

Lyman L. Lemnitzer Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 11/03/1966
Administrative Information

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Date of Interview: November 3, 1966
Place of Interview: Paris, France
Length: 8 pages

Biographical Note

Lyman L. Lemnitzer (1899-1988) was the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, a general in the United States Army, and a Supreme Allied Commander in Europe from 1963-1969. This interview focuses on John F. Kennedy's policies regarding the United States military and international relations, among other topics.

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Suggested Citation

Lyman L. Lemnitzer, recorded interview by Joseph E. O'Connor, November 3, 1966, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

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Lyman L. Lemnitzer– JFK #1

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Oral History Interview

with

LYMAN L. LEMNITZER

November 3, 1966
Paris, France

By Joseph E. O'Connor

For the John F. Kennedy Library

LEMNITZER: At the time of the election of President Kennedy, I was Chairman of the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff. I had assumed office, taken over the office, from General [Nathan] Twining on the first of October, 1960. In passing command from one president to the other, insofar as the Joint Chiefs of Staff are concerned, and particularly the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the problem of nuclear responsibilities loomed as one of the most impressive and complex of all problems. Several weeks before the inauguration I talked with President [Dwight D.] Eisenhower with regard to having him approach President-elect Kennedy in order to outline to him some of the responsibilities carried by the Commander in Chief, that is the President of the United States, with regard to our nuclear plans. In this regard we had, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had just approved a Single Integrated Operations Plan (SIOP) for the conduct of the United States nuclear operations. This particular plan was the first of its kind and was subsequently approved by Secretary [Thomas S., Jr.] Gates at our meeting at the Strategic Air Command headquarters in Omaha. It was also approved by President Eisenhower.

As I requested, President Eisenhower called President Kennedy to the White House to discuss this, among many other aspects of the handover of responsibilities from one president to the other. Upon being informed of the discussions between the President-elect and President Eisenhower I raised several additional points and urged that the President talk to President-elect Kennedy on these also, which he subsequently did. He then suggested that I make an appointment with President Kennedy in order to get down to the details of the relationship between the Commander in Chief, that is the President, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff on this vital issue. I made this appointment with President Kennedy, I believe, on January eighteenth or nineteenth at a residence that he was occupying at that time in Georgetown in the District of Columbia.

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During this conference I outlined in the most precise form, but very much in summary form because of the limited time available, the detailed composition of our single intergrated operational plan, the chain of command, and how communications were always maintained between the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Secretary of Defense, and the President. He listened intently as I revealed the details of this plan and indicated a great appreciation for the information. Shortly after the inauguration the President on a number of occasions--after National Security Council meetings and in some cases by special visits to the White House--probed into the details of the United States nuclear activities and responsibilities and capabilities. He was rather deeply worried about the tremendous responsibilities carried by the President in the nuclear field. He was particularly concerned with regard to the likelihood of the President's being required to come up with a decision to launch our retaliatory effort almost without any warning whatsoever. While this was a considerable possibility at that time, we in the Joint Chiefs of Staff did not consider it likely with the available intelligence that we had, that this would come quite as much of a complete surprise requirement for a decision as the President had in mind. During his association with military and nuclear problems subsequently, I feel that he became more and more appreciative of the fact that this requirement for a snap decision was not as likely as he first had the impression it would be. This concern was later dissipated to some extent by the achievement of new capability in the nuclear field.

The first and a very dramatic step in this direction was the ability to place a part of the entire Strategic Command--50 percent of the Strategic Air Command's aircraft capability--on a fifteen-minute alert. By that it was assured that if our ballistic missile early warning indicated that missiles were on their way to the United States, these aircraft, at least half of our capability would be in the air and off their bases which precluded the complete destruction of our retaliatory capability.

In the months that followed we began to get a ballistic missile capability which also further alleviated the situation. Now the alleviation of the situation can be spelled out in more precise terms by his concern about having to launch, the possibility of having to launch the United States retaliatory effort on electronic warning.

Electronic warning, we all appreciated, wasn't quite as positive as some of the advocates of electronic warning were inclined to give it, or the confidence that they had in it. We did not have the confidence in electronic warning that the designers of the equipment had in their own equipment, and subsequent events had indicated that this lack of confidence was well founded. So the transition from the likelihood or the necessity of making a decision solely on electronic warning to preserve our nuclear capability gradually disappeared first with the 50 percent of the SAC's ability to go on, being on airborne alert, and our hardened missile capability. This was a great relief to the President and in my conversations with him you could see a sort of a relaxation as a result of this tremendous transition from the conditions that existed when he assumed the Presidency.

O'CONNOR: That's a very interesting topic right there. I had no idea that was so.

LEMNITZER: Well, now let me go to Berlin.

O'CONNOR: All right, fine. You can go to Berlin.

LEMNITZER: No, I want to go to Vienna first.

O'CONNOR: All right, let's go to Vienna.

LEMNITZER: The next incident that I recall very vividly was events leading up to President Kennedy's visit to Europe in 1961 at which time he was scheduled to have a meeting with Mr. [Nikita S.] Khrushchev in Vienna. Just prior to the time the President was scheduled to depart from Washington for Europe, the Joint Chiefs of Staff were attending SHAPEX, which is an exercise conducted by the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers of Europe (SHAPE) each year. In 1961 the exercise took place in mid May. As one would expect, the Joint Chiefs of Staff provided a great amount of briefing material for the President in preparation for this meeting with, the proposed meeting with Mr. Khrushchev. During SHAPEX, or during the discussions among ourselves at SHAPEX, I recommended that we give President Kennedy a memorandum to spell out in as precise detail as we could information to sort of fortify him in the rather strong propaganda attack which we had thought Mr. Khrushchev would launch against the President. Accordingly such a memorandum was proposed. Upon our return to Washington in the latter part of May, after going through many drafts, the Chiefs approved a memorandum in final form which I signed on the twenty-seventh of May, 1961. This memorandum reads as follows. Firstly, it is top secret and as of this date, manely 3 November 1966, it has, to my knowledge, not been declassified. The memorandum reads as follows:

27 May 1961

Memorandum for the President

Subject: Military Posture of the United States

(Paragraph 1) In your conversations with Premier Khrushchev at Vienna on 3-4 June, 1961 be assured that you may speak from a position of decisive military superiority in any matter affecting the vital security interests of the United States and our allies.

(Paragraph 2) Anticipating your meeting, the Joint Chiefs of Staff have reviewed the most current estimates of the forces opposing us and have considered U.S. capabilities and plans to combat these forces.

(Paragraph 3) From this review it is the considered judgment of the Joint Chiefs of Staff that the military forces under your command are ready and capable of carrying out their assigned missions. Their plans are realistic and current. They can achieve decisive military vistory in any all-out test of strength with the Sino-Soviet bloc to the extent that the United States will retain the dominant power position in the world. Thus in your discussions be assured you may represent the national interest with confidence and without fear or reservation.

(Paragraph 4) The military forces of the United States reaffirm their dedication to your command and wish you Godspeed in your mission.

For the Joint Chiefs of Staff,
(signed) L.L.Lemnitzer
Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff

To my knowledge I don't know whether that's ever been . . . [Interruption]

O'CONNOR: In presenting him with this, did this indicate a feeling on your part or a feeling on the part of any other member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff that, well, perhaps you weren't entirely confident of his ability to stand up to Premier Khrushchev?

LEMNITZER: Oh, not at all. Not at all. I presume we would have done this for any president who was moving into this arena. However, there was a great amount of discussion in the press about the missile gap and a great many other things that we felt may have degraded in the President's mind the capability of the United States vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. There were many indications in the press--erroneous in our opinion--that downgraded United States military capability, particularly our nuclear capability, as a result of the aftermath, or the events leading up to the election, about the missile gap and things of this character. And we felt that there was no doubt in our mind that the President would handle himself with great ability and determination and firmness with Mr. Khrushchev, but we felt that as the senior military representatives of the United States Armed Forces that our Commander in Chief was going into what we regarded as pretty much a crucial meeting with Premier Khrushchev, that we felt that it was not only our duty but that we wanted to provide him with this assurance before he went into that meeting.

O'CONNOR: Well, the reason I asked is because, well, often groups are broken down according to their attitude toward the Soviet Union into softheads and hardheads and so forth, and President Kennedy has, by some military figures been considered a rather soft person toward this. I thought perhaps this was a very strong effort on the part of the Joint Chiefs to perhaps stiffen his outlook.

LEMNITZER: No. As a result of your question I recall another important element of this. We felt that in the very short time since his inauguration that he had not had the opportunity to comprehend this capability to the extent that President Eisenhower would have been in a position to do after being in office eight years and having seen the development over the years of all of this. President Kennedy was faced with many policy reviews and, as a matter of fact, except for my previous comments about preparing him for handling his nuclear and military responsibilities, we did not have an opportunity that occurred many times later because of the reviews of policy that a new president always had to make, the review and the reconstitution of the budget and all the new things that a new president has to do upon taking office. We felt that he was just not in a position, and no human being could have been in a position, to really fully comprehend the military power of the United States to the degree that we wanted the President to comprehend it and use it at this important conference.

O'CONNOR: Okay, we can go on to the next subject.

LEMNITZER: The next item that occurs to me that would be of interest are the events leading up to the Berlin crisis of 1961, the time that the Soviets and the East Germans decided to build the Berlin Wall. President Kennedy was always greatly concerned about Berlin and commented frequently upon what was obvious to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, namely the disadvantage that the Tripartite Powers--namely the United States, the United Kingdom, and France--the disadvantageous position which they occupied with respect to Berlin, having their forces a hundred and ten miles deep behind the iron curtain, subject to the supervision of Soviet and East German authorities with regard to our access to Berlin. He fully comprehended the responsibilities or the commitments which we had to the people of Berlin but I always felt that he was most uneasy as to how we would carry out these commitments in the face of what Mr. Khrushchev had previously told him that he would step on his corns whenever he believed--that is, President Kennedy's corns or toes--whenever he wanted to. I think Mr. Khrushchev made these comments because of his confidence that he did have the Tripartite Powers at a distinct disadvantage with regard to their military position in Berlin. When the period of early August, 1961, arrived and without any warning--I recall no specific warning as to just what the intentions of the Soviets and East Germans were with respect to Berlin--without a great deal of warning I think it was on the thirteenth of August, 1961, they began the construction of the Berlin Wall. There were many ramifications at the presidential level with regard to this incident. It created a crisis of the highest magnitude as to what they were up to, what to do about it, and so forth. There were a myriad of questions being raised in the press, in the Congress, analyzing our military position as to what might be done about it. We found that there were not many things that we could do without creating an even greater crisis and the possibility of starting hostilities. The President decided that it would be a good thing for Secretary of Defense [Robert S.] McNamara and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, myself, to go to Europe and review the situation from the viewpoint of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), that is General [Lauris] Norstad, stopping in London upon our way back to the United States to review with them (the British) the developments and consider possible actions which might be taken. Mr. McNamara and I went to SHAPE where we spent the greater part of one day with General Norstad who was then the Supreme Allied Commander, Europe. We reviewed the capabilities of the forces in central Europe with General Norstad and were particularly concerned with respect to the weakness of those forces and particularly their lack of logistic support, that is, particularly the lack of logistic support on the part of our Allies. The U.S. forces in Europe were fully manned, well trained, equipped with the most modern weapons and did, in fact, have a strong logistic backup. We found, to our distress, that very little had been done by some of our Allies to provide their forces with the necessary modernized equipment and particularly the logistic backup which would give them a sustained combat capability. It was also our conclusion--I say our conclusion, that is, Secretary McNamara and myself --that there had to be some dramatic gesture made to impress upon the Soviets and the East Germans that we regarded this as a very serious incident and that we were going to take certain pre-

cautionary measures to meet this contingency, a matter which I will discuss in a moment. On our way back to Washington we stopped briefly in London where we had a meeting with the Minister of Defense, Mr. [Harold A.] Watkinson, at a working dinner that evening at Lancaster House. Upon our return to Washington and making yet another review of the situation, we recommended that certain measures be taken insofar as the United States forces were concerned. In the meantime, while we were in Europe, we had urged on General Norstad to do whatever he could to impress the nations having forces in the central part of Europe of the great need to improve the status and combat capability and logistic support of their own forces, which General Norstad immediately began doing.

O'CONNOR: Were you doing, in effect, the same thing in your moving around? Were you trying to get them to . . .

LEMNITZER: No, with the exception of the U.K. we were concentrating our efforts with regard to the U.S. forces. It was decided to move two divisions to Europe with the requisite combat and service support. As I recall there were several armored cavalry regiments which were in the United States, there were a good many artillery and other type of support units, combat-support units, which were available and could be moved. This proposal was promptly approved by President Kennedy and the movement started and in my opinion had a profound impact upon the Soviets and East Germans as well as our Allies. This proved to our Allies that we were determined to bolster our strength in central Europe if there were developments out of the Berlin Wall that could not be handled by the forces there. I think that this was a sound decision and, as a matter of fact, we now in Europe are attaching some of the benefits yet of that decision because the equipment of the two divisions was stockpiled here in Europe and is still available here and adds greatly to the speed with which we can reinforce our forces here in Europe at the present time in that we don't have to move a great deal of heavy equipment and we now have the capability of moving people rapidly. We can reinforce the several divisions here very quickly.

O'CONNOR: This doesn't necessarily have to be the last one. If you can find out any of these others I'd be glad to talk about them.

LEMNITZER: One item of great significance and importance to me since I was partially, in a small way, responsible for the establishment of the National War College in 1946, that occurred during the time of the Berlin crisis of 1961. As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff I began to get repeated rumors through governmental channels and from various officials that I was about to receive a directive from the President to change the name of the National War College. This concerned me very deeply because I had been involved in the establishment of the National War College. I had participated in a great many discussions with regard to the title to be given to this new venture in military education, military and civilian education. As the rumors kept coming to me from White House officials, Defense Department,

State Department, I grew more and more concerned about it but the memorandum or the directive, oral or written, never reached me. At a meeting at the White House one afternoon, not in the President's office but in the Circular Room on the second floor, and we were going over the arrangements for improving U.S. military strength in Europe in connection with the development of the construction of the Berlin Wall. At the conclusion of that meeting in which we were talking over some very serious things that involved the military particularly, I decided to ask the President point blank about this rumor that was reaching me. So I went up to him with no one else in the vicinity and I said, "Mr. President, I understand that you are considering issuing an instruction to me as Chairman and to the Joint Chiefs of Staff as a group along the line that you would like to have the name of the National War College changed. The rumors that reached me indicate that you are considering National Defense College, the College of International Affairs, and so forth, and so forth. Before you do this, I would like to have the opportunity to give you the background of why the name National War College was adopted." And to make it as brief as possible I cited Judge [Robert P.] Patterson, who was at the time of the establishment of the War College, the Secretary of War, (this was before the time that the Defense Department was established in 1947) summed it up in my opinion best by stating that--and one must recall that this was very shortly, one year, after World War II. Judge Patterson stated it very succinctly, in my opinion, which was agreed to by all the other officials that were involved, including the Chief of Staff of the Army, the Secretary of State and others, that--and I'm quoting Judge Patterson now--"While the United States abhors war and always will abhor war, we want the world to know that we are always prepared to go to war to defend our freedoms, our liberties, our way of life against all comers and to this end we believe that the name of the National War College is appropriate to that end." That's as far as I intended to go and that's as far as I got.

The President looked at me and said, "General, there has been discussion along this line but the information that has reached you is a little wrong, a little in error. As I understand from your comments you have been told that I would like to have the name of the National War College changed to include consideration of some of those that you mentioned. The situation is this, and it is particularly pertinent after this meeting we've had here this afternoon dealing with improving our military readiness in connection with the developments pertaining to the Berlin Wall. So instead of it being that the President would like to have the name of the War College changed and so forth, the rumor would have been far more accurate if it stated thus. You have heard what the President is supposed to have wished with respect to the change of the name of the War College. Is that clear?" I said it was very clear to me. He said, "All right, let's drop the subject." Period.

O'CONNOR: Did you know where these rumors came from?

LEMNITZER: What's that?

O'CONNOR: Did you know where the rumors came from, where the pressure to . . .

LEMNITZER: Oh, it came from a good many of the academic people that had just come into government . . .

O'CONNOR: I wondered if you had anyone specifically in mind.

LEMNITZER: Well, I had quite a number specifically in mind but they were rumors and I wouldn't. . . . It was from many, many members of the New Frontier that had come into government and I might add to this that there were many in the previous administration who were inclined in this direction but President Eisenhower would have no part of it at all. The President's reaction on this occasion was a great relief to me and it settled it insofar as. . . . It settled the matter insofar as the President was concerned because he never raised it again and the rumors stopped abruptly.

O'CONNOR: I can imagine that.