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Biographical Note

Shepard, the first American to orbit the Earth and a Project Mercury astronaut for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (1959-1965), discusses his conversations and meetings with John F. Kennedy (JFK), plans for the space program, and JFK's interest in the space program, among other issues.

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Alan B. Shepard, Jr.

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Oral History Interview

with

Alan B. Shepard, Jr.

June 12, 1964

Project Mercury Astronaut Manned Spacecraft Center
National Aeronautics and Space Administration, Houston, Texas

By Walter D. Sohier, General Counsel

For the John F. Kennedy Library

SOHIER: This is the beginning of an oral interview with Astronaut Alan B. Shepard, Jr., in connection with the oral history program of the Kennedy Library. The interview is being conducted in Commander Shepard's office at the Manned Spacecraft Center in Houston, Texas, on June 12, 1964, and is being conducted by Walter D. Sohier, General Counsel of NASA.

I wonder, Commander Shepard, if we might begin with Project Mercury and your flight of May 5, 1961, and your first meeting, I believe, with President Kennedy [John F. Kennedy], some anecdotes of that and things you can recall.

SHEPARD: My first contact with President Kennedy actually occurred on the day of the flight, the 5th of May, 1961, and it was in the nature of a radiotelephone call from the White House to me aboard the aircraft carrier USS Lake Champlain.

SOHIER: That must have been quite a surprise. I guess the others got to maybe expect it, but yours was the first, wasn't it?

SHEPARD: That's quite right. Actually it was a surprise to me as an individual, and the first of many surprises, really, which comprised not only the President's

reaction to the manned space program but the public's reaction as well. I was, in fact, very surprised when the phone call came through. I talked first to a Captain Taz Shepard [Tazewell T. Shepard, Jr.], the President's naval aide, who is a personal friend of mine.

The connection was very good. And then the President came on, and, I must say, I was even more thrilled at that moment in talking to him than I had been after the flight. Of course, it was about an hour after the flight, as I recall. I actually had been on board the carrier for about an hour and the first flush of success had worn off to some degree, but it certainly was reactivated when I talked to him.

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SOHIER: Then you headed back to Washington, and there was a ceremony in Washington, I believe.

SHEPARD: That is correct, sir.

SOHIER: What happened there? As I understand, there were some rather interesting discussions about the space program after the ceremony.

SHEPARD: Yes. First I would like to say that a rather amusing thing happened during the ceremony in the Rose Garden. He was presenting me with the Distinguished Service Medal from the NASA, and, as Jim Webb [James E. Webb] handed it to him in the case, it slipped from the case and fell to the terrace. He stooped over quickly and picked it up and his remark at that time as he was presenting me this medal was "which came to me from the ground up." I thought that was a remarkable reaction to what could have been kind of a disastrous situation.

The thought that came to me at that time was that he was perhaps even as nervous as I, and, in thinking back about it later on, I think this may be the first indication we had of his interest in our space program. It was not the fact that there were a lot of people there that made him nervous, but rather the fact that he was being associated with the program that appealed to him.

SOHIER: I think one got the impression from watching TV and seeing the pictures that he was personally moved by the whole thing. Did you have that reaction?

SHEPARD: Yes, I think he was. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] had to remind him to pin on the medal; he had forgotten to do that as well. So, that was certainly an amusing situation but, as I say, it's perhaps the first real indication that I had in an indirect way of how much he was impressed with the program.

After the presentation of the medal, we went into his office. There were the seven astronauts there, Dr. Gilruth [Robert R. Gilruth] and Walt

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Williams from the Space Task Group, as we were then called; the President; Vice President Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson]; the heads of the Senate and House Space Committees—at that time I believe it was Senator Kerr [Robert S. Kerr] and Congressman Brooks [Overton Brooks]; and Congressman Martin [Joseph William Martin, Jr.]. All in all, I'd say there were possibly 20 to 25 people in the room.

SOHIER: Did you sit down, or were you sort of milling around—or what kind of a setup was it?

SHEPARD: There was a general milling around when we first came into the room. The press was in there at that time, they took their pictures and then they left, and the room was closed. We sat down; the seven of us sat on two opposing sofas, the President sat in his rocking chair at the head of the opening between these two sofas, and the other congressional leaders were sort of sitting around behind him and behind us.

The one singular point I remember quite strongly about that incident really started about a month before my flight when a subcommittee of the President's Scientific Advisory Committee (a subcommittee which was composed primarily of medical people) came to Langley Field and we engaged in a series of discussions which lasted the better part of a day. They indicated great trepidation about the upcoming flight; and they indicated a rather surprising lack of confidence in the ability of man to perform successfully under a weightless condition, even for short periods of time, also to perform successfully under conditions of acceleration during the launch and reentry.

I'm not sure what recommendations this subcommittee made to the President as a result of the flight, but I assume we were able to convince them that we could in fact go ahead and operate under this environment.

So this became the subject of conversation which I recall most vividly on that occasion in the President's office,

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when we were able in fact to present that group assembled with the evidence that the flight had been made, that I had been able to talk, to communicate, to operate effectively throughout the entire flight.

The flight actually planned for me to control the spacecraft, which I did. I was called upon only once to backup a small failure in the electrical system, so my presence in this case didn't completely support our theory of the pilot's reliability as a functioning machine. Nonetheless, the point we made to the President then was we have in fact indicated that for a short period of time man can perform effectively in space. Of course, from that point then we projected to the programs that were in the planning stage at that time—Project Gemini and the lunar landing program, which later became known as Project Apollo, neither one of which was in a firm design commitment in '61.

SOHIER: At that meeting, I understand there was really quite a colloquy about space and that the President kind of hashed over what we might do next, and things

of this sort. Do you remember that in any detail? What did he ask you, for example—"How do you feel?" What sort of question was coming at you?

SHEPARD: Well, as I recall, the discussion was primarily centered on what I had done in the way of a human pilot.

SOHIER: In terms of the medical aspects of the thing and the President's Scientific Advisory Committee's concern before? It was more this kind of question?

SHEPARD: Yes, and then, of course, we projected in some detail what our plans were for the upcoming Mercury flight. Everybody certainly was running over with confidence at that time because the flight had gone so well and we had proved our point, and I think that we made that point quite clearly at that time—that a man can operate effectively in space.

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SOHIER: The environment in which your flight occurred was one of the Cuba fiasco, and this was a terrific lift for the country. Did you get any feeling about the relationship between those two events in President Kennedy's mind? And, also, you may recall 20 days later, May 25, 1961, the decision to go to the moon in this decade was made, and I wonder what the tie-in of both to the Cuban crisis might have been, from what you overheard or what he said to you, and also to the success of your flight. To what extent did that have an impact on deciding "well, let's go for the moon now; we've done this so well"?

What I'm really trying to find out is: In that short period of time that President Kennedy was in office, and beginning with the Wiesner Committee report which was rather critical of the space program, you have this major decision to make this enormous program effort. What made President Kennedy decide to do this?

SHEPARD: Well, of course, I can't answer that exactly because you never really know how an individual makes up his mind, but it seemed to me that the point which I have just made about the capability to operate effectively in space was certainly a consideration.

We discussed this rather thoroughly, as I say, and projected man's capability to the proposed Apollo program at that time.

Another factor completely surprised me and I'm not able to fully analyze how it affected the President and Vice President Johnson. I remember riding down Pennsylvania Avenue after our meeting at the White House with Vice President Johnson in the car, and I remember the President's taking Mrs. Shepard [Louise Brewer Shepard] and me to a meeting of the National Association of Broadcasters on a completely unscheduled visit. They hadn't known a thing about it and neither had we. I remember noticing the tremendous response of this meeting and the tremendous response of the public during the ride down Pennsylvania Avenue. I recall the crush on Capitol Hill when what was supposed to have been a well-regulated reception

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turned out to be a completely throng-packed, pulsing room of congressional leaders reacting to this flight that had been made.

I would think these two things—the successful demonstration of man’s capability and the public support of a program which immediately became to them a very thrilling, exciting program—affected him in his decision-making process much more than the international situation which existed at that time. I’m speaking of the Cuban situation...

SOHIER: Of course, things were pretty low after the Cuba thing, and it was a real break to suddenly have this thing happen. I know there were some who felt that right at that point it might have been good timing to say “let’s go to the moon now, fellows,” but I guess the facts show that this was still under study at that point.

In terms of the later Mercury flights, I guess there were a number of ceremonies at the Cape and in Washington which you attended, and, without covering each one individually, could you mention a few of the anecdotes or things that happened, conversations with the President, that might be of interest here?

SHEPARD: Yes. The very next contact we had with him occurred after John Glenn’s flight at Cape Canaveral on February 23 [1962], during which time he presented Glenn with the [NASA] Distinguished Service Medal, and we made a tour of the Project Mercury installations there at the Cape.

He seemed, as he always seemed when we discussed the program, to be extremely interested in it, and even in some of the details of how the flight controllers reacted, how they responded, what their jobs were, and so on, which was, of course, all part of the tour which he made.

SOHIER: Before the Glenn flight, did he ever raise the question of the safety of it with you or with any of you that you know of? Do you remember some consideration again of that problem?

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SHEPARD: Not to my knowledge. I know, of course, that during all of the flights, using primarily the public relations office channels, we kept an open line to the White House. I did not have access to the line and I’m not sure exactly what conversations went on.

SOHIER: I note on this list here that you had lunch at the White House with the President of Ecuador [Carlos Julio Arosemena Monroy] on July 23, 1962. How did you happen to get invited to that? Do you remember much about that?

SHEPARD: Yes. As a matter of fact, that in itself is rather a funny story. It seems to me

that the President had invited the French Minister of Culture [André Malraux] to dinner. Colonel Lindbergh [Charles A. Lindbergh, Jr.] was also to be there, and he had invited Mrs. Shepard and me.

It so happened that the date of the dinner fell on a day when I was supposed to be at one of our tracking stations in California getting ready for Carpenter's [M. Scott Carpenter] flight. It was my opinion that I should regret that I would be unable to attend, which I did to Mrs. Kennedy's secretary. And it's my understanding that on the morning of that particular affair, the President was reviewing the guest list and wanted to know where my name was. You can imagine the confusion that created over at NASA Headquarters when they received the call from the President wanting to know where Shepard was.

They immediately contacted me, just at the end of an all-night session at the tracking station, and I wasn't too happy about it anyway. I was able to explain the situation to them and, in fact, finally did call Taz Shepard, the President's naval aide, and explain it to him. I assume that the President was made aware of my decision and he said he certainly agreed with it and offered a "rain check." So the luncheon for the President of Ecuador was the "rain check," and Mrs. Shepard and I went up there together.

The two things that he mentioned when we went through the receiving line were, first, that he was in fact sorry I

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had not been able to make the other one, and the second had to do with John Glenn waterskiing. We made some remarks about Glenn's appearance with a t-shirt on; we agreed it was rather sorry-looking to be skiing around with a t-shirt on in front of all the cameras.

We didn't have too much chance on that occasion to talk about the program. It was primarily short, fast, personal exchanges.

SOHIER: He had a technique of picking up information from everybody that he came in contact with. When you saw him at these various occasions, did he ever take you aside and say, "Well, what do you think about the moon program?"; or "What do you think about Mr. Webb?"; or "What do you think about any of these things?" I remember once he asked me whether I liked Mr. Webb, and I hadn't met him yet. Mr. Webb had only been there about two months, I guess, but that seemed a long time not to have met Mr. Webb. Did he ever do that kind of thing?

SHEPARD: Yes, he did, but it was primarily with respect to our thoughts about our capability to conduct a successful manned space program.

SOHIER: It was more right down your own line. Is this including the lunar shot and Gemini and so on, or is it more specifically Mercury?

SHEPARD: Well, it was most specifically Mercury at that time. We did discuss what the general plans were for the moon shot on several occasions. One occasion was on the 26th of February, after Glenn's flight, and he presented the medal to him at the Cape. John and Gus Grissom [Virgil I. Grissom] and I went to Palm Beach to fly

with the President to Washington for the official welcoming ceremony for Glenn in Washington.

The three of us spent an hour, I would say, possibly a little more, in conversation with Prince Radziwill [Stanislas Albrecht Radziwill], his

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wife [Lee Bouvier Radziwill], and the President in his cabin on the airplane. During this flight we discussed some things of a more personal nature, expressing our opinions about how we could possibly be used to help sell the space program, both within the continental limits and also internationally, and still allowing us an adequate amount of time to stay in training and help in the various engineering areas of the program.

SOHIER: Were you expressing a feeling at that time that maybe NASA was asking you to make too many trips around and speeches, or was it that maybe you weren't doing enough of that? Was he suggesting more of this sort of thing; in other words, was this sort of a session to work out a problem, or was it trying to discuss how best you could...

SHEPARD: It wasn't an ad hoc session for any particular problem. It was just an exchange of ideas at that time. We had made then the three flights, mine and Grissom's and Glenn's, and, through our personal association with Ed Murrow [Edward R. Murrow] of the USIA [United States Information Agency] at that time, were able to get feedback of what this thing had meant internationally.

So we were aware of what we as individuals might do in the program and it was just a general discussion of how much should be done, recognizing the contribution that we could continue to make directly to the space program as well. There were no specific decisions made. I think we all agreed at that time that something should be done.

SOHIER: What was his attitude? Was it that there was an important role to be played in getting around this country and abroad that you all could play? Was this the sort of thing he was saying to you?

SHEPARD: Yes, I think we all agreed on the importance of this. Of course, we had been making national public appearances before on some occasions, even before the flights started. But it seemed at that point that some kind of a formula, some kind of a scheme, should be developed so that we could make appearances like this and help sell the

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program domestically and abroad, and at the same time allow us a certain amount of freedom to participate in our own requirements.

SOHIER: You remember there was a certain amount of rhubarb after the Cooper

[Gordon Cooper] flight as to whether there would or wouldn't be another flight, and I believe you were involved in some conversations, or at least one conversation, with President Kennedy on that. Could you fill in some of the detail of that discussion?

SHEPARD: Yes. The flight which was to be designated MA-10 had been assigned to me. The Atlas missile and the hardware were already at the Cape being checked out; as a matter of fact, I had run several preliminary tests of the spacecraft at the time of Cooper's flight.

We visited with President and Mrs. Kennedy in the evening of the 21st of May, 1963. Cooper had come to Washington in the morning. They had presented him with the [NASA] Distinguished Service Medal in the Rose Garden, and we had a very short informal conversation with the President in his office afterwards—nothing as lengthy as occurred after my flight, but the six of us (John Glenn and his wife [Anna C. Glenn] were missing) and our wives were invited back for just a social get-together with the President and Mrs. Kennedy in the evening. There was a total of only 14 people there; it was a small, warm, friendly gathering.

SOHIER: Walt Williams was there, wasn't he?

SHEPARD: No, sir.

SOHIER: Just the astronauts, was it?

SHEPARD: That's right.

SOHIER: And what transpired there? Was there any discussion of another flight or about the space program?

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SHEPARD: Yes, there was. I had been rather vociferous in my expression of opinion to Bob Seamans [Robert Seamans] and Mr. Webb and Dr. Dryden [Hugh Latimer Dryden]. I felt very strongly that we should fly another flight. I expressed, of course, my opinion up through the chain of command. I felt strongly enough to tell Mr. Webb that we had been invited to the White House that evening. We happened to be at a reception at his house just prior to that, and this was the first occasion I had had a chance to see him during that busy day. I said we had been invited to the White House that evening, and did he mind if I discussed this with the President. He said, "No, go right ahead. I think you should discuss it with him and give him both sides of the picture."

So during the course of that little family get-together, if you will, that evening, the question came up. The President himself brought up the question—I had intended to but he brought it up before I did—about my feelings on the flight. I expressed them, and I also expressed what I thought were the feelings of the people who opposed making the flight.

The most significant reason I had for wanting to make the flight was that we felt that, as a result of the previous flights, we could measurably extend the amount of time in orbit, perhaps three and one-half days confidently and maybe as much as four days with a little luck on the use of fuel and oxygen, doing it on a carefully controlled basis. It seemed to me it was most important at that time to try to match what the Russians had done in terms of duration of the flight. I felt that it would be of great benefit to the country to be able to do this at that particular time.

SOHIER: Did he react to this, or did he just listen?

SHEPARD: He didn't react strongly. He listened and we discussed that aspect of it, and we discussed another one of our problems, which has been convincing the medical

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community that human beings can function fairly effectively under weightless conditions, and we felt that this longer period of time would help us get an immediate answer to what the problems of circulation were, what the problems of muscular atrophy and so on were, and this seemed to me we could apply directly to the Gemini flights.

These were the two opinions I expressed in favor of making another flight. The opposing opinions I expressed for Mr. Webb. He felt that it was appropriate, since we had had six successful Mercury flights, that we terminate the Mercury program; that we take the talent that had been working on the Mercury program and shift it over to Gemini, which at that time was rushing along; and that we would then have more time and more talent available to apply to the Gemini program.

The extra cost of the mission was a relatively small figure and really of no consequence, although it was discussed. The President did not indicate at that time whether he favored or whether he was opposed to making another flight. He said that he felt that it should be the decision of the Space Administration to make. He did not indicate that he would use his influence in any way in either direction.

SOHIER: It's an unusual opportunity to be able to tell the President of the United States your own views about something. What sort of atmosphere was this done in? Was it just a question of picking your brains and getting your point of view?

SHEPARD: Well, it seemed most of the time we were with him the atmosphere was very informal. The Gridiron Club meeting and some parts of our presentations at the White House, of course, were quite formal. The Collier Trophy, when we briefed the President at the Cape, and also when he visited here at Headquarters—some of these briefings were quite formal, but most of the time it seems our conversations and associations with him were most informal.

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It was during this visit to the White House, on the 21st of May in the evening, that I expressed this point of view in a very informal manner.

SOHIER: He seemed to have a real bond with all of you, and I suppose not every President of the United States would have reacted that way. What was it that rang his bell from your point of view? He really took an enormous personal interest in all of you, and to sort you out to go to the White House. Tell us what it was about President Kennedy that's different from someone else.

SHEPARD: I never have been able to analyze completely why he reacted this way to us, why he provided the time to be with us on these occasions and essentially on a very informal basis—access which I suppose not too many people had.

My wife, whom I consider to be rather an astute woman, in discussing it with me one time, said, "Well, it appears to me that his reaction is one of being happy to be associated with you as a group and as individuals because of what you've done, not because of any great abilities but I suppose because of the one ability to recognize a challenge and to be willing to meet the challenge."

Secondly, we were representatives of a program which in itself was a challenge. And we have been representatives of the Mercury program, because I think people understand other people better than they do machines. I think, now that I look back, I agree with this analysis of his reaction to us as individuals and as a group. He was in favor of the program, he was proud of what we had been able to do, proud of what a lot of people had been able to do, but reacting to us as representatives.

SOHIER: One subject that he got involved in was the question of the *Life* contract with the astronauts. You remember at the beginning of the Kennedy Administration it was pretty well known that the President had taken the position that there wasn't going to be a renewal of the

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Life contract, that he didn't feel that this was a good thing. And yet, on August 24, 1962, there was a meeting in his office with several NASA officials in which he indicated that he agreed with NASA's position in favor of another contract with *Life*. So that it was really quite a shift in position, and, at least from the newspapers, one gets the impression that he talked to you all about this question, and that you may have influenced the decision. Were you involved in any of these discussions, or do you know what was behind his change in position on that?

SHEPARD: Yes, I think I do. I did not talk to him directly, nor did we talk to him directly as a group about the *Life* contract. Our first contact on this subject with him was with Vice President Johnson at the Johnson ranch where we spent an informal two days. We expressed our points of view as to why we thought that it was appropriate that a contract of this type be allowed, and I assume that the Vice President relayed this in some degree to the President.

The other significant meeting on this subject was one which John Glenn had with the President.

SOHIER: This was when he was up at Cape Cod?

SHEPARD: That is right. And I'm sure that John can express the details of that meeting better than I. I do know, however, that he did make the point, which we all felt strongly, that, since we were representatives of the space program as individuals and since people can analyze people better than machines, as I've said before, one very good way to sell the program is to make these personal stories available—the things which appeal to the majority of the people.

And, here again, it was our opinion, having talked with Ed Murrow, that this was the kind of thing that also meant a great deal internationally as well. In other words, we were getting more mileage, more response, out of the

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personalities rather than out of the machines, or rather than out of any kind of a technical report of the program.

SOHIER: In this August 24 meeting, in addition to the *Life* contract, he brought out the Houston houses deal and expressed some concern at that meeting about these kinds of problems and what kind of greater control might be exercised. Did he ever discuss this kind of problem with you or in a group of which you were a part?

SHEPARD: No.

SOHIER: This never came up specifically?

SHEPARD: No. He discussed it with John Glenn, as you know.

SOHIER: But you weren't in on any of these particular discussions?

SHEPARD: No.

SOHIER: You mentioned the LBJ ranch meeting. Was that a weekend down there, or what was that—overnight?

SHEPARD: It was on a weekend. It was on a Saturday afternoon, Saturday night, and Sunday morning. We left about Sunday noon. We were there about 24 hours.

SOHIER: Would you care to mention some of the other things that came up in this discussion with the Vice President? In addition to the specifics, I'm sort of interested in the role played by Vice President Johnson in terms of the space program and, in particular, your activities.

SHEPARD: Well, as I recall, we spent a lot of time touring the ranch and looking at whiteface and blue-bonnets, hunting cabins and deer stands. It was a most pleasant visit. We had a chance to chat with Vice President Johnson in the evening after dinner when the ladies withdrew from the group.

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We had a chance to talk with him briefly the following morning. The subjects that were discussed were primarily our problems outside of the space program—the problems we had had with appearances; the problems we had with the *Life* contract; could we, or should we, in fact make special compensation in pay for our astronaut group and future astronaut groups. This sort of thing is what we discussed primarily, rather than anything having to do specifically with the hardware of the space program.

SOHIER: How did this meeting come about? Did Vice President Johnson suggest that maybe you all had problems you wanted to talk out loud about, or was it just a social visit in which you got talking after dinner?

SHEPARD: As I recall, I was in Dallas at the Chance Vought company running a launch simulation in connection with the study of the Gemini program. John Glenn called and said that about two months before, President Kennedy had suggested that Vice President Johnson get together with us at the ranch and just sit down and informally discuss what our problems were. Glenn told me that this in fact had transpired and we were to meet at Johnson's ranch on this particular date. So it's my impression that the meeting actually was at the request of President Kennedy, and I don't really feel that too much transpired as a result of that meeting. I think it was just a discussion. It gave us an opportunity to air our points of view, was an educational process for the Vice President, and gave him a chance to find out just what some of our problems were.

SOHIER: There are a number of major elements in the space program in which President Kennedy was interested. One that threads all the way through his Administration was the question of how we could cooperate with the Russians in space. There's a hint of it in the Inaugural Address, and, of course, in May of last year there was the speech before the United Nations. Did you ever get into discussions of this sort? Did he ever ask you what the

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feasibility of, let's say, including a Russian astronaut in a trip to the moon might be?

SHEPARD: Yes, and I'm not sure on what occasion it was that we discussed this. I don't really recall whether it was a little aside conversation during one of his visits at the Cape or Houston or not, but the question was raised by the President as to what extent we felt we could in fact cooperate with the Russians on this basis.

My answer at that time was that I felt that it would be very difficult for us to exchange hardware, missile parts and spacecraft parts and so on, and that primarily the cooperation could come through exchange of information. We, for example, might make a flight or a series of flights studying the effects of radiation, because it's always been my feeling that our data on radiation has been better than theirs. They, for example, would make a flight studying the protracted effects of weightlessness on the human being and the information could be obviously exchanged since their physiological make-up is not too different from ours.

As far as actually getting together and flying pilots of different nationalities in the same spacecraft, we expressed the opinion that we didn't feel this was feasible.

SOHIER: He raised that question, did he, just to see what your reaction would be?

SHEPARD: It was a general question about cooperation, and that was part of the answer.

SOHIER: Did he ever get into the subject of astronaut selection—why not have a woman astronaut, or scientists as astronauts? Did this question ever come up? It's been in the papers a lot.

SHEPARD: I've discussed that so many times with so many different people...

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SOHIER: This wasn't a particular thing he was pushing?

SHEPARD: I don't remember that we discussed those two points about women and scientists with him on any occasion. At least not that I recall.

SOHIER: A couple of other things: Did he ever bring up the subject of the military importance of the space program, both in the sense of military importance of what NASA was doing in building up a capability to operate in space and, secondly, what military missions might there be in space? Did this come up in discussion?

SHEPARD: It seems to me that it did briefly, as I recall, and here again we've had so many visits that I don't remember which one it was...

SOHIER: It doesn't matter when if you can remember any aspect of it.

SHEPARD: I'm not sure whether we actually discussed that or not. If we did, the opinion that I expressed was along the line that agreed with the Space Act which Vice President Johnson was so instrumental in establishing, which designated the Space Administration as a scientific exploratory agency, that it in fact should be kept that way to operate most effectively, but that it became fairly obvious to us that whatever we could do as individuals during a manned space flight under NASA could have immediate implications on what a military pilot could do. We discussed specifically the ability to

observe on a reconnaissance mission, for example; the ability to change the orbital plane in a spacecraft at his own discretion, assuming he had the amount of fuel available to do it. These two things were within the grasp of the state of the art at that time, and we discussed them specifically. Here again, the occasion on which they were discussed is rather hazy.

SOHIER: Let me ask you a more philosophical question. You saw him a number of times. You remember in the early

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days, with the Wiesner Committee having reported, he probably was a little unsure of what he thought about the space program, where we ought to go, and there certainly seemed to be no doubt at the end that he was one of the great supporters of a vigorous space program. What do you think he felt the importance of the space program was to the country? What role did it play in his thinking in the evolution of the American people? Where did it fit in? Why did he become so enthusiastic about it?

Was it the fact that we were sort of behind the Russians and now we were getting ahead of them? Or was it the competitive aspect? Did it have a broader significance than that? Did it have to do with moving ahead, vigor, the youth of America? What kinds of things do you think went into his thinking and influenced him to be such a supporter?

SHEPARD: Well, that would be very difficult to answer. I think that certainly the success of Project Mercury had a great deal to do with it—the demonstrated capability to launch reliable vehicles and the demonstrated capability of individuals to perform under these unusual conditions.

I recall on the occasion, which we discussed previously, when Grissom and Glenn and I met with him in the cabin of his airplane, that he was completely aware of the international advantage which had accrued to us as a result of our activities. I'm sure he was aware of that because we discussed that specific point in connection with our discussion of how astronauts should be used to explain or sell the program.

I'm sure he was aware of this as a facet of a national strategy. Beyond these two points, I don't recall any other specific areas of interest in the program that might have helped him.

SOHIER: You remember the interest he had in youth generally—physical fitness, fighting juvenile delinquency. How did the program fit into that kind of thing? In connection with speaking engagements, for example, was the

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emphasis primarily on inspiring youth? Was that the kind of thing he was thinking of in addition to the international image of this country? Or didn't this come up particularly?

SHEPARD: I don't recall that we discussed it specifically, but I'm sure that he was aware of the physical training program which we instituted ourselves because we felt

that it was important to stay in good shape. I don't recall that it was ever discussed.

SOHIER: You didn't necessarily project this in terms of the physical fitness program?

SHEPARD: I don't recall that we ever brought it into any conversation with him. Of course, we have supported the program in doing movies and so on, but I don't recall ever discussing it specifically with him. But I'm sure he was aware of what types of physical training we went through.

SOHIER: I wonder, Commander Shepard, if there are any other little anecdotes that you might like to mention having to do with President Kennedy?

SHEPARD: Well, there's one that comes to mind. It occurred after Gordon Cooper's flight when, as I have indicated before, we had a little informal get-together with President and Mrs. Kennedy at the White House, and it certainly was a very happy occasion since Cooper had done so well on his flight. I think that everybody was relaxed and informal.

Toward the end of the evening, the President suggested that we have a picture taken of all those who were assembled. A photographer was called in, and we posed in a semicircle, everyone standing, including the President and Mrs. Kennedy and the six of us and our wives, with one exception and that was in front in the center of the semicircle was the President's rocking chair which Gordon Cooper occupied.

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SOHIER: I believe that completes our oral interview. Thank you very much, Commander Shepard.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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