

**Theodore C. Sorensen Oral History Interview – JFK #1, 3/26/1964**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Theodore C. Sorensen  
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**Biographical Note**

Sorensen was staff assistant, speech writer to Senator John F. Kennedy (1953-1961) and Special Counsel to the President (1961-1964). This interview focuses on the space race, civil defense, and the missile gap, among other issues.

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Theodore Sorensen

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JFK #1

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First Oral History Interview

with

THEODORE C. SORENSEN

March 26, 1964

By Carl Kaysen

For the John F. Kennedy Library

KAYSEN: Ted, I want to begin by asking you about something on which the President [John F. Kennedy] expressed himself very strongly in the campaign and early in his Administration, and that is space. What significance, in your mind, did the President attach to the space race in terms of, one, competition with the Soviet Union and, two, the task which the United States ought to do whether or not the element of competition with the Soviet Union was important in it?

SORENSEN: It seems to me that he thought of space primarily in symbolic terms. By that I mean he had comparatively little interest in the substantive gains to be made from this kind of scientific inquiry. He did not care as much about new breakthroughs in space medicine or planetary exploration as he did new breakthroughs in rocket thrust or humans in orbit. Our lagging space effort was symbolic, he thought, of everything of which he complained in the Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] Administration: the lack of effort, the lack of initiative, the lack of imagination, vitality, and vision; and the more the Russians gained in space during the last few years in the fifties, the more he thought it showed up the Eisenhower Administration's lag in this area damaged the prestige of the United States abroad.

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KAYSEN: So that your emphasis was on general competitiveness but no specific competitiveness with the Soviet Union in a military sense. The President never thought that the question of who was first in space was a big

security issue in any direct sense?

SORENSEN: That's correct.

KAYSEN: Now the first big speech and the first big action on space was taken in a special message on extraordinary needs to the Congress in May. What accounted for this delay? What was the President doing in the period between his inauguration and May? He didn't really say much about space in the State of the Union message. He mentioned the competition with the Soviet Union in his State of the Union message, but he didn't really say much or present any programs. What was going on in this period between the inauguration and the inclusion of space in a message which was devoted to extraordinary, urgent was the word, urgent national need?

SORENSEN: There was actually a considerable step-up in our space effort in the first space supplementary budget which he sent to the Congress. You can check the actual records, but my recollection is that it emphasized more funds for the Saturn booster. Then came the first Soviet to orbit the earth – Gagarin [Yuri Gagarin], I believe that was – and the President felt, justifiably so, that the Soviets had scored a tremendous propaganda victory, that it affected not only our prestige around the world, but affected our security as well in the sense that it demonstrated a Soviet rocket thrust which convinced many people that the Soviet Union was ahead of the United States militarily. First we had a very brief inquiry – largely because the President was being interviewed by Hugh Downs of *Time* magazine and wanted to be prepared to say where we stood, what we were going to do, what we were unable to do, how much and so on – in which he asked me and Wiesner [Jerome B. Wiesner] and others to look into our effort in some detail.

I do not remember the exact time sequence, but I believe it was shortly after that; that he asked the Vice President [Lyndon B. Johnson], as the chairman of the Space Council, to examine and to come up with the answers to four or five questions of a similar nature: What were we doing that was not enough? What could we be doing more?

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Where should we be trying to compete and get ahead? What should we have to do to get ahead? And so on. That inquiry led to a joint study by the Space Administration and the Department of Defense. Inasmuch as that study was going on simultaneously with the studies and reviews we were making of the defense budget, military assistance, and civil defense, and inasmuch as space, like these other items, obviously did have some bearing upon our status in the world, it was decided to combine the results of all those studies with the President's recommendations in the special message to Congress.

KAYSEN: Was the moon goal chosen as the goal for the space program because it was spectacular, because it was the first well-defined thing which the experts thought we could sensibly say we ought to pick as a goal we could be first in, because it was far enough away so that we could have a good chance of being first? What reason did we have for defining this as the goal of the space program and making it the

center of the space element of the message?

SORENSEN: The scientists listed for us what they considered to be the next series of steps to be taken in the exploration of space which any major country would take, either the Soviet Union or the United States. They included manned orbit, two men in orbit, laboratory in orbit, a shot around the moon, a landing of instruments on the moon, etc. In that list, then, came the sending of a man, or team of men, to the moon and bringing them back safely. After that was exploration of the planets and so forth.

Looking at that list, the scientists were convinced – on the basis of what they assumed to be the Russian lead at that time – that with respect to all of the items on the list between where we were then, in early 1961, and the landing of a man on the moon, sometime in the late 1960s or early 1970s, there was no possibility of our catching up with the Russians. There was a possibility, if we put enough effort into it, of being the first to send a team to the moon and bringing it back. And it was decided to focus our space effort on that objective.

KAYSEN: Now, as early as the inaugural message, the President talked about making space an area of cooperation instead of conflict. He repeated this notion

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in his speech to the U.N. September '61, although with a rather narrow set of specifics on weather and communications satellites and things like that. At various times in the course of '61 and '62, I think the record suggests that there was a division of emphasis between the competitive element with the Soviet Union and the notion of offering to cooperate in space. In the President's 1963 speech to the U.N., he made a specific suggestion that we cooperate in going to the moon. Do you think this represented a change in emphasis, do you think it represented a change in assessment of our relations with the Soviets, or do you think it represented a change in the assessment of the feasibility and desirability of trying to meet the goal set of getting to the moon in 1970 and being the first on the moon?

SORENSEN: I don't believe it represented the latter. It may have had an element of the first two in it. I think the President had three objectives in space. One was to assure its demilitarization. The second was to prevent the field from being occupied by the Russians to the exclusion of the United States. And the third was to make certain that American scientific prestige and American scientific effort were at the top. Those three goals all would have been assured in a space effort which culminated in our beating the Russians to the moon. All three of them would have been endangered had the Russians continued to outpace us in their space effort and beat us to the moon. But I believe all three of those goals would also have been assured by a joint Soviet-American venture to the moon.

The difficulty was that in 1961, although the President favored joint effort, we had comparatively few chips to offer. Obviously the Russians were well ahead of us at that time in space exploration, at least in terms of the bigger, more dramatic efforts of which the moon shot would be the culmination. But by 1963, our effort had accelerated considerably. There

was a very real chance that we were even with the Soviets in this effort. In addition, our relations, with the Soviets, following the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Test Ban Treaty, were much improved – so that the President felt that, without diminishing our own space effort, and without harming any of those three goals, we now were in position to ask the Soviets to join with us and make it more efficient and economical for both countries.

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KAYSEN: In this last element, was the President persuaded, as some people argued, that the Soviets weren't really in the race; that, for example, we were developing the Saturn, our intelligence suggested to us that the Soviets had no development of comparable thrust and character; and that, in a sense, we were racing with ourselves, and we'd won, because once we'd made the commitment to develop the Saturn and it looked as if this was feasible, although maybe the schedule wasn't clear, that we could do it and the Soviets really didn't have anything that could match that; and that, therefore, the psychological moment had come to sort of make it clear to them that we knew it?

SORENSEN: I don't know if that was in his mind. I did not know that.

KAYSEN: This is a speculative question, but do you think that once an offer of cooperation that was more than trivial, that went beyond the kind of things we had agreed, about exchange of weather information or other rather minor and technical points about recovery of parts and all that kind of thing, that once any offer of cooperation of that sort was made and accepted and some cooperation actually started to take place, do you think space would have become politically uninteresting?

SORENSEN: Politically, in domestic politics?

KAYSEN: Yes.

SORENSEN: It probably would have been less interesting, that's right.

KAYSEN: I'm assuming, and I take it you're assuming, that in the initial exchanges there'd be static and the right wing of the Republicans would shout and so on, but I'm assuming we'd get past all that and some actually useful cooperation would result?

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SORENSEN: I think it would be less interesting. Even though the President would stress from time to time that the idea of a race or competition was not our sole motivation, there was no doubt that that's what made it more interesting to the Congress and to the general public.

KAYSEN: Was there any indication that you are aware of that in '63, that in the

process of assembling the budget for '63, at the time of the first review, midyear review – that is, I'm talking about the '65 budget, of course, which took place in '63 – just the size of this program and its rate of growth were beginning to worry the President, and that he was more eager to stress the cooperative issue because he was dubious about either the wisdom or the possibility of maintaining the kind of rate of increase in this program that NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration] talked about?

SORENSEN: I think he was understandably reluctant to continue that rate of increase. He wished to find ways to spend less money on the program and to cut out the fat which he was convinced was in the budget. How much that motivated his offer to the Russians, though, I don't know.

KAYSEN: What would you assign to it? You'd say that the broader political interest in trying to find positive things we could do together was much more important than any budgetary concern about the space program or any feeling that this was not the most important effort that ought to be maintained.

SORENSEN: Right.

KAYSEN: Let me ask a couple more, rather narrower questions. What led the President to pick Jim Webb [James E. Webb] as administrator of NASA? What kind of a man was the President looking for, and two years later did he think he'd gotten the kind of man he was looking for in this rather difficult area?

SORENSEN: My recollection here is not very good, and I'm sure my participation in that decision was remote. I believe that Webb was highly recommended, not only

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by the Vice President and I would assume, by Senator Kerr [Robert S. Kerr] and others who knew him well, but also by Dave Bell [David E. Bell] and Elmer Staats who had known him when he'd been in the government previously. I also have a dim recollection that the President had tried to get others to take the job although I do not now remember any names, whom he tried or why they turned it down.

The President never expressed any specific dissatisfaction with Webb as space administrator. I think Webb was not what we would call a Kennedy type individual. He was inclined to talk at great length, and the President preferred those who were more concise in their remarks. He was inclined to be rather vague, somewhat disorganized in his approach to a problem, and the President preferred those who were more precise. From time to time, the President would check with him on progress he was making – whether the President's own commitments would be upheld. The President was willing to see a large chunk of the space program developed within the Department of Defense, undoubtedly because he had more confidence in McNamara's [Robert S. McNamara] managerial ability than he did in Webb's.

But even taking all of these qualifications, I don't know that the President ever regretted his appointment of Webb, or wished that he had named someone else.

KAYSEN: Turning from space to another relatively finite subject – civil defense. It's again striking that this was one of the first things to which the President did pay some attention. It was included in his urgent national needs message of May 25th. In that message, he recommended a new fallout shelter program as well as some reorganization of the administrative machinery of the program. Why, given the history of lack of action in this area in Congress over a long period of time with which the President was certainly familiar, what can you say about his thinking in singling this out as an important part of his defense program, including it in his first message?

SORENSEN: I think that the President felt at that time, more strongly than he did in subsequent months and years, that a general civil defense program would strengthen his bargaining power at the international conference table, or as a deterrent on the international battlefield. He thought he

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could act more freely and flexibly if the civilian population of the country could be protected from the attack another country might launch as a part of our involvement in international affairs. In addition, he may have felt that there was some possible political dangers. Everyone thought at that time Governor Rockefeller [Nelson A. Rockefeller] was likely to be his opponent in 1964. Rockefeller was a constant advocate of a large shelter program, and the President felt that it was inconsistent his own posture to be advocating less than the Republicans in an area which appeared to represent an example of American lag. Finally, I think he felt as a matter of conscience and moral responsibility that, in the even of a nuclear exchange of any kind, major or minor, rational or irrational, it would be a terrible thing to have any number of civilians killed who might have been saved had the President made an effort to save them through his civil defense shelter program.

KAYSEN: Now, the May 25th message, which outlined the new program, didn't get any great response, either in Congress or in the public. In the July speech, in which the President presented his program to deal with the Berlin crisis, he included civil defense again, urged its necessity. This led to a quasi-panic reaction in certain parts of the country. What was the President's own response to this reaction? Did it affect his thinking on civil defense? How did he interpret this?

SORENSEN: His own interest in a reasonable civil defense shelter program continued on a rather steady basis. But he was concerned about the reaction, more in political terms, I think, than anything else, because it did become a political issue. The excitement and interest got out of hand. People were talking about barring their neighbors from their shelter, do-it-yourself shelter kits were being sold, and all kinds of articles were written speculating about how many or how few lives would be saved. The President felt that there was too much misinformation – too much fear being inspired by

some, and too much confidence (in shelters) being inspired by others. He felt that it was partly his fault for having included a general civil defense shelter plea in a very somber speech about how we would have to meet the Berlin pressure from the Soviet Union. So that his effort thereafter was a dual one. It was to push for a reasonable shelter program, and it was also to try to bring public opinion on this issue back into perspective.

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KAYSEN: Now, the program which the President had first formulated in May was, with some working out of detail and some minor variation, really offered to Congress several times throughout the Administration. The Congress never accepted it. And still hasn't. To what extent did the President decide, if he did, that this was a lost cause and he just had to leave it alone? To what extent did he change his assessment of the importance of this proposition as time went on?

SORENSEN: I don't know how much he changes his assessment, and I'm influenced by the fact that my own assessment was perhaps never as strong as his. But I do believe he increasingly felt that it was not big on his list of priorities. He felt that the civil defense shelter program which he recommended in 1962 could be included in the Defense Department message, instead of being included in a special presidential message. His inability to obtain action 1962 was not regarded by the President as a grave loss. But he did resubmit the program in 1963, and I believe he was still interested in it.

KAYSEN: I think one of the most striking pair of accomplishments, strikingly contrasted pair of accomplishments, of President Kennedy's Administration was the large buildup in our military strength, especially our strategic striking strength, and the substantial progress in disarmament. Looking at it very broadly, starting with the question of how the President thought and felt about the missile gap, which was featured prominently in his campaign, would you say that there was an evolution in his thinking, a change in his viewpoint as well as a change in his understanding of the facts, which I think was general, or would you say there was always a double emphasis, which came out depending in response to the situation? He started out, so to speak, holding defense in one hand and disarmament in the other, or do you think he really had a shift, an evolution in thought, in the relative roles he placed on defense and disarmament in looking at our relations with the Soviets?

SORENSEN: I would say that prior to 1960, and '61, the President's chief interest was in defense, while he had less interest, comparatively little, in disarmament. That gap narrowed somewhat in 1961 because of his interest in achieving a nuclear test ban treaty before the Soviets

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resumed nuclear testing and his interest in progress at the Geneva disarmament talks and the

United Nations generally. But that interest in part reflected what he thought was a necessary posture for the United States before the rest of the world, and not a necessary or realistic position in the sense that the defense buildup was. By November 1963, however, I would say there had been an evolution. Defense was not replaced by disarmament in his thinking, but was accompanied by disarmament and may even have been surpassed in the sense that he was stressing peace and conciliation more than military buildup and a general militant outlook.

KAYSEN: Well, now within this broad framework I'd like to pursue some of the details on that point. The missile gap was one of the three or four most prominent themes in the President's campaign. What background of both information and attitude would you say was most relevant in picking this point as something to campaign on?

SORENSEN: Once again it was partly a matter of symbols. The missile gap, or to be more precise, what he felt to be a lag in our defense effort, symbolized to the President, and he felt to the American people, the lack of vitality and vision in the Republican Administration. The President's chief interest had always been in foreign affairs. He read the speeches and books of General Taylor [Maxwell D. Taylor] and General Gavin [James M. Gavin] and the testimony of those who were concerned about our falling behind the Soviet Union in military strength over a period of time and what that would do to the security and strategy of the United States. So that he was genuinely concerned about the matter not simply as a political issue but as a very real threat affecting the future of the country. He found that it was also one that he could use to political advantage because it tied in with his whole theme that this country was not doing all that it was capable of doing.

KAYSEN: On the concrete information on which the President, when he was a candidate, shaped his argument, was he relying mainly on the record of the Senate committees that Johnson and Symington [Stuart W. Symington] had built up...

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[BEGIN SIDE II, TAPE I]

KAYSEN: The question was: What were the candidate's sources on the missile gap, were they entirely the records of the Senate committee, did they also involve privileged briefings from the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency]?

SORENSEN: They did not include any privileged briefings from the CIA. They included printed matter in Senate hearings and Senate debates, and it's possible that some of that came from privileged briefings. The charge was made that Senator Symington was using his position with the Armed Services Committee to obtain such information. There was a good deal of public testimony by the Secretary of Defense,

Joint Chiefs of Staff, and even statements in the message of President Eisenhower that indicated that there was a missile gap. In addition, President Kennedy had, as a candidate, an academic “brain trust,” so to speak, and some of the Harvard and M.I.T. [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] experts in that brain trust were also advising him on military needs.

KAYSEN: How soon after the President came into office did he ask the Defense Department and CIA to review the relative strength of the United States and Soviet Union in strategic striking force?

SORENSEN: He asked the Defense Department to review it before he came into office. In the transition, after the election, the newly appointed Budget Director and I went over with him a list many pages long which included in it all of the items which he might want to take up with the Congress or act on administratively that year – items culled from the platform of the Democratic party, speeches of candidate Kennedy, and the un-enacted legislation of the previous Congress, other issues. On the basis of that review with the President-elect, letters were sent to the various nominees in the Cabinet, which outlined those areas in their jurisdiction which raised questions which the President wanted answered as a basis for his messages to the Congress and other actions. Among those was a long list of questions addressed to Mr. McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] on our relative military strength at various levels and what steps should be taken.

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KAYSEN: The President did not discuss these questions at that time with Mr. Dulles, Mr. Allen Dulles?

SORENSEN: I do not know that.

KAYSEN: When to your knowledge was the earliest time that the President recognized that the missile gap did not exist, to put it very crudely?

SORENSEN: Well, you put it too crudely. I’m not willing to state it quite that way. I think that the President was right to be concerned about our comparative military posture over the long haul. He therefore ordered an immediate buildup in our strategic power, particularly Polaris and Minuteman missiles, transferred a larger part of our air striking power onto an alert basis, and took other moves. What was discovered through better intelligence was that as of that time we certainly not behind the Soviet Union; we were, in fact, ahead of them and should be able to stay ahead of them. But I don’t believe that the President ever regretted ordering the increase in striking power.

KAYSEN: No, perhaps my question carried that implication. Really I wanted to get at just the point that certainly the public discussion in the year preceding the President’s election and the campaign discussion suggested that the true state of affairs was that at that moment we were behind the Soviet Union. Maybe a very careful analysis of what people said might have led to that conclusion, but that was certainly

the popular image. Now the point I was trying to develop was, when it became clear that this was not the case, that currently, as you just said, we were ahead, and if we acted properly, we could stay ahead, what was the President's reaction to that recognition?

SORESEN: As I recall it, even before the clear-cut intelligence data was available, the President had a meeting fairly early in the year in connection with the defense budget, which included a review of the intelligence estimates of Soviet missile strength. The President learned then, and I do not believe he had known this before though I cannot be certain, that there was not an intelligence estimate,

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there were several intelligence estimates, a high, a medium, and a low – and that within the intelligence community the estimates varied, at least partly, according to the particular branch of the service or point of view which the intelligence officer presented. And I think that impressed him, or perhaps I should say disturbed him, as much as the figures contained in those estimates.

KAYSEN: But I'm trying to get at this point in a different way because I don't want to stray off into a discussion of this particular problem of the intelligence community and its organization and management, which is an important but different problem. At some point after the buildup contained in the first urgent national needs message, the increase in the Polaris and Minuteman programs, the Defense Department then set to work to formulate a long-range program; over a number of years, for increasing strategic forces. This program was reviewed in the ordinary way, and this was done twice during the President's Administration. The record, I think, is clear that at some point the President felt we had not. And while this may not have been translated directly into numbers, the question is how did it translate into the President's attitudes towards more military force, on the one hand, and what was it that gave him the feeling we had enough that, without trying to pinpoint a precise moment (perhaps there never was one), what events and processes of thought led to a conclusion quite different from the conclusion than the position from which he started?

SORENSEN: In the fall of 1961, as the review of the defense budget to be presented in January of 1962 went forward, several things had already become clear to the President. First, better methods of intelligence detection and better understanding of intelligence estimates persuaded him that the generally increasing level of strategic armaments which he was pursuing would be sufficient, and there was no need for an additional accelerated program to meet any dangerous gap in the future. Secondly, he was convinced that the military chiefs of service always asked for too much. And his own sense of budgetary prudence rebelled at what seemed to be a lack of justification for their requests which appeared to him to be based as much on inter-service rivalry and pride as anything

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else. Third, he had long been convinced that his Secretary of Defense was a brilliant man who was able to calculate far more precisely than had ever been done before exactly what this country would need now and in years to come in terms of our own strength: how much of it would survive a first attack, how much of it would penetrate enemy defenses, how much of it would accurately land on target, how many targets needed to be included, and so on. He relied very heavily on Mr. McNamara's judgment, although, in these matters, I think he also felt that McNamara could only go so far in overruling the Joint Chiefs of Staff if he was to maintain morale and support within the Pentagon. I think a combination of all those factors influenced the President's final judgment on the level of our strategic strength.

KAYSEN: Now, to get back to the other half of the broader question of the sort of shift in relative emphasis between defense and disarmament. Do you think it was primarily the Cuban crisis which set this shift, or do you think a shift really had substantially got under way in the President's thinking before October 1962?

SORENSEN: I'm inclined to say that the lessening of pressures which followed the Cuban crisis made it possible and more practical for the President to emphasize peace and cooperation more than he had previously. It was more a change of circumstances than it was a change of feeling.

KAYSEN: Yes, because you did say earlier, in a response to the first question on this, that you think there had been a real evolution of the President's thought on this matter, that he started out...

SORENSEN: On the specific matter of disarmament. But if we're talking in more general terms about what – for purposes of gross oversimplification – might be called the olive branch and the arrows. I think that dual theme was present all through the Kennedy presidency. It was emphasized in his inaugural and in his first State of the Union. In the Berlin crisis speech of July 1961, he talked about our willingness to talk. At the time of the great buildup and mobilization of our forces in response to Berlin, he was pushing our allies hard, trying to find a new negotiating position on Berlin. I think that continued, and, of course, the Cuban

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crisis itself was an example of holding up the arrows and the olive branch at the same time.

KAYSEN: But I was thinking really of a much narrower question, because if you take the approach to disarmament, there are two different approaches which logically, in the abstract, have something to be said for them. One of them is the approach which says, sure, you maintain your forces to the level that you think you have to, but you don't build them up beyond that level, and you are essentially as quiet about your forces and as persistent in talking about disarmament as you can be; the other says you say you want disarmament, but in its absence you're really just going to work very hard at military superiority, and only when there is concrete progress in disarmament are you going

to give up seeking military superiority.

Now, I'd say that basically the policy of President Kennedy, the administration policy, was much more the former than it was the latter. Yet, if you look at the movements, the activities in the first part of the President's term, first budget message, urgent national needs, Berlin message, you don't get the sense that the question of, "Am I going past a line from which I can't return on the disarmament issue?" really was in the President's mind at that time. Later, I think it was, my own judgment would be, it was in his mind, whenever he was talking about military force, military deployment and its use, he was saying, you know, "Okay, if we do this now, what next steps do we get into and how does this affect the other interests we have?" Now, do you have any feeling about when this balance really began to shift, in which every military move was looked at in terms of its disarmament consequences, in a long sense, as well as in terms of its immediate consequences? Or do you think that's not a correct formulation? Really I'm formulating...

SORENSEN: I didn't know...

KAYSEN: I'm formulating something of a conclusion, Ted, and I think the way to put this is, how do you react to that formulation?

SORENSEN: I doubt that the President made that formulation. I don't know, I never discussed it with him in those precise terms. Perhaps you and others did. It

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seemed to me the evolution, instead, was one more of tone and emphasis in his thinking and his speeches and his approach to world problems.

KAYSEN: Let me just turn around and interview myself for the moment and say I'm not trying to suggest by the question that I heard the President formulate it in those terms. I'm trying to suggest by the question that as an observer this might be a reasonable description of what was happening and the question is precisely: Is it a reasonable description of what was going on in the President's mind? And you are saying: to the best of your knowledge, no. An observer might look at what was said and say, "There's been this change." But you wouldn't accept that as the description of the internal dialogue, so to speak.

SORENSEN: That's right. I think there were several evolutions. I think there was an evolution after the Bay of Pigs in which he saw that military ventures were not necessarily going to succeed. There was an evolution after Vienna when he realized that a different period in the Cold War lay ahead of him and that we would have to be prepared for it militarily. There was, as I've already suggested, some change after the Cuban missile crisis in which he hoped for a period of lessening tensions, and that was accelerated by the conclusion of the test ban treaty in that next summer.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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