Reserves. I'd wondered what the Army position was.

[-41-]

DECKER: Yes, I recall that, but I don't recall that anything came out of it.

HACKMAN: I think he was a very, fairly vocal person. I'd wondered if that created any particular problem for you?

DECKER: Well, it didn't create any real problems. He had some ideas he put into the report, but I don't recall that we had any problems with it. I don't recall that we did anything about it either.

HACKMAN: There are a couple of other things. I don't know if you can remember anything specifically about either Panama or Okinawa and working out problems with differences between Defense and the State Department. The Army had responsibility in both these areas. Did you get deeply involved in this? Or was this primarily...

DECKER: No, not too deeply. I know that there was quite a difference of opinion between General Caraway [Paul W. Caraway], who was in command in Okinawa, and the State Department about reversion to Japan. Of course, as long as we are involved to the extent we are in Southeast Asia, it's essential that the Army—well, not the Army, but all the military services have a vested interest in Okinawa. It's something that we should be free to handle in the way that it should be handled. If the Japanese were sovereign in the island, they would create some very serious problems, particularly in connection with storing nuclear weapons. The Army and the other military services were strongly opposed to some of the proposals that came out of the State Department and from the U.S. ambassador in Japan. But these were handled mostly by Under Secretary Ailes. I was in on them, but they didn't cause me too much of a problem.

HACKMAN: Was there ever any consideration given to removing General Caraway over there? Were some people pushing for this in the State Department?

[-42-]

DECKER: If so, it didn't come to my attention. Not to my knowledge.

HACKMAN: Can you remember any push from McNamara or from—I think

Yarmolinsky [Adam Yarmolinsky] was working on this for him at the time—on the area of civil rights in the Army, base commanders and off-base housing and things like this that they'd ask you to do, that you got involved in?

DECKER: Yes. I became slightly involved in it. I think it was after I retired, though, because I got a request from Eddie Hébert [F. Edward Hébert], on the Armed Services Committee of the House, for my views on some of the instructions that have come out of the Department of Defense.

HACKMAN: Yes, that was in '63 in a big report.

DECKER: And I wrote him a letter and gave him my views and told him briefly what I thought of the interference in prerogative command, the way they were restricting the troop base commanders in what they could do. So far as I know, nothing further than that. I was not involved any further than that.

HACKMAN: I had wondered if there was any conversations with Secretary McNamara during this period when you were there on this subject?

DECKER: Not that I recall.

HACKMAN: I think the big push did come, if there was a push, it did come later. You'd talked about Secretary McNamara's interest in promotions. Did the White House ever show any interest in getting involved in this at all, or considering Army policies on this?

DECKER: I don't think so. Of course, appointments of general officers had to go to the White House, but so far as I know, there was never any change made at the White House, although there were some changes made in the Department of Defense.

HACKMAN: What about assignments to particular command spots? Was McNamara as interested in this as he was in the…

DECKER: Yes, he was. He was interested in all kinds of promotions and assignments.

HACKMAN: Can you remember any of the specific ones that were particularly important to him or that became particularly important to him or that became controversial? I had heard, for instance, that when—I don't know if this was in the period you were there or just after you left—when General Harkins [Paul D. Harkins] was assigned to Vietnam that there was some debate on this assignment.

DECKER: I was the one that selected General Harkins to go to Vietnam, and before I did so, I consulted with people whom he had recently served. I discussed it with General Taylor with whom he had worked very closely. And all the reactions I got were favorable. As I recall it, he and I were traveling together, and at that time I told him that he just had to make a go of it in South Vietnam, I put my confidence in him, I knew he could do it. He went to see the President. I think that we were enroute to see the President when I was talking to him in this way. So the President talked to him and agreed to his selection. I don't know that anyone questioned his assignment. If they did, it didn't come to my attention. All the reactions I got were favorable.

HACKMAN: Can you remember any assignments that Secretary McNamara was particularly interested in changing the Army recommendation on?

DECKER: Well, one case comes to mind. A general was being considered for an important assignment. Secretary McNamara called him back from an overseas assignment to Washington so he could talk to him. He talked to him for fifteen minutes, I think, and on that limited knowledge he came to a conclusion. Now this seems to me to be a rather farfetched way of doing things. The judgment of people who have known an officer for thirty years or so, is discounted on the basis of a fifteen minute interview. That's illustrative of how he got into promotions and assignments.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

George H. Decker Oral History Transcript
Name List