

Paul H. Nitze Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 5/22/1964
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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 Nitze's time on the National Security Policy Committee, the workings of the Department of Defense, and the Kennedy administration's approach to nuclear weapons, among other topics.

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INTERVIEW BETWEEN MISS DOROTHY FOSDICK AND MR. PAUL H. NITZE

SUBJECT: MR. NITZE'S IMPRESSIONS OF JOHN F. KENNEDY

Miss Fosdick: Mr. Secretary, I thought we might start the interview with a rather natural question. When did you first meet Senator Kennedy? What were your first impressions of him on that encounter?

Mr. Nitze: I first met Mr. Kennedy through Deidre Henderson. She worked on his staff, when he was Senator. He had assigned to her research work with respect to defense issues. She was working for him up in Boston, and she asked me whether I would consult with Senator Kennedy about a speech he was going to make in the Senate on the subject of defense. I had lunch with Senator Kennedy at the Senate and we had a long discussion of basic defense issues. I then supplied him with a memorandum, ideas from which were then incorporated in the speech he made at that time on the subject of defense.

Miss Fosdick: What was your impression of him in terms of grasping national security issues and using your advice and incorporating it in his speech? Was he quick to catch the point?

Mr. Nitze: I thought he was very quick. In fact, he had independently come to some of the ideas that seemed to me to be important. He was concerned about the massive retaliation doctrine. He was concerned that we were not putting enough emphasis upon defense options other than the strategic nuclear attack option. He was concerned about the military support which we were able to give in crisis spots in Africa, the Middle East and the Far East.

Miss Fosdick: Did he use the material which you gave him?

Mr. Nitze: It was included along with material obtained from others.

Miss Fosdick: You were appointed by the Senator, following his nomination as candidate for President, to head his National Security Policy Committee. I wondered how this came about. Did this come about through Senator Jackson? Senator Jackson at that time was Chairman of the Democratic National Committee and Senator Kennedy had asked him to arrange for a National Security "task force" as one among a number of task forces.

Mr. Nitze: That is correct. My recollection is that there were three factors involved in my selection: one was that, after having worked with Senator Kennedy on his defense speech, from time to time I would be asked for comments or advice on various other things that would come up in the Senatorial debates or in other speeches with reference to defense policy; secondly, I'd been responsible for the foreign policy-defense work in the Democratic Advisory Council; third, Senator Jackson had been asked by Senator Kennedy to make recommendations to him, as I remember it, on how to set up staff work which would deal with foreign policy-defense issues, this staff work to be ready before the new administration took office.

Miss Fosdick: This National Security Policy Committee or Task Force which you headed up, was one of a number of task forces operating during this period to supply preliminary advice to the President-elect. In starting you off on this committee, did he suggest that you get in touch with the other task forces, or did he indicate that he wanted you to go about your work independently? What I am interested in here is whether he emphasized collaboration with other groups or did he want your committee advice unadulterated by coordination or compromise, let's say, with the Symington Committee, or Clark Clifford's Committee, or one of the other groups?

Mr. Nitze: Well, the only other related committee was the Symington Committee which was working on problems of organization and Ros Gilpatric was a member both of the Symington Committee and my committee. The coordination was effected between the two committees by Ros. But I think the point you're getting at is what was the President's interest; the President's interest was in my committee's views, not compromises with anything else.

Miss Fosdick: If it's agreeable to you, I think we should attach to this interview the full text of the report of your National Security Policy Committee so that it will be in the permanent record. What were the main recommendations of your committee that particularly interested the President?

Mr. Nitze: What he did with this report was to give it to everyone of the cabinet appointees who dealt in this field. When he asked Mr. Rusk to take office, to be Secretary of State, one of the documents that he asked Mr. Rusk to read was this report. When he asked Mr. McNamara to become Secretary of Defense, this was the document he gave him to go over. This report was the starting position in this field that he had accepted. When I say accepted, he didn't put his "John Henry" on it, neither did he question the general thrust of the report. This was the report gotten up by the people he had confidence in; he had gone over it himself and felt that this should be the starting point for further analysis by the responsible cabinet members.

Miss Fosdick: I notice that in the development of the report there were consultations with some of the British and German leaders, both of the Adenauer group and of the Social Democratic group, and also with some of

the French leaders. Was this done on your initiative or was there some suggestion from the President-elect that the background for this document should extend to some analysis of the points of view of key foreigners?

Mr. Nitze: This was done really on my initiative, but Mr. Kennedy had also asked me to do two other things. One of them was to monitor for him the negotiations which were going on in NATO with respect to the Herter proposal which involved a NATO pool of strategic nuclear weapons--the idea which subsequently evolved into the MLF--which was under negotiation in Europe at that time. The Republican Administration wanted to get a commitment from Mr. Kennedy to the ideas as developed. Mr. Kennedy asked me to meet with Spaak and with the people from the State Department, primarily Mr. Herter and Douglas Dillon, who were conducting the negotiations for the United States. In connection with that, I talked to Spaak, the Germans, the British, the French, and brought up some of the policy issues which were under review in our committee at that time. Mr. Kennedy had also asked me to be the liaison man for him with the Treasury Department in connection with the gold flow or balance of payments problem. So, during this period I was trying to do all three of these things concurrently for Mr. Kennedy.

Miss Fosdick: Even at this early stage in the building of the Administration you were being looked at by the President-elect as something of a trouble shooter, I would say. Is that fair?

Mr. Nitze: I think that is fair in the field of things that affected the outside, the non-domestic U.S. issues, economic, balance of payments problems, diplomatic and defense.

Miss Fosdick: We'll get back to the report of the National Security Policy Committee, but I thought we might move on for a moment to how you got your job in the Administration. With this kind of background and having done this sort of work for the President-elect, you were obviously in a position to take on at his request a number of different posts. Why did he settle on the one he did for you? Could you throw any light on this?

Mr. Nitze: I think the first question in his mind was whom did he want as Secretary of State. He had Clark Clifford working for him on the question of helping him get the right people for the right cabinet posts, and Clark Clifford talked to me about it. I said that I would recommend Dean Rusk, whom I believe neither Clark Clifford nor the President knew. Clark Clifford suggested that I get in touch with Dean Rusk and see what Dean Rusk's view of it was, would he be willing to accept this post. So I talked to Dean Rusk and his first reaction was that he couldn't afford it, that he had no money other than his salary from the Rockefeller Foundation and that to move down to Washington to rent a house and to entertain the way one would have to as Secretary of State would be beyond his financial capability, and that

he must say no. So I passed this on to Clark Clifford. Then a few days later, Dean Rusk telephoned me and said that not at his request but on their initiative the Trustees of the Rockefeller Foundation had said they thought it would be regrettable if, just because of financial problems, he, Dean Rusk, were not to be available for the job of Secretary of State; that they thought he would be entitled to retirement pay if he left the Rockefeller Foundation for this purpose, and that he therefore was in a position to accept it. I passed this on to Clark Clifford and the next I knew about it, Dean Rusk was in Washington with the President.

The President then telephoned me and said he was with Rusk and that Mr. Rusk had accepted the job of Secretary of State and he wanted to ask me to be Under Secretary of State for Economic Affairs--that the job of Under Secretary for Political Affairs would go to Chester Bowles. Then the President said that, before I answered he wanted me to know that he had other positions in mind for which he would want me. One of them was the National Security Council job of Assistant to the President for National Security Council matters, and the third was the Deputy Secretary of Defense. I asked the President how much time I had to make up my mind, and he said, "Well, three minutes." I said of the three jobs, I would prefer the job of Deputy Secretary of Defense. The reason for this was that I had already done the economic kind of work in the State Department and I was reluctant to get back into all the problems having to do with aid, trade policy, tariff negotiations--that part of the State Department's work. I said that it seemed to me the key issues were those which were outlined in our National Security Policy Committee's paper, and that the most crucial one was a more flexible military support for the conduct of foreign policy rather than the previous emphasis upon massive retaliation. I said, this also was the key to whether the National Security Council job could be well done, for unless the Pentagon really wanted to make the switch from the old policy to a new one, the National Security Council job would be almost an impossible one. It therefore seemed to me that the place to be in order to try to get done what I wanted to get done was in the Defense Department and not in either of the other two jobs. He said, "All right--that was what I wanted to know."

The next thing that happened was that the name of Mr. McNamara was then presented to him for the Secretary of Defense job. I believe that Adam Yarmolinsky recommended him either to Clark Clifford or the President directly. When the President talked to Mr. McNamara, I understand that he accepted, but he made one request and that was that he would be given full authority to select his own team.

Miss Fosdick: That is, that McNamara be given full authority?

Mr. Nitze: That McNamara be given full authority to select his own team. I believe the President agreed to that request. I think the President then did say that he had considered me for the job of Deputy Secretary of Defense,

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but I think others had recommended Ros Gilpatric. Mr. McNamara immediately got hold of Ros and got hold of me, and it was clear in his mind that the person he wanted as Deputy Secretary would be someone who could become his alter ego in everything that he did. What he wanted me to do was to work specifically on the matters of military policy and the interface between foreign policy and defense policy. This more appropriately could be done in ISA, International Security Affairs--the Assistant Secretaryship. Obviously, I was somewhat disappointed because I would have preferred the job of Deputy Secretary. I thought the best thing to do was to call Mr. Kennedy on the telephone, so I did. Or attempted to. I had his private number down at Palm Beach where he was. Mr. Kennedy found it wiser not to answer that particular telephone call. I got the clear message that he did intend to back up his agreement with Mr. McNamara, that Mr. McNamara should have the authority to choose his own team in the way he wanted to. And further, that Mr. Kennedy wanted me under those circumstances to do the Assistant Secretary job in ISA. So I did it.

Miss Fosdick: Was there any breach or shift in the agreement with regard to any of the personnel of the Defense Department, or did Secretary McNamara have carte blanche to take on whomever he wanted.

Mr. Nitze: I think he took on only those he wanted, with one possible exception. Mr. Fay was a close friend of the President and Mr. McNamara chose Fay for the job of Under Secretary of the Navy largely because of, if not entirely because of, his close relationship with Mr. Kennedy.

Miss Fosdick: From the very beginning of the Administration then there seems to have been the understanding by President Kennedy and Secretary McNamara that you were going to be very heavily involved in the substantive, critical, strategic defense issues. Granted that President Kennedy tended to put advisors or friends into certain compartments and categories and then handle them in those compartments and in those categories, would you perhaps comment on what category you really fitted into--in the beginning and then perhaps how that relationship with the President developed. For example, was it a social relationship--were you a social friend, too? Were you close personal friends? Did he consider you more of a trouble shooter to bring in on really critical issues? Did he rely on you heavily for substantive advice? Did he think of you as just ISA Assistant Secretary, or did he think of you in a really far broader role in terms of the problems that he had to face?

Mr. Nitze: To answer the first part of your questions, he did not consider me as being a social friend, although I had known him for some time. He considered me as a person to work on specific projects. I think he wanted to be able to get my judgment on any issue of foreign affairs, or defense affairs or the interface between foreign affairs and defense affairs. I think he would have preferred it if I had maintained a direct relationship

with him; in fact, I subsequently got some complaints from the White House staff that I didn't independently go to the White House to see him and gossip with him about a number of the issues as they came up so that he could get an independent person-to-person view of the way things were going in the Defense Department with respect to these issues.

Miss Fosdick: Why didn't you maintain that direct relationship. Was there some factor here that caused you to be reluctant to do this?

Mr. Nitze: Well, in part, I think it goes back to the problem over my initial appointment, whether I would get the Deputy Secretary of Defense post and whether I was really going to be working for Mr. McNamara. If I was really going to be working for Mr. McNamara, I was going to work for Mr. McNamara. You have to make these decisions early whenever one takes over a job as to what will be the chain of authority. It seemed to me that I would be in deep trouble with Mr. McNamara, and be ineffective, unless I was very careful always to talk to Mr. McNamara first before going to the President. When I went to see the President, Mr. McNamara always knew that I was not trying to undercut him.

Miss Fosdick: Did you ever have occasion to explain this relationship, this element in the picture, to the President in either a humorous or a direct way?

Mr. Nitze: He was a very sensitive and intelligent person, and he knew exactly what the story was. He understood perfectly why I was doing it this way and I think he came to the conclusion that he would not urge me to change it. And, frankly, I think it was the right answer. I think we did, during those early months of 1961, get adopted and established as defense policy all those things the President was really interested in. I think Mr. McNamara did accept these ideas as his own. Mr. McNamara was trying as hard as he could to work with Mr. Kennedy and get done what Mr. Kennedy wanted to get done. So this was far and away to my mind the best way of proceeding, and I think it was successful.

It was somewhat a counter situation to the way in which the State Department operated--in the State Department every Assistant Secretary and sometimes people much further down the line felt they were entitled to go directly to the President without first clearing the matter with Mr. Rusk or being sure that this was in conformity with what Mr. Rusk wanted to do. Often the problem was that the President was receiving five or six different types of views from the State Department, and it was almost impossible to tell which was which. It was sometimes difficult, even when necessary to do so, for Mr. Rusk to pull all these things together into a State Department position so at least the President would know what the considered view of the State Department as a Department was.

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The considered view of the Pentagon as a Department was not always unanimous. Sometimes there were basic differences between individual members of the Joint Chiefs, and between them and me or Mr. McNamara. But I think the President always had a pretty clear idea of what the Department of Defense position was.

Miss Fosdick: Did the President dig deep into the Department when given a Department position to find out what your point of view was; what the Joint Chiefs had said; what, perhaps, people even further down were saying, or did he tend to take the considered Defense Department view and not question it, or ask for debate in front of him among various points of view?

Mr. Nitze: He welcome^d debate in front of him, and he would specifically ask the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Lemnitzer at one time, and General Taylor later, do you agree with this? Do you personally agree with this? Do the Chiefs agree with it? Which ones of the Chiefs agree with it? Is that what Admiral so and so thinks? And from time to time he would ask the detailed working people to come and report to him directly, but he would always have Mr. McNamara, Ros, me or somebody else from his office there when these things happened. Then it didn't result in a confusion of the lines of authority within the Pentagon.

Miss Fosdick: That was not necessarily the case in handling the State Department, was it? The President did not always have the Secretary of State there, did he, when he had Assistant Secretaries or the Chairman of the Policy Planning Staff, or even all the Directors?

Mr. Nitze: This was in part due to the enormous burden on the Secretary of State in handling negotiations in Europe, the UN, here, there and the other place, working with Ambassadors, so he wasn't as readily available as Mr. McNamara or Ros Gilpatric. Also the problems that you had to deal with in the State Department were the problems where you had to get down into finer detail more often. Mr. Kennedy was suspicious of generalized statements, generalized policy statements, that kind of deductive approach to a solution to problems. He was much more interested in finding the details of problems, finding out what were the relevant details, how did these all work together so he could understand the problems from the grass roots, and then make a decision on the basis of his somewhat intuitive feelings as a result of listening to the detail, having worked with the details, and having gotten right down to the bottom of the matter. In order to do this with respect to a problem like, well, the Congo, which was full of every kind of messy uncertainty, he would get everybody in and listen to them, read the material, read the teletypes. He knew it as well as the action officer of the State Department. You can't quite do this with respect to a given division, or a ship, or a task force--it isn't quite comparable.

Miss Fosdick: Perhaps this is a good point at which to comment on the President's attitude towards the advice that comes up through the military

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channels, and how he either changed his attitude toward it or developed a particular point of view on how to handle the problem of obtaining military advice.

Mr. Nitze: I think he was always troubled with just this problem--how do you obtain military advice; how do you check into it; how do you have an independent view as to its accuracy and relevance; how do you know whether you really need sixteen divisions in this given situation, or whether ten would be enough or whether you need twelve? How do you know whether you need so and so many air squadrons or reconnaissance squadrons, or this or that or the other thing, to be kept in operation? How do you really know these things?

For instance, the military often used to come up with a preliminary estimate that before undertaking a given political-military action they should be authorized to use nuclear weapons in the event of necessity. If the question came up of taking a political action which could conceivably lead down a course which could result in hostilities with the Chinese Communists, then the military opinion would be you shouldn't do this unless you are prepared to authorize now the use of nuclear weapons in the event of the contingency evolving to the point where they are required. President Kennedy was skeptical as to whether the military had really looked at all the possibilities of holding off the use of nuclear weapons and still obtaining our political objective. How could he get down to having a solid judgment on it? He thought that these were problems which were his responsibility--not the Joint Chiefs of Staff responsibility--as to whether or not to make the transition from the use of conventional weapons to nuclear weapons. How could he obtain that capability--the capability to make a valid independent judgment? But I don't think he ever really satisfied himself that he had found a way to get the best possible military help on such matters.

He had great confidence in Mr. McNamara and I think he also had confidence in me in this area. I think that he felt he could listen to our advice and count on our advice. Yet it wasn't "advice" that he wanted; what he wanted really was the feeling that he personally was in a position to exercise the responsibility which was his and which was not delegatable--particularly on these matters of the use of nuclear weapons. He felt this was not a delegatable kind of thing, that he personally was responsible.

Miss Fosdick: When President Kennedy first came into office, did he understand, do you think, the full implication of nuclear power and the dangers involved, or did this grow upon him, manifesting itself in his interest in limitation of nuclear weapons, the test ban, the negotiations with the Russians--did the importance of this phase of his program develop early in the administration?

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Mr. Nitze: As I said earlier, I think he had already come to a realization or a preliminary conclusion that the preceding defense policy of primary reliance upon nuclear weapons was wrong from the political standpoint--from the standpoint of conducting the national policy of the United States. But I think there was a further development of his thought at the time that he was first briefed by the Net Evaluation Subcommittee of the National Security Council. The Subcommittee was responsible for making each year a net evaluation of the position of the United States versus the USSR in the event of a nuclear war, and I was present at the meeting in which he was first briefed by the Net Evaluation Committee. It was perfectly clear that it affected him deeply, the nature of the responsibilities he would be undertaking, that might have to make the decision to use nuclear weapons in a way which could lead to that kind of a situation. It was very hard for anybody to be in the position of realizing that some day he might be called upon to make that decision--in a real sense by himself.

Miss Fosdick: He apparently wanted to get tremendous detail, a variety of information and views on these critical problems. This, obviously, put a tremendous load on him personally as well as on his advisors. Have you any appropriate examples from the early period from your own personal experience that throw some light on this, on his need to get detailed information?

Mr. Nitze: Well, take Vietnam, for instance. He used to read all the telegrams that came in from Vietnam. There was one point when General Lansdale had written a memorandum about Vietnam. The President saw the memorandum. He immediately asked for Lansdale to come over and immediately went into a briefing and asked very penetrating questions about all the details, about specific people, about specific types of action, right down to the smallest detail. This was really the start of the story of the very keen interest in the Kennedy administration in South Vietnam's problems.

Miss Fosdick: To carry on a little further with this problem of the President's concern over nuclear weapons and their danger, would you comment on your own role in influencing his thinking in this area leading up to the test ban issue, for example? Is there some progression that you could trace in which you played a part?

Mr. Nitze: The central point of policy is really so simple--the central point of policy is whether one wants to put primary reliance upon the threat of the use--and perhaps the use--of nuclear weapons in support of foreign policy, or whether one wants to emphasize instead the other end of the spectrum. The other end is the support we give to people who are defending themselves against guerrilla warfare through helping them and aiding in guerilla warfare tactics. Is it wiser to make the effort to protect people in the lower edge of the full spectrum of political military danger, to try to really win the battle at the low edge of the spectrum, rather than be in a position where we are threatening to escalate or escalating to the higher end of the spectrum? On this I think he came to a policy decision while he was a Senator.

I don't believe that one can say that anybody had controlling influence over that basic policy decision--the real question was how should one go about converting that policy decision into appropriate action? This had myriad facets. One of the initial facets of the question was what should be done in the Pentagon to increase our limited war capability, and on this I did head the first study group trying to determine what our requirements were for limited war forces, what all the budgetary and other ramifications of this were. This developed into a much more elaborate analysis which was really the Program III phase in our Five-Year Force Level and Financial Plan structure. This was the initial effort of the Pentagon in 1961.

Another facet of it was the question of how do you help other countries in the sublimited war area, in the anti-guerrilla warfare and beyond that in a civil action kind of thing which may obviate the danger of a guerrilla warfare situation arising. In this field Bobby Kennedy and Max Taylor were the two who did the most work. This whole facet was developed in concrete detail.

Another facet of it was the question of how do you get command control over nuclear weapons by which you can be sure that they are not used contrary to Presidential decision. In this field, well, a number of us were concerned. I think the man who made the greatest contribution towards getting it done, creating ideas into actual hardware systems, was Marvin Stern in Dr. Brown's office, although before this got going, I had something to do with it; Harry Rowen had something to do with it; Dan Elsborg had something to do with it. It was quite a thing to get this worked up to programming and really translated from an idea into an action.

Miss Fosdick: You say that this whole range of approaches was very much on the President's mind--was he following up on it?

Mr. Nitze: Yes, he was following up on it. I think the other facet or the other place where he made the greatest contribution, where I may have played more of a role, was in how do you conduct foreign affairs differently by virtue of the changed capabilities. What do you do in Berlin by virtue of this approach rather than the preceding approach of just saying Berlin is so important that it may lead to thermonuclear war? How do you get away from that to something which is consistent with Mr. Kennedy's new approach which will in fact serve to safeguard Berlin against the very real thrust of the Russians' blockading of Berlin and the crisis of 1961-1962. That was the area which seemed to me to be the crucial area, and I think it seemed to him to be the crucial area. This obviously subsequently led to developing a policy with respect to the Cuban missile crisis which clearly was a demonstration of Mr. Kennedy's approach in a most crucial affair.

Miss Fosdick: Was there any tendency by the President as he looked down the road ahead to back off from the threat of nuclear weapons as one of the tools or elements in a foreign policy situation? Was this matter debated within the administration--as to whether one should even have the threat of nuclear weapons in the background, or whether this was even too dangerous and too risky? .

Mr. Nitze: This wasn't debated in big meetings. It was my feeling, however, that Mr. Kennedy would have been much happier if it were possible, if it could have been possible, to conduct policy with zero reference to the threat of we ourselves escalating a crisis situation to the nuclear phase. He would have been happier, I think, if we could be in the position to say that we would not be the first to use nuclear weapons. He didn't feel that he could say that; because in the European scene when one looked at the danger of a massive Soviet conventional attack into Europe, it did not look as though one could hold that without the West initiating the use of nuclear weapons in support. And if one were to say that he would not initiate the use of nuclear weapons under any circumstances including that circumstance, this would have driven the Germans into the arms of the French and both of them out of the NATO Alliance and probably into a position of some compromise with the Soviet Union which would be tantamount to a neutralization of Europe which would then have left the United States alone to face the whole Communist problem. This, Mr. Kennedy felt, he could not do, therefore he had to maintain a position that there were circumstances under which he would be prepared to initiate the use of nuclear weapons, and he so said in the spring of 1961 and made such a statement. I think this was only after a great deal of thought as to whether it wouldn't be possible to move to the position where he would not have to rely on the threat of ourselves initiating the use of nuclear weapons.