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Administrative Information

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Biographical Note
Paul H. Nitze (1907-2004) served as President of the Foreign Service Education Foundation from 1953 to 1961, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs from 1961 to 1963, and Secretary of the Navy from 1963 to 1967. This interview focuses on a report Nitze wrote on nuclear weaponry and the Kennedy administration's change in policy concerning nuclear weapons and defense strategies, among other topics.

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Miss Fosdick: During the two years preceding the election in 1960, Senator Kennedy spoke frequently about the danger of relying almost exclusively on nuclear strategy which in his view was a fault of the Eisenhower administration. Your task force report from the National Security Policy Committee generally supported this view and recommended greater reliance on conventional forces.

Mr. Secretary, I thought it might be useful to explore now in more detail your perspective on the President's role in establishing changes and adjustments in defense policy, especially during the early months of the Kennedy administration. You probably know this part of the story as well as anyone does. You may have some special insight on the moves to a more flexible support for the conduct of foreign policy - away from emphasis upon massive retaliation as the prime support for foreign policy.

Comments on your NSC 68 Report, written considerably prior to the Kennedy administration, would make a good prelude to this discussion. Do you want to start with a brief reference to NSC-68?

Mr. Nitze: The origin of NSC-68 was the Russian explosion of the nuclear device in the fall of 1949. This resulted in an intense reexamination of our policy to see how we would meet the fact of a Russian nuclear capability and obviously it would be a growing nuclear capability. Everybody had taken it for granted that at some time the Russians would develop a nuclear capability but it was uncertain in people's minds as to whether they would do it as promptly as 1949 - some people thought it would take them another five or another ten years. But to have them actually explode the device, this made an actuality of what had been looked at before as being merely a contingency.

George Kennan headed the group that was reexamining this in the first instance. It became related to the problem as to whether we should go forward with the experiments necessary to produce the hydrogen weapon and whether we should do this with full urgency or what degree of effort we should put into the production of the hydrogen weapon. It was finally the recommendation of the State Department that we go forward with urgency to develop a hydrogen device if it was possible. It was Oppenheimer's view that it was technologically not possible. We all hoped that it wouldn't be technologically possible but it was the feeling that if it was technologically possible it was important for us to know that technique and that technology prior to, and at least as early as, the Russians. The President finally decided in favor of the State Department position which was more or less in correspondence with the Defense position, but which was opposed by the AEC.

At the time of that decision by Mr. Truman, the Chairman of the AEC, David Lilienthal, made a strong argument that what he was really interested in was that we thoroughly review the whole range of our policy wordwide, and particularly vis-a-vis the USSR, and that this decision to go ahead with the H-Bomb could not be made just in the context of previous policy, but should really kick off a basic review of where we stood in the light of the actuality of a nuclear capability on the part of the Russians. Mr. Truman, therefore, directed that the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of State conduct this basic review together, and I was asked to head the group and General Landon was the designee of Louis Johnson to work on the group.

At the very beginning of this study Mr. Acheson and I had a discussion as to the degree to which it was probably wise to strengthen our nuclear capability as a response to this fact of the Russian explosion and the degree to which other measures--including a build up of conventional forces--might be necessary in the long run. I can remember that about Christmas of 1949 Mr. Acheson himself at his farm dictated a memorandum which really pointed out clearly the defects of sole reliance upon nuclear weapons in a world where the Russians also had nuclear weapons. I think it was right at the beginning that this point was made clear.

Certainly NSC-68--which was the fuller paper that we worked out--involved a much broader approach than merely increasing our nuclear capability. It did call for greatly expanded expenditures upon our nuclear weapons and it had been preceded by the decision to go forward with all speed on the research necessary to produce the hydrogen weapon. But, in addition to that, many more things seemed to us to be required to support foreign policy in this context.

In 1954 when Mr. Dulles made his speech at the Council of Foreign Relations in New York, the table at which I sat, I remember, included a group which had worked on this type of problem and we were all immediately shocked by the extreme reliance that Mr. Dulles was proposing to put upon massive retaliation. I immediately sat down and wrote a paper on this and took it to Bob Bowie, who was then the Director of the Policy Planning Staff. He, in turn, took this up with Mr. Dulles, and Mr. Dulles himself was somewhat concerned about the extreme position he had taken in that 1954 speech, and subsequently wrote a piece in the Foreign Affairs Magazine which retracted somewhat from the extreme position of primary reliance on massive retaliation. But that never really caught up with the rest of the Eisenhower administration. Some of the people in the Defense Department continued to hold really to the '54 position, even though Mr. Dulles increasingly moved away from it. And certainly Mr. Herter moved very far away from it when he became Secretary of State. So that the position in 1960 wasn't really any longer the policy of the '54 statement that Mr. Dulles

had made. But in fact the capabilities we were developing were based upon that '54 statement. We were in fact relying almost entirely upon massive retaliation at the close of President Eisenhower's term. The dangers and the risks were manifest to the State Department, I believe to Mr. Eisenhower, to Mr. Dulles and to others, but somehow or other, it seemed to be impossible for them to really get the things done which were necessary to give us broader options than the sole option which we then had.

Miss Fosdick: When Secretary McNamara took office, how did he first get in touch with you on this? With this kind of background, with your long discussions with former Secretary of State Acheson on this type of problem, it seems to me you would have been in a position to help him out quickly. Coming in with his kind of experience, he obviously needed to talk over very quickly some of the basic philosophy or some of the basic history of this problem. Did you get in touch with him, or did he reach you on this?

Mr. Nitze: Well, my recollection is that we talked about this problem in our very first meeting to some extent, because I had explained to him why it was that I was particularly interested in working in the Defense Department, namely, that it seemed to me one of the preconditions to conducting a successful foreign policy was to lick this problem which the preceding Administration had not been able to lick, of having the military forces which would support our foreign policy - forces to supplement the sole tool of the threat of massive retaliation. We discussed this, I think, at our very first meeting.

In addition to that, Mr. Kennedy had distributed to all the principal members of the cabinet this paper that our group on National Security Policy had written. This was the first reading that each one of them had to do. I think it was the first paper given to Mr. Rusk. He read that report of our committee. Mr. McNamara read this report. There wasn't really any disagreement on the part of the new members of the National Security Council with the report, so that this was the starting point - the conclusions that we had come to in our group of three. These were accepted by Mr. Rusk and by Mr. McNamara and, I believe, by the President. So that the direction in which the new Administration wanted to go was clear.

The basic problem remained, how do you get there, what do you do concretely, how do you create the forces which will give you a broader option? I might also say that the situation had changed in '57, '58 and '59 by virtue of the Russian Sputnik, so that even the threat of massive retaliation was less useful because of the growing probability that the Russians would have a missile capability earlier than we, and the people thought that it would be in larger numbers than ours. As it turned out the Russians built their missile capability at a slower pace than in '57, '58 and "59 had been

thought possible for them. They also ran into technical difficulties in actually getting missiles, ICBMs, to work properly, so that they did not build as many and deploy them as rapidly as had been estimated. So when we came into office and found out what the facts really were as to numbers of Soviet ICBMs, we found this Russian missile gap threat was not quite as we had envisaged. But it still looked as though it would be wise to accelerate the POLARIS program and MINUTEMAN program to build secure retaliatory forces more rapidly than had been done before. But still we didn't feel under quite the same degree of urgency with respect to that as we had anticipated we would prior to the time that we had had access to all the intelligence.

Well in the very first days of the new Administration, Mr. McNamara discussed these matters with the President in connection with the State of the Union message which was being drafted and it was agreed that a reexamination should be made of the vulnerability of our nuclear deterrent, its dispersal, the size of the nuclear deterrent, and also of the mobility, size and capability of our non-nuclear forces. So that in the State of the Union message there was a reference to this, or if not in the State of the Union message, in one of the earlier messages - I forget which one.

Mr. McNamara immediately created four Task Groups, one of the task groups looked solely to the nuclear deterrent question; the second one, which he asked me to head, looked to the question of limited war forces; the third looked to the field of research and development, and the fourth dealt with military installations. I might further point out that all this was in the context of the necessity to review the Eisenhower budget which had been submitted in December 1960 and, if we were going to get anything changed, we would have to get in our recommendations for additions or subtractions to the Eisenhower budget early in the year so that we would have the money to do these things that we wanted to do.

As I remember the report on the limited war capabilities, we looked at the contingency of being faced with two limited war situations concurrently, one comparable to Korea, then something else, perhaps Africa, Latin America, the Middle East. And when we worked out what the requirements were inorder to meet concurrently two limited war contingencies, we came up with very large additions that would be necessary. As I remember, it was some six or seven billion dollars on top of the Eisenhower budget just for limited war forces. When Mr. McNamara reviewed this, he cut it way back because there were also requirements in connection with strengthening the nuclear forces and there were also requirements in connection with research and development, so that as I remember it, the final decision was to add three billion dollars of which maybe $1.8 billion was for limited war forces as opposed to the $6 billion which seemed to be the requirement if one were going to meet the full objective of being able to handle two limited war situations concurrently. But

at least we got a start right there within the initial months of the new Administration.

Miss Fosdick: Did the President himself talk to you about the results of the task force on limited war? Was this left largely to Secretary McNamara and to his department, or did the President discuss the issues directly with you?

Mr. Nitze: My recollection is that the President discussed these matters directly with Mr. McNamara and none of us, who were heading up the task forces, worked directly with the President. We worked with Mr. McNamara and he, in turn, had daily or semi-daily discussions with the President during this period because there was the problem of how much additional money he wanted to ask for.

Miss Fosdick: During this same period there must have been discussions on how you were going to help other countries in the area of sublimited war. This problem would be very closely related to that of increasing our own limited war capability.

Mr. Nitze: My recollection is that Mr. Khrushchev made a speech, I think it was in January 1961, in which he described the various categories of war; general war, which he ruled out; limited war, which he ruled out; and wars of liberation, to which he took a positive view. This speech of Mr. Khrushchev's made a very deep impression upon the President, and the President thought here was the real threat, this is the thing that Mr. Khrushchev is telling us he is going to do. He is going to do subversion, guerrilla warfare, sublimited warfare, and this is where we have been weak, this is where we really need help in supporting foreign policy. Mr. Kennedy and the Attorney General were the driving forces behind this effort.

Miss Fosdick: How did the Attorney General get into this?

Mr. Nitze: A special group was created, to deal specifically with this increasing sublimited war capability, of which the Attorney General was chairman.

Miss Fosdick: Was this before or after the Vienna Conference when the President had such a negative feeling about the chances of working directly with Khrushchev on these things?

Mr. Nitze: I don't remember clearly when these organizational steps were taken but the President's interest in this, I think, predated the Vienna discussions.

Miss Fosdick: Did you work on this problem continuously, the problem of developing the forces and the techniques of fighting counter-insurgency actions and limited wars?

Mr. Nitze: I did during the very early days of the Administration when our principal problem in the earliest days of January 1961 - the hottest problem - was that of Laos. I was a member of the task force working on the Laotian problem and this was a field in which many of these problems became concrete - what could you do to help a country like Laos defend itself against the type of aggression which was going on in Laos. Later on, when it became formalized this responsibility was transferred to Mr. Gilpatric who took over the responsibility for this area in the Defense Department.

Miss Fosdick: I notice that you had some difficulty getting what you thought were adequate funds for the limited war categories in the early days. How did that develop in the course of the next year or so?

Mr. Nitze: The deciding factor here was Khrushchev's renewal of the threat of a Berlin Peace Treaty and potential blockade of Berlin, so that in the context of trying to meet the Berlin crisis, a lot of things developed. It became clear that certain forces were necessary which had not been clear at the time we were arguing for more than the $1.8 billion initial revision of the Eisenhower budget.

Miss Fosdick: It is rather like the experience with NSC-68 when the actual invasion across the line proved the NSC-68 recommendations were needed and then President Truman signed the paper he had previously held off signing.

Mr. Nitze: I think these are analogous situations. I think that the point they illustrate is that when you meet a concrete fact it looks different than it did when you were merely doing advance planning with respect to that contingency. But if one does the advance planning first and indicates the lines of thought and considerations, then, when they are confirmed by an actual fact, everybody agrees that action must be taken. So that when we did confront this concrete threat of an East German Peace Treaty and a blockade and considered how we were going to cope with this short of the threat of massive retaliation, it became clear that the only way in which we could demonstrate to the Russians that we really meant business in our commitment with respect to Berlin was by a buildup of conventional forces. In other words, we needed to buildup the capability to meet the threat in the air corridors and on the ground in Europe in a meaningful way - not necessarily in a way where we would be able to rescue Berlin and drive the Russian forces away from it - but in a way which would bring such pressure to bear on that front that the Russians couldn't handle it

without mobilization and the full application of their power, in which event they couldn't help but realize that nuclear war would be a great probability -- and it would be awfully hard for anybody to keep it from going to nuclear war. But this buildup of conventional capability - which would make it politically possible to take the action in support of our commitment to Berlin - the need for this was clear to everybody shortly after Mr. Khrushchev pointed to Berlin as the point of pressure.

It was then that we worked out a blue book which laid out a program, not only for the U. S. buildup in connection with the Berlin crisis but also what we wanted our allies to do and what we thought it was possible for them to do. This blue book constituted the basis for two things: one, for a second request to Congress for authority and money with respect to a further buildup of our conventional forces; and two, for our diplomatic negotiations with our allies to get them to take the actions which they should take in order to contribute to the overall program. In this way we could call up the additional Army divisions; we got the additional ammunition that was necessary for those divisions: we reconstituted the Army strategic reserve divisions here into real combat divisions - before they had really been training divisions; we got the fleet in a position where it could really do its job; we got tactical air forces in a position where they could do their job - and this is where we really made the big incision to produce the really credible non-nuclear forces to support our foreign policy.