

Benjamin H. Read Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 2/22/1966
Administrative Information

Creator: Benjamin H. Read
Interviewer: Joseph E. O'Connor
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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 focuses on activity in the White House during the 1963 Test Ban Treaty negotiations in Moscow, among other topics.

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By Benjamin H. Read

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Benjamin H. Read

Benjamin H. Read

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Oral History Interview

with

BENJAMIN H. READ

February 22, 1966
Washington, D.C.

By Joseph E. O'Connor

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'CONNOR: Mr. Read, what was your relationship to the negotiations of the Test Ban Treaty and to the President?

READ: My relationship was rather intimate during the period of the negotiation. I had just taken over here as Executive Secretary of the Department of State about the first of July in 1963, just prior to Averell Harriman's departure for Moscow. And just before the Harriman group left on that assignment, the President asked Averell to go to the White House to get some special instructions from him. When the Governor came back to the Department--and I remember he was with Carl Kaysen at the time--he said that the President had spelled out very specifically to him the way in which you wished to have traffic to and from Moscow and the negotiating delegation handled. He said that the President wanted there to be only five readers in the Government of the traffic to and from Moscow on the Test Ban subject in addition to himself. He gave Averell a list of those persons. They included, as I recall, Secretary [Dean] Rusk, Under Secretary [George W.] Ball, Secretary [Robert S.] McNamara, [John A.] John McCone, and [McGeorge] Mac Bundy. And the President had

told Harriman and Kaysen that he wanted them to make arrangements to see that the traffic was handled in a completely private way. He did not want to have jeopardized a subject of this importance by any premature leaks that would find their way into newsprint.

As the Executive Secretary of the Department, they asked me to set up a system which would be absolutely iron-clad to carry out the President's wishes. So I worked out with the communicators a special slug, as we call it, or caption, to be put on all of this traffic, which we gave the unimaginative name of BAN to. Regardless of the classification of anything that would come in, it would be marked "Top Secret" or "Secret" BAN. And all traffic of that nature was to be handled in the communication room by the person who first saw the word "BAN" in most unusual ways. At the moment he saw that slug, he was to handle the matter personally and privately and not involve others in the communication section. As soon as the message had been decoded, the communicator was to put it in an envelope and give it to me personally--and to no one else--to give to these five readers. With a seven hour time difference between Moscow and Washington, this became quite a problem, as you can imagine, with traffic coming in in the middle of the night and communicators who weren't familiar with the issues calling me at odd hours. But I did work out a system which filled the President's requirements, and I was on the move for the better part of ten days carrying out the assignment. I personally had to take the messages to the people in this building and work out arrangements for the others to come to my office to see it or to get it by special messenger.

As it worked out, Harriman and others in the delegation would dispatch cables to the Department which would be handled as I've indicated. And they would come in frequently, sometimes reporting, but sometimes asking for instructions on how to proceed on a given issue.

From the first or second day--I forget which--I found that by the end of the day there would be an accumulation of cables which I had trotted around to the various principal officers, but, because they were busy on a thousand and one other things, no one had been able to do any staff work on it and no one had been able to get any sort of outgoing draft instructions prepared on it. So I assumed that work, and on the second or third day of the negotiations we fell into the regular practice of going over to the White House, at about 7 o'clock or 8 o'clock in the evening with the Secretary, George Ball, [William C.] Bill Foster, who was included shortly after the start of the negotiations. Bob McNamara would be there. John McCone would be there. We'd meet first in the Cabinet room, and then usually the President would join us after we'd had a preliminary go-round and would stay with us anywhere from a half an hour to an hour, until we reached agreement on what should be sent out in the way of instructions or guidance to the delegation.

I started out pretty much as the bag-carrier for the group, and the communications piled up so fast that I had several briefcases to haul over every time we met. Then I assumed a first drafting role for needed replies and started preparing suggested agendas for the daily meetings, which I'd take to the White House and put in front of the group with draft outgoing messages. Sometimes the letter had and sometimes had not been reviewed by the others in advance.

Obviously, it was an intriguing experience. The President indicated a devouring interest in the subject of the negotiations. He'd delve into the subject with gusto and in considerable detail. And I remember many occasions in which he did set the tone of the outgoing instructions very personally and directly in his own words. I used to come back with the most god-awful collection of scribbled notations in my several pockets from each

member of the group. The hardest to decipher, I remember, were the President's, who had a terrible handwriting. And I'd try and put together these various items into an outgoing cable which would then reflect his desires and the group intent. I used to gulp hard before signing for all of them as was required to authorize transmission.

The group was added to as the discussions wore on in Moscow. It was about a ten-day negotiation. [U. Alexis] Alex Johnson became part of it almost from the beginning. I remember, [Edward R.] Ed Murrow was called in on a number of occasions; and I remember the President asking Ed Murrow's opinion on several issues that had come up. [Theodore C.] Ted Sorensen sat in on the last two or three days. I remember his attendance at the Cabinet room meetings. [Llewellyn E., Jr.] Tommy Thompson was brought in as an old Soviet hand whose judgment was respected by the whole group. We could go into the issues, but I'm not sure that's the purpose of this type of interview.

O'CONNOR: Really, that is the purpose of this type of interview. If you can. . . . I'm sure that was the period of most intense concentration on the Test Ban Treaty. And if you can give us some ideas of what were some of the specific interviews, specific matters that the President might be counting on or might suggest action on, or the specific questions that Averell Harriman might ask for instructions on. . . .

READ: Well, we have for instance, a book of the cables to and from, and certainly at this point in time, two and a half years later, I would be unable to reconstruct with any degree of exactness the negotiating problems that arose, although I remember some of them quite well. I wonder if you don't already have in your annals, the actual cables that went to and from.

O'CONNOR: I sure would like to have them for our annals. What I was thinking of was any particular thing that stood out in your mind or that was considered more important. Sometimes it is difficult to decipher, even from the cables, what really were issues that a great deal of attention was given to.

READ: Why don't you turn the machine off.

O'CONNOR: Sure. [Interruption]