Benjamin H. Read Oral History Interview – JFK#2, 10/17/1969
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Biographical Note

Benjamin H. Read (1925-1993) was the legislative assistant to Senator Clark of Pennsylvania from 1958 to 1963 and the Special Assistant to the Secretary and Executive Secretary of the State Department from 1963 to 1969. This interview covers the 1963 negotiations for the Test Ban Treaty in Moscow and the internal operations of the State Department during the Kennedy administration, among other topics.

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Benjamin H. Read– JFK #2

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Second Oral History Interview

with

BENJAMIN H. READ

October 17, 1969
Washington, D.C.

By Dennis O'Brien

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'BRIEN: I guess the logical place to begin in any interview of a nature as this is to simply ask you when was the first time you met the President?

READ: Early on?

O'BRIEN: Well, okay, if you'd like you could go back to the time that you were with Senator [Joseph S.] Clark, fine.

READ: Well, I met then Senator Kennedy a few times when I was working for Senator Clark because they were close political allies. I remember working quite closely with him on the bill that repealed the loyalty oath under the National Defense Education Act. I came to have a slight acquaintance with him; it wasn't anything very close. But I knew his staff people quite intimately, and we were adjacent neighbors in the Old Senate Office Building. So there was some direct tie before his period of presidency, but very little. I don't think it would be worth reciting here.

O'BRIEN: How did your appointment as a special assistant to the Secretary come about?

READ: Well, I had known [William H.] Bill Brubeck, who was my predecessor, when we both worked for the Kennedy campaign in 1960. We were both in the L Street headquarters doing some research work and some writing work. I think [Myer] Mike Feldman was head of the group, as I recall it. I have known Bill for some time. I think he was the one who was instrumental in proposing my appointment with Rusk, whom I did not know at that point.

O'BRIEN: And then, when you came into the Department, was the Test Ban Treaty the first thing that you became involved in?

READ: It was practically the first thing I handled as Executive Secretary, although I'd been here before that for two or three months as deputy Executive Secretary. Bill left and went to work for [McGeorge] Mac Bundy as his African man. I took over about the first of July. Within days the Harriman delegation was getting it's final instructions and underway to Moscow. So it was one of the first major projects; certainly the first one in which I got total immersion.

O'BRIEN: Why did the President want such tight security around the negotiations on the test ban?

READ: Well, he had an almost pathological fear of press leaks at that point. He'd been hit by a whole series of them--heaven knows of what exact nature; at this point in time, I can't recall. But he really had worked up a passionate concern that a subject of this importance not be jeopardized by premature leaks. And he knew that the Russians had a similiar rabid concern about discussions getting out prematurely. So he was really very, very adamant that this enterprise, which he put great stock in, not be spoiled by indiscreet handling. I learned this in later days when I've gotten to know Averell well.

The sequence of events that led up to the test ban--I think this can be demonstrated best by a review of the Kennedy-[Nikita S.] Khrushchev correspondence at that period. The President's initiative at American University was plainly the first causative event in the chain of things which led to the negotiations and treaty. There was just simply nothing moving on this issue prior to that particular point in time. Tests were continuing on both sides. The unilateral U.S. declaration of test suspension announced by the President, coupled with an invitation to the Russians to join us in binding agreement, was picked up by Khrushchev and made the subject of correspondence within two or three weeks of the time of the American University speech. When Harriman was in Moscow and talked to Khrushchev, the importance of the President's speech became quite clear. We had suspected it before that time, but it was made explicitly clear in the Moscow discussions, that it was the President's initiative that produced the negotiations. It was not the initiative of the State Department text or anyone else that got this thing going.

And the President felt passionately involved in achieving its success. So much of the efforts in foreign affairs in his first three years had been spent in preventing awful things from happening or handling cold war headaches of king size. The test ban effort, was he felt, was the first really major constructive item on his agenda. He was just not going to have it fouled up in any unnecessary way.

O'BRIEN: Then we are really talking about, in time, late June, when Harriman is. . . .

READ: The first cables from Moscow--I have them in front of me--were dated July 16. Harriman had gotten there a day or two earlier. And the first conversations actually were on the 15th of July. So it was just over a month from the American University speech of June 10. During that time there had been an exchange of correspondence with Khrushchev, the delegation had been instructed and left Washington around the 10th or 12th of July.

O'BRIEN: And then you come into it about when?

READ: At about the time the delegation left Washington is when I got into it, although I'd been handling on a purely processing basis the Presidential correspondence prior to that.

O'BRIEN: There was a little reluctance about letting the Joint Chiefs of Staff in on this, I understand.

READ: I don't recall that specifically, but they were not, in fact, in on it until very late in the negotiation when the thing was virtually clinched. This was part of the same feeling of concern on the part of the President that cables that went to the Defense Department would inevitably get into the massive military machinery and the close security that he wanted and insisted on would be jeopardized.

O'BRIEN: I understand that Harriman was not particularly liked by some of the people in the State Department involved with Soviet affairs, so-called "Sovietologists," at this time. Did you ever get any insight into that at that time or later in your association?

READ: Much--then and later. Yes. Of course, there are some of the old line Foreign Service fellows who considered Averell an amateur in their business, despite his long experience. But it didn't really enter the test ban picture because there weren't any logical candidates for chief negotiator in the Foreign Service at the time. Foy Kohler was our Ambassador. He was utterly

non grata with Khrushchev. [Llewellyn E., Jr.] Tommy Thompson would have been an alternative, but Harriman was plainly the President's first choice.

O'BRIEN: Now, at this end, of course, [Anatoly F.] Dobrynin was Ambassador, and at that end we were also having difficulties. Does this mean that, in terms of U.S.-Soviet relations, that the fact that both ambassadors in a sense are personae non grate--does this result in a kind of stalemate in Soviet-American relations at that point?

READ: No. I don't think so or at least I think that's an overstatement of the case. Dobrynin was still suffering the aftereffects of the Cuba crisis, but he had a very good channel of communication with Thompson, and this was used for many things. He wasn't in this particular enterprise, but there was no inability to communicate on their part to the top of American government. We had some problems because Foy was just simply not able to gain access to Khrushchev, who considered him--rightly or wrongly--a person not sympathetic to detente purposes.

O'BRIEN: So business is going on at this end rather than at that end?

READ: Much of it was, yes.

O'BRIEN: Did you get any insight into the selection of the delegation that was sent to Moscow, beyond Harriman?

READ: Some, yes. Harriman wanted to have a Bundy man; Carl Kaysen was the obvious choice. He wanted to have a Defense man; John McNaughton was the obvious fellow. He'd talk to [Robert S.] McNamara, and McNaughton was his nominee. Was there a military man--I don't recall at this point--on the delegation?

O'BRIEN: I don't think so.

READ: I think McNaughton was considered to be representative of the Defense Department. As I recall it, there wasn't--do you have the slate in front of you?

O'BRIEN: Yes, I do, and I didn't see a name unless someone went along as an assistant. How about people like [Franklin A.] Long? That would be a logical choice, wouldn't it, from the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency?

READ: Yes, but A.C.D.A. was not in favor at the White House, Pentagon or elsewhere for a variety of reasons. [William C.] Bill Foster had become enough of an arms control advocate that he had stepped on many toes around town, and there was never any close relationship between Kennedy and Foster. So it was agreed to include [Adrian] Butch Fisher because they obviously wanted to have a Disarmament Agency man who had the rich expertise that ACDA had accumulated by that time. It was obviously a bit hard on Bill Foster; the more so because both he and Butch were old friends of Harriman's. So it was a slightly delicate business.

O'BRIEN: How about Adrian Fisher?

READ: He got along well with everybody and was respected by all concerned.

O'BRIEN: How about Press, the geophysist? As I understand, Frank Press went along.

READ: I don't remember if he did or didn't.

O'BRIEN: Did you get any insight into the instructions that the delegation had?

READ: Well, they were the ideal instructions--as Harriman has so often reflected looking back--to bring home the bacon on the one essential issue as the President saw it: a three environment, limited test ban. Harriman, in reminiscing about this in subsequent days, has told me many times that in his opinion these were the absolute ideal instructions. They were to get an agreement and come home. They didn't attempt to tell him all the tactical do's and don't in advance, as was the case in later days in the Vietnam negotiations.

O'BRIEN: Well, this was originally tied with nonaggression--it was originally was thought that a nonaggression treaty was going to be evolved. Was Harriman anxious at that point to separate the nonaggression treaty part?

READ: Yes, he was.

O'BRIEN: Did you get any insight into the way the instructions, as well as the negotiations, were affecting the relations with NATO allies, particularly Germany and France, at this time?

READ: Well, everyone was very concerned about this from the very beginning. There hadn't been much advance consultation. Of course, the British were involved; so that wasn't a problem. But we knew the French to be inimical to this effort from day one, and we were nervous about the German attitude. Just as soon as we saw the essentials of an agreement were obtainable from the early reports and discussions with Khrushchev and the Soviet delegations, we started framing a series of letters to [Charles A.] De Gaulle, to Bonn, to the Italians, and to others, to tell them this was coming and that we were going to be looking after their interests and not infringing on them.

The area of greatest concern to the French and Germans was the nonaggression pact possibility. The Russians put this forward in several forms during the course of negotiations. And it raised all sorts of sticky questions about solidifying the German borders and all the Berlin theology of the postwar period. So we knew that we would have a serious problem with them if this area couldn't be avoided in the process of negotiations.

O'BRIEN: Who was framing the letters to Bonn and to De Gaulle?

READ: Well, everyone had a hand at some point or another. I remember doing one or two of the drafts myself. We had extremely tight cable handling, which I think I described in the interview in February of 1966. I was literally the only indian in the crowd at that particular point and the one who was following the talks closely and doing nothing else during the course of this period. So by the end of each day, I would have accumulated a series of questions which needed presidential decisions. And as part of their assignment, obviously, I was doing some of the initial drafts and some of the messages to allies that needed presidential consideration. Obviously, others were also involved. I remember George Ball did some drafting on several occasions. Mac Bundy did others. There was no single author to all of these cables.

O'BRIEN: On the De Gaulle letter, as I understand, there was an offer made to De Gaulle of nuclear warheads. It might have been in one of the letters.

READ: I do not recall at this time whether that was so or not. We made a major effort to get him on board, which failed. I have not reviewed that correspondence for six years, so I couldn't describe it.

O'BRIEN: How about Bonn? Do you recall anything in the correspondence to Bonn?

READ: No, except the obvious assurances that the ban could be verified at every step of the way, and that the technological capability to do so existed. Towards the end of the negotiating period, which only lasted eight or ten days, the issue came up of where the treaties would be deposited and how other states would adhere to the treaty. And this concerned Bonn particularly because of East German-West German divisions, the theology of the Pankow regime being a non-state and the [Walter] Hallstein doctrine of the period entered the picture because of Bonn's fears that East German signature and ratification would enhance their status.

O'BRIEN: Can you recall any of the assumptions in the minds of the people that you were dealing with--people like George Ball, Mac Bundy and the President as well--into their understanding of the Russians? I'm sure they must--at this point, all of you must have have had some idea or at least thought why the Russians were moving in the direction of an atmospheric test ban at this point. Could you describe that . . .

READ: I really couldn't reconstruct the operative premises. It was quite plain through the Khrushchev correspondence before Harriman left for Moscow that they wanted this. Why they wanted it didn't really become any plainer in the course of the negotiations. There were the obvious reasons: atmospheric pollution, I think there was the shared concern of China and France. But there were no Byzantine motivations that became apparent in the course of the discussions or were even hinted at. It was, obviously, a sensible thing to do, and I don't think it was anything terribly much more complicated than that.

O'BRIEN: Through all of this, did you get any hint of, perhaps, any overall understanding between the United States and the Soviet Union, perhaps directed along the lines of spheres of influence?

READ: No. There were some amusing instances--I was just looking at the cable covering Khrushchev's first talk with Harriman on the evening of July 14th, when they first got together and Harriman delivered the letter from the President expressing his great hopes for agreement in this area. Khrushchev, at one point early in the conversation, said that he understood the task of those assembled was to prepare such documents as would enable the President and [Harold] Macmillan and himself to sign agreements on a test ban, nonaggression pact, disarmament, and German peace treaty. If the U.S. and the U.K. wished, additional agreements could be prepared and considered. Jokingly he remarked that his list of topics was rather short and perhaps all of them could be settled before dinner. [Laughter] So he put in a light touch early in the game. It wasn't altogether light because the nonaggression pact point kept reappearing in serious presentations of the Soviet negotiators, and it did loom large in this week-long period of talks. But there weren't too many grand insights about division of the world, if that's what you're intimating.

O'BRIEN: Harriman was quite concerned about the nonaggression pact all the way through this.

READ: Yes.

O'BRIEN: Did he make it clear early in the negotiations that he would like to have it separated, or didn't he?

READ: Yes. He made it quite clear. He knew the pitfalls that this would pose for us, not only with our allies but with the Hill and with congressional ratification. During the course of the negotiations, I think it was on the 17th or 18th of July, Kennedy first started consulting key Senators and members of Congress, and it became painfully obvious that if we cluttered this treaty with any such exhortations about nonaggression, we'd be in one hell of a lot of trouble. He made this very clear to Harriman in a cable halfway through the discussions. Averell was well aware of the complications that this would involve and had taken a consistently negative position on it with the Russians from the very beginning.

O'BRIEN: Do you think this was a throwaway on the part of the Russians, originally?

READ: I don't know. It's awfully hard to really determine why they were making such a pitch for it. They didn't persist on this for very long or very hard so it's just an interesting footnote to history at this point.

O'BRIEN: Do we have any, in a sense, throwaways at this point?

READ: Yes. We had a throwaway early in the game. We were pushing for a provision on peaceful uses of nuclear explosions, which had been prepared, really, to please the Atomic Energy Commission and its backers on the Hill, and this was given away early in the negotiations. It was obvious that we couldn't put this over to the Russians. The Russians took a good healthy whack at it right away.

O'BRIEN: There was also the issue that comes up in the negotiations of the ban, as I understand it, the ban affecting the possible use of nuclear weapons in case of war. How does this issue generate? Does that come through your side?

READ: I have just recalled this as we talk here now. I had forgotten that that issue had been dragged in by the heels, and I don't remember how it arose or what wording created the problem. It was so painfully apparent that the prohibitions that we were talking about were peacetime prohibitions and not applicable when everyone's ultimate security's--interests were at stake in war. This was a theoretical problem and not a real one.

O'BRIEN: Does that come from this side of the Atlantic, or is that an issue that is generated by the delegation?

READ: Yes, I think it was a theoretical concern that we anticipated. Everyone was worrying from day one about how to answer the critics on the Hill when we got to the ratification process. So, it was just an anticipatory worry on our part.

O'BRIEN: Well, you were talking about Hailsham [Lord Hailsham, Quintin Hogg] a moment ago and his role in it. As I understand it, the British were quite concerned about Harriman's so-called rigidity in negotiations. How does that issue come back to you on this side?

READ: Well, I don't recall their degree of concern. They were probably a bit worried about Averell's age, though here we are seven years later, and he's still going strong. But they hadn't dealt with him closely since the [George C.] Marshall Plan days, and I think, probably, it was just a concern about the fact of his age and the fact that his wartime experiences and tough post war anti-Stalin views might dominate his thinking in this period of time. They couldn't have been wronger. He obviously had infinitely more flexibility and skill at this sort of thing than anyone we could have fielded.

Hailsham was not a skillful negotiator in this at all in the opinion of any of the U.S. team. He was awfully quick to grab things that the Soviets would put forward, which really wouldn't bear close scrutiny. He was constantly toying with the nonaggression pact idea and saying, "Well, why don't we consider this?" He just simply didn't fully fathom the complications that that would involve. There was correspondence between Macmillan and Kennedy which reflected our concern about him at one point during this ten-day period.

O'BRIEN: Was that raised on this end?

READ: By Kennedy with Macmillan.

O'BRIEN: By Kennedy with MacMillan. Was the President suggesting that he be recalled?

READ: No, but obviously, it had to be very oblique. It was a delicate matter to say you don't have a very good negotiator, but he got him toned down on a couple of the points that Hailsham was causing a bit of a flurry about.

O'BRIEN: I understand there was a phone exchange between he and Macmillan at one point and also Carl Kaysen and Mac Bundy, all going at the same time. Were you there when that happened?

READ: Yes, and it was a horrible connection we could barely hear Carl, and he could barely hear us. It got down to more and more simple language. I think the final shout was "Say yes." [Laughter] I wasn't in the room, of course, during the Kennedy-Macmillan conversations, but I remember the one with Kaysen and Bundy.

O'BRIEN: I understand he was on the phone in the Soviet Foreign Ministry.

READ: He was immediately adjacent; it was in the Situation Room where the President was talking to Macmillan. Was Carl in the. . . .

O'BRIEN: I understand he was in the Foreign Ministry.

READ: Was he?! [Laughter]

O'BRIEN: He was making the call out, which brings out an obvious question: Isn't there a problem there of, really, security in a call of that nature?

READ: Oh, certainly. There is a great deal of self-delusion about the security in these things because you inevitably get down to the final crunch period, and it's more important to get your point across than to worry about little people somewhere listening in along the line. And you're dealing with the opposite side, at that point, directly. Plainly, it's desirable to avoid if you can, but when you're right at the edge of agreement and you're just trying to clinch the last point or two, why, it has to be done in this manner.

O'BRIEN: That was over, as I understand, a question of recognition of so-called unrecognized countries.

READ: Yes.

O'BRIEN: How did this get into the. . . .

READ: It came up because of the German concern about an adherence clause which would have conferred governmental status on the East Germans. The language which was finally worked out, which you have available to you. . . . Let's see here. . . . It finally--I can't put my finger on it, but it finally answered completely the Bonn worries about conferring status by this particular clause. It referred to states and "other governmental authorities" or something; a saving clause which didn't in any way dignify the status of the countries in the situation of the East Germans.

O'BRIEN: This is the reason, then, of the multiple depository idea.

READ: Exactly. To avoid the East Germans coming into Washington to deposit their treaty . . .

O'BRIEN: Where does that idea generate?

READ: . . . or Taiwan in Moscow. I don't recall where the idea came from or whether this is a clause which appears in other treaties. I don't remember whether there were any precedents prior to this or whether this was the first precedent created. It made sense because there were three principal capitals involved. We each had allies that were odious to other allies in one form or another. It is the principle that's been employed in several other treaties since 1963.

O'BRIEN: Well, that gets down. I guess, to the matter of some of the meetings and some of the personalities involved. I pulled these out of the White House appointments book, which I think is perhaps a partial listing of some of the meetings. What do you recall about some of the individuals here, going through this series of meetings regarding negotiations that were going on?

READ: Well, I remember mainly a really remarkable degree of unanimity of objective and accord. There was absolute common purpose of literally everyone who appears on these lists. There are some fellows that you wouldn't normally think would be particularly keen to this sort of effort, and yet they were. John McCone, for instance, who came in at the end, was tremendously strong in favor of the whole effort. He played an instrumental role on the Hill in getting certain senators to back ratification. Ed Murrow, as you see, was brought in on July 24, had some very, very good suggestions, I remember, on how to handle the public presentation. These sessions were as free of unpleasant undercurrents or cliques as any effort I can recall for a six year period of like meetings. There wasn't any tug-of-war going on behind the scenes.

O'BRIEN: Well, what's on the President's mind during this whole. . . .

READ: A driving desire to get the bacon, to get the agreement; growing concern about the problems of congressional attitudes as he kept meeting with more and more of them during the course of it, particularly anxiety if we had to have extraneous provisions in the treaty as it emerged. Congressional concern also made us very keenly aware of the headaches if we had a withdrawal clause which wasn't related specifically to events, suspicious events of a testing nature. The Soviets put forth a provision which would have, in effect, just let them back out on ninety days notice if they declared that their national--they felt in some way, nebulous way, that their security was jeoparidized. It was quite obvious that that could have used this clause to mask a simple decision to resume a testing program, as they had done in '61. That recent precedent was very much on the President's mind. He knew that he had to have a clause which made sense on the Hill to get ratification. But he and Harriman really showed a remarkable ability to prevent extraneous issues from clouding the horizon during this effort. It was really an admirable show on both ends.

O'BRIEN: Was he ever impatient with the pace of things?

READ: No. It was a fairly fast-moving affair. We got bogged down on a couple of clauses along the way, but only briefly. It went quite well from the beginning.

O'BRIEN: How about Secretary Rusk? How does he react to the test ban, the developments that are taking place?

READ: He was as delighted as all members of the group were about developments. He was instrumental in writing a number of the cables that went out.

O'BRIEN: In going over the cables, is there any particular cables that you feel--or anything that you think is of particular significance you'd like to put in here?

READ: Well, the only one that occurs to me that is really quite typical of the President's essential attitude was the very first one that went out to Harriman. It was dated the 15th of July. Harriman had reported on his first conversation with Khrushchev in which it was quite apparent that they wanted to do business with us on this thing. The President scribbled a message to Harriman, I remember, on the back of an envelope I carried back and had had a terrible time trying to interpret his writing--his writing was horrible to try to read. It gives you a good flavor of what was on his mind. He said, "Your report is encouraging on limited test ban. You were right to press for that without, repeat, without link to the nonaggression pact. You were also right to keep the French out of the initial treaty, although I continue to be prepared to work on the French if the Soviets will continue to work on the Chinese. You should make this clear as the occasion offers. I remain convinced, however, the Chinese problem is more serious than Khrushchev comments in his first meeting. I believe you should press the question in a private meeting with him. I agree that large stockpiles are characteristic of U.S. and U.S.S.R. only, but consider that relatively small forces in hands of people like the Chinese Communists could be very dangerous to all of us. Further, I believe that even the limited test ban can and should be the means to limit diffusion."

It shows his great desire to not see this cluttered and his continuing concern about the underlying security problems involved.

O'BRIEN: Well, I understand Harriman pressed the issue on China--on Chinese-Russian relations. On several instances Khrushchev, in a sense, turned him off.

READ: Well, he turned him off just by saying, "What are you going to do about the French?" And we weren't exactly in the position to say we were getting very far in that quarter. He countered with the obvious one on that.

O'BRIEN: As I understand it, the Russian-Chinese ideological conversations were taking place during that period of time in Moscow. Did the thinking about that or did that ever enter into the thinking of the negotiations at all?

READ: I don't remember any evidence of that.

O'BRIEN: In putting together a delegation to go for the signing, did you get any insight into the selection of these people or the non-selection of people for that delegation?

READ: No, I think it was pretty obvious who should be chosen. Seniority dictated most of the answers. Obviously, we were concentrating exclusively on the Senate because of the Senate ratification prerogative. The Majority Leader didn't want to go, as I recall; he had to stay and tend the store. [Hubert H.] Humphrey was an obvious choice as chairman of the disarmament subcommittee. And [George D.] Aiken was obvious, being senior Republican on the [Senate Foreign Relations] Committee, and Chairman [J. William] Fulbright, was, of course, included. So it was pretty much dictated by seniority and the Committee leadership structure.

O'BRIEN: Did Ambassador [Adlai E.] Stevenson's name ever come up?

READ: I don't think so. I just don't recall, if his name was suggested, as well it might have been, looking back to the history of the issue in the '56 election and Stevenson's original test ban proposal.

O'BRIEN: Well, we've covered a number of things here in regard to the test ban. Is there anything that we've left out?

READ: I don't think so. I think we've covered the main points in this interview and the earlier one. The question that still haunts me was what the President would have done next in turning his sights towards the next objective in arms control and disarmament. In the six months remaining of his life or less, I never sensed any direction about where we were heading after the test ban treaty. There was little indication of thrust or direction in this particular field. Of course, other events were pressing in. We had a whole series of little Berlin crises in fall of that year just before the assassination. But again, it was a haunting feeling of drift in an important area that developed that late summer and fall. It was at the same time that so many domestic things on the Hill were in a state of drift or impasse at that point.

O'BRIEN: Did the Russians show any interest in carrying it further into another stage?

READ: I can't specifically recall at this point. There were a series of letters back and forth with Khrushchev, then and later. At one point, they showed interest in a troop thin-out in Central Europe at a time when we were opposed to it. At a later point in the [Lyndon B.] Johnson regime, we were pushing it and they had cooled off. It was a mismatching of time as much as anything else, and the issue of a nonproliferation agreement hadn't yet come into sight.

We were concerned in the course of the test ban agreement with observation points, stationary observation points. I remember that looked like an important next objective. But it never jelled; it never came into focus. I think we've pretty much covered the works.

O'BRIEN: One final thing just struck me. Was there anything in the way of technological developments that took place that you were aware of, either just prior to the negotiations or during the negotiations, which in any way contributed to the outcome?

READ: In the testing or detection field?

O'BRIEN: Either the testing or detection field . . .

READ: I'm not aware of anything.

O'BRIEN: . . . or anything else. Well, in our conversation on the phone, you mentioned you might be able to discuss some things in regard to Bundy's staff, the operation of his operation in the White House. I really don't know what to ask you in the way of questions except if you care to discuss organization or anything that you feel that would be very helpful to someone twenty years from now, twenty-five years from now, trying to figure out that operation.

READ: Well, I don't really know what I had in mind in saying that on the phone. It was an operation, obviously, that I saw intimately from the State Department end. It was an extraordinarily talented crew of people. The level of capability of that staff, as opposed to the staff of three or four years later, was markedly higher. There were problems, of course, in terms of personalities and difficulties, but I don't think there is much point in getting into that here.

O'BRIEN: What was your role, your contact role with them?

READ: Well, the massive paper flow from the State Department to the White House and the White House to the State Department went in Read-Bundy memos or Bundy-Read memos. So my office and Bundy's had contact on a thousand and one different things in the course of any given week. I would be on the phone with [K. Bromley] Brom Smith, who was sitting next to Bundy, many times daily; with Mac a number of times, too, and about the manifold items of State-White House business that occur in the course of the day. So we saw a great deal of the staff, and I knew its strengths and weaknesses.

O'BRIEN: Right. The staff was organized along the lines of, basically, problem areas, as I understand.

READ: Yes.

O'BRIEN: Let's get into that organization, if you care to. [Robert W.] Komer basically took care of the Middle East at that point, as I understand.

READ: Bob was on the Middle East. I guess Brubeck was Africa, just beginning at that point.

O'BRIEN: Who had done that before?

READ: I forget who was handling that.

O'BRIEN: Who was handling Latin America?

READ: [Ralph A.] Dungan was handling Latin America on a somewhat casual basis. It wasn't the most effective coverage because Ralph had a thousand and one other things to do. This was a weakness in their staff approach to foreign policy. Europe was usually considered Mac's concern, or he would take a primary hand in it.

O'BRIEN: Who would have handled U.N. affairs at this point?

READ: Do you have a list of them?

O'BRIEN: No, I don't. I'm just starting to do a number of things on this. That's one of the reasons I wanted to take it up with you, to get some insights on some of the things I will be doing in the next few months. Surprisingly, in effect, that's one of our weaknesses. We really haven't done much on that or on a lot of the others in foreign affairs. That's one of the reasons I've been trying to pick up some of these things. Well, let's put it this way: In a sense, you're in a place in which you're in contact with the staff as well as the Department. Do you see any tensions there between the Department and that staff?

READ: Oh, there were inherent tensions, and there always will be. I mean, nearness to the President, speaking on behalf of the President, or implying that you speak on behalf of the President, of course creates tension in any bureaucracy. So there are all sorts of inherent tensions built into the thing. It worked reasonably well during this period. There was a minimum of machinery, as you probably know from your general readings. The NSC [National Security Council] had become fairly dormant and was used for rallying support once a policy had been worked out and agreed upon within the Executive branch. Things were done in a fairly sensible, workman-like, pragmatic basis. Seeing some of the toils of that office in recent days, I look back on the Bundy period as a fairly efficient one.

O'BRIEN: Well, there's a number of people who feel free to go directly to people on the White House staff--in the Department, and then other people, particularly career-oriented people in the Department, as I understand it, have a tendency to go through channels. Did you get any insight into examples of this or problems that come up with that?

READ: Well, sure, but I don't know how useful this would be to get into. This problem has been a major headache over the last several years.

O'BRIEN: I think it would be, really, terribly important . . .

READ: It really is sort of a whole set of new subjects and is my problem, and I've got a dentist appointment in twenty minutes.

O'BRIEN: Oh well, could we--could I get back to you some time when you have a little time?

READ: Sure.

O'BRIEN: Just briefly--you mentioned a whole set of new subjects--what. . . .

READ: Well, I'm talking now, not specifically about the Bundy period or the [Walt W.] Rostow period or [Henry A.] Kissinger period, but just in general. There is a problem when any member of the White House staff, numbering twenty or thirty or forty, feels free to contact any level of a large department of several thousand people and say the White House wants this or the White House wants that. Frequently, it's the most junior, new member of the White House staff who says that, and he doesn't have any more idea what the President wants than you or I do. But there is a tendency on the part of people in the Executive branch, particularly the newer ones, to jump as though God had spoken when they get a phone call of this nature. So there are all sorts of problems which that

generates, and a request directly to a young Foreign Service officer to do something or send a paper over can set in stream a whole series of problems. He can send over a very poor, premature piece of paper which just doesn't represent anyone's thinking except his own. It then, in turn, becomes the cause for State-White House problems. At the other end it's ridiculed. The fellow who gets it says, "Look what that State Department sent over this time," when it's just one person's rushed view.

You have to have--if you have an orderly setup, you simply have to have a central point of contact between the White House and the State Department, or it gets thoroughly disorderly. Obviously, this has to be supplemented with person to person contacts up and down the line at times on certain subjects. But time after time, for instance, unless you had a central system of this sort, you'd get a call from a subordinate White House official through a fellow in the State Department way down the line, saying, "I clear a cable which is over here. Get it out." They'd come rushing up to the Secretariat and say, "It's cleared. Send it." We learned by bitter experience not just to nod and do so, but to check on our own with the central office at the White House there because frequently the White House contact didn't have any authority to clear the cable or only amend a fraction of the problem. It would have been disastrous to do what the initial contact had said, and everyone would have been ill-served in the process. So this is general bureaucratic sets of problems I'm talking about now. And they are legion, of course, as you can imagine.

O'BRIEN: I would like you to go into that because I think it is a--at some time in the future, of course; I know you have a dental appointment--but some time in the future. I think it is for people interested in government and the way government functions--I know it would be a very useful discussion because you dealt with a lot of those people.

Well, thank you.

READ: It's a pleasure, and good luck to you.