Donald M. Wilson Oral History Interview –JFK #2, 1/14/1972
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Wilson, Donald M.; Member, John F. Kennedy's Presidential campaign staff (1960); Deputy Director, US Information Agency (1961-1965). Wilson discusses how his prior work with Time and Life influenced his role as part of John F. Kennedy's [JFK] staff. He discusses events such as the Bay of Pigs invasion, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Berlin situation, as well as the various types of meetings he was a part of, among other issues.

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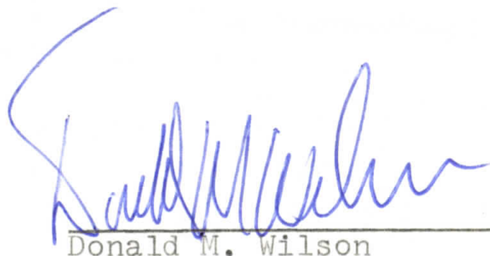

Donald M. Wilson

acting Archivist of the United States

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Donald M. Wilson – JFK #2

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Second Oral History Interview

with

DONALD M. WILSON

January 14, 1972
New York, New York

By William W. Moss

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MOSS: I want to go back with you to the time when you were at the *Time & Life* bureau in Washington and took your leave of absence to go on to the campaign. How did that come about?

WILSON: I had gotten to know the senator, John Kennedy, quite well from ‘56 to 1960, first of all, as head of the *Life* bureau. Starting in ‘56, one of the first stories I did was at the Democratic Convention in ‘56 when I covered Kennedy and his unsuccessful bid for the vice-presidential nomination. Thereafter we did a number of stories in *Life* (which I was running in the Washington end at that time) because he was obviously an attractive and ever-improving candidate for the nomination for the presidency, so, therefore, he was news, and I saw a lot of him. And there were a number of *Life* stories done, including the first, I think the first, national story that was ever done on Jackie Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] with a cover on *Life*, which I think was 1958 which was surely before people started paying much attention to her. I did a by-line story on her.

Well, anyway, so I particularly got to know them very well. I positively got to know Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy] well. My wife and I used to see Bobby and Ethel [Ethel Skakel Kennedy] socially, constantly, during that period.

MOSS: How did they impress you in those days? What are your recollections of what they were about and what kind of people they were?

[-34-]

WILSON: Well, in retrospect, they seem so much younger and gayer and more fun than what came later, of course, they all changed with the burdens of the presidency. But they were just delightful people to be with, all four of them, in those times. They were so interesting. They were so au courant with what was going on, but they also were a lot of fun to be with. The story I was referring to that we did for *Life* on Mrs. Kennedy…. was incidentally, the story in which all the famous pictures were made by Mark Shaw, the photographer, of John Kennedy walking on the dunes, playing with Caroline [Caroline B. Kennedy], all those pictures were done in one or two days. We went and spent the weekend - my wife and I and Mark Shaw spent a weekend with the Kennedys. It was just a thoroughly delightful time, full of wit and laughter.

But in January of 1960, I had lunch with Robert Kennedy and at the Metropolitan Club one day, and I think I surprised him. I said I had a good job, and obviously an interesting job as head of Washington's *Life* bureau. I said to him, "Look, I'm sufficiently impressed that this country needs John Kennedy as a president, I just want you to know that if you ever want to use me in the campaign, I will leave my job or take leave of absence from my job, if I can get it, to go to work." He was quite taken aback, I think. He said right then and there, "Well, we do," which I was pleased by. This is, as I say, in January. I think probably shortly after the actual announcement of his candidacy.

MOSS: Right.

WILSON: It was decided that since my forte was obviously the press and they had Pierre [Pierre E. Salinger], who was a very competent guy, handling the press, that there wouldn't be much point in my coming on the campaign until after he'd won the nomination; assuming he won it. And also, I think they were being considerate of me. They realized that if I came on early and he didn't win it, it would make my life more difficult at *Time* Incorporated, and certainly would mean, as I always understood, that I could not work in Washington again because I would be so clearly partisan after having taken such a role. I'd have to come back and work in the New York office.

So, anyway, what was agreed not just at that luncheon, but in the ensuing few weeks, was that if he won the nomination in Los Angeles that I'd go to work right after it. So the months went by, and I talked to the managing editor of *Life* shortly before Los Angeles, and told him of my intentions, because by that time it was becoming more apparent that he would win. And I said, if he wins, I want to take off, and that's what happened. [INTERRUPTION]

[-35-]

MOSS: We were just at the point where you had informed people that you were going to go with the Kennedys after the convention.

WILSON: Right.

MOSS: Okay. Now did you have any part to play at the convention?

WILSON: No, at the convention I was still working for *Life*, although I was not covering Kennedy.

MOSS: Right.

WILSON: I technically took a leave of absence within three or four days after the convention ended. My initial assignment was to work on the campaign materials for the forthcoming campaign; by that I mean the brochures, posters, that kind of written campaign material. And, as I look back on it, having had a little more experience with it in 1968 with Robert Kennedy, and having learned a lot more about it, it was an incredibly amateur operation in retrospect, although operations before that were even more amateur, I think for presidential campaigns.

But what we did -- and I worked quite directly with Robert Kennedy and occasionally with John Kennedy and a lot, and most of all with Ted SOrensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] -- was prepare a number of brochures on various issues. I remember we did one brochure on the aged. We did another on labor and several more for various other groups, as well as an overall brochure that could be useful for all groups. I borrowed the services of the art director friends in New York, who moonlighted on the side on the project to lay out the brochures so they looked modern and good. I do think they were, as of their date in 1960, the best that had ever been done. A lot of usage of pictures and the like which might not be surprising since I had come from *Life* and all. But I think they were pretty bright and sprightly. Of course, we were very careful about the wording in them. Actually the candidate wanted to see them all and did. Really what they went through was kind of a process of a basic writing job by me -- of course, as you know, a brochure is very boiled down thing -- and then Ted Sorensen would rewrite it, often very completely, and then JFK would sign off on most of them. This was all taking place in the summer of 1960.

MOSS: Where were you operating, in the ESSO Building?

WILSON: No, right after Los Angeles I went up to the Cape. I started operating right out of Cape Cod. By chance, my

wife's family had a house in Falmouth, which is near Hyannis. The Cape, New York, and Boston were the three places in which I was operating. Boston was involved because the Kennedys had used an advertising agency for their senatorial campaigns, the name of which eludes me now.

MOSS: No, we have it on the record and I can't remember what it is.

WILSON: They were a very kind of old-fashioned, unimaginative firm. What I was trying to do was bring some more imaginative New York techniques into the thing -- the kind of techniques that a magazine like *Life* would use, and I think we did so successfully. But, really, we were putting all this stuff together during that tremendously difficult period when the Congress went back into session. I don't remember John Kennedy being in a grumpier mood than he was during that period because he was frustrated by nothing happening in the Senate. He wanted to get going on the campaign; he couldn't. Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] also had the top hand in the Senate. Kennedy was really in a very testy mood during that month.

MOSS: In an awkward situation. Here he was, in effect, a more or less junior senator who was the candidate of his party under the thumb of Johnson and a recalcitrant Congress. [INTERRUPTION] Okay. Now we had you doing brochures from the Cape and from New York and Boston and trying to put a little life into the advertising campaign. You said these were the brochures on the aged and that sort of thing, did you do anything else in the way of TV coverage or anything of that sort, or was it all the printed material?

WILSON: No, I was just doing the printed material, and I never got involved in the TV material. Actually, I just did the printed material in the summer. As of approximately the first of September, I went out on the road with Senator Kennedy, and then I traveled the entire campaign with him every day thereafter. So I did not get involved in the TV part of it.

I will tell one thing about the selection of the official poster. It was a most difficult and sensitive selection process because he really didn't like any of the pictures that we proposed. I was pushing hard for a picture with a smile because I thought it was a good picture and I thought that a youthful look was favorable. Well,a s you well know, his youth was regarded as a political problem at that time. Is he too young to be president? But, that aside, he always looked better when he had a smile. We had one really fine picture

of him with a smile. Finally, I remember it was in Lyndon Johnson's chamber as a Senate Majority leader. I came in with this large blow-up of what became the official poster, and both Johnson and Kennedy were there and looked it over. They were both in foul humors, but Kennedy finally said, "Okay. Let's go with that." So we went with that. But that was at least the fourth or fifth picture I had tried out on him before he was willing to go with it.

MOSS: Did you see anything of Kennedy in a one-on-one relationship with Johnson at that time? Do you recall how they were…. This is just a shot in the dark.

WILSON: No, I would say no. No, I really didn't.

MOSS: Okay. Now, on to the campaign trail. You say you were with him daily. What sort of things were you doing on the campaign itself?

WILSON: Well, in effect, I was really the number two press secretary. As the campaign grew, we had two planes and eventually three planes. Normally, Pierre was on the plane with Senator Kennedy and I was on the plane with the press, but sometimes we switched around for one reason or another. The formulation of a campaign is that you do your best to get stories for both the morning and afternoon newspapers and the television and the radio people, as befits their needs in terms of timing. When you have two planes, you really need two people. Actually, eventually we had three people, because Andrew Hatcher also became very much involved. When Pierre went away, which he did on one occasion during the period of getting the USIA [United States Information Agency] documents on prestige, I was the acting press secretary for perhaps a week at one point. As I can recall I traveled the entire campaign.

MOSS: Do you remember any situations that were either 1) amusing, 2) particularly difficult, or 3) that went much much better than you expected? Any of these examples, anecdotal kinds of things?

WILSON: Well, I remember one of the worst nights and days we ever had was when he went to the National Plowing Contest. It was the big farm speech of the campaign. There was nothing that he was less acquainted with or less interested in than agriculture, although he knew it was damned important from the point of view of votes. That speech and everything connected with it was just a total torture. I remember it kept getting written and rewritten until the late hours of the morning. It was finally given, no one was very

happy with it. That was one of the darker moments. Oh gosh, I could remember so many of the higher moments. I've got to try to come up with something here that isn't already written or isn't so obvious. Of course, the Dallas…

MOSS: Houston.

WILSON: Houston, thank you. The Houston minister's speech was enormously important. I remember participating in the preparation, and I remember participating in the room and getting the feeling of the event as it unfolded. My gut told me that it was going very well; it did go very well.

Another evening I thought went very well which people don't write about as much -- it was just one of those evenings when I thought he was "on" and was awfully good -- was in the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City. It's a wonderful place to speak from, that podium

sort of sticks out right into the audience, the acoustics are wonderful. I thought he was almost as good that night as I'd ever heard during the entire campaign. Of course, the speeches, as you know, are similar; as you go through a campaign, you hear them again and again many times. So you do get very sophisticated as to what's a good evening or a good speech and what's a bad one. I remember that one was a particularly good one.

MOSS: All right. Were you at the Cape the night of the election?

WILSON: I was.

MOSS: Could you describe the events of that evening?

WILSON: Yes, there was one interesting event which I can shed some light on. I was in charge of the press at the Armory that night. Pierre was at the house. Therefore we were in constant communication. When the press had queries, they gave them to me and I transmitted them to Pierre and, sometimes, Bobby. There isn't a tremendous amount to say except for the very interesting matter of the telegram from Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] congratulating Kennedy on his victory. I don't know whether you're -- are you aware of this one?

MOSS: Yes, I know that there's…

WILSON: Well, I'm at the press center -- and I can only give you a guess that it might have been 2:00 am, somewhere around there, maybe 1:30, -- a Western Union man hands me a telegram at the Armory. It says -- whatever it said eventually became public -- "Congratulations on your victory," signed Dwight D. Eisenhower. I

immediately called over to the house and told Pierre this. Pierre said, "Hold it," and he put the Senator, put John F. Kennedy on the line. I read it to him. He was so shrewd I thought. He said, "You haven't put that out yet?" And I said, "Oh, no." He said, "You'd better check it first." He said, "It doesn't sound right to me." Because Nixon [Richard M. Nixon], of course, hadn't conceded…

MOSS: Hadn't conceded yet.

WILSON: He said, "Get through to Hagerty [James Hagerty] as fast as you can." So I got through to Hagerty, who was at, if my memory is correct, the Mayflower. He was in a fit. There'd been a mix-up at their end and he'd obviously sent the telegram out earlier than he should have. Of course, I knew him very well because I'd been part of the Washington press corps for the previous four years. He said, "Don, do me a favor." In effect, he was a man who was in a hot spot…. The telegram was

out; it had been handed to me by Western Union. It could be given by us to the press. There was nothing to stop us from doing it. He said, "Do me a favor." He said, "I sent it out too early by mistake. There was a misunderstanding here. It really isn't authorized yet." And he said, "Please don't put it out."

I said, "Well, I'm not going to put it out, Jim." I said, "I just talked to Senator Kennedy, and he asked me to call you because he thought it seemed premature to him since Nixon has not conceded." I said, "Of course, I can't make the decision on it. I've got to talk to my boss." Hagerty was literally pleading on the phone for us to be understanding about it. Of course, we were going to be reasonable.

So I called back to the house. They immediately put Senator Kennedy on. I told him about the conversation. He said, "Well, hold it up. Don't put it out until they say put it out." In effect, we were not going to fool around with the words of the President of the United States. So I clutched it to my bosom. It wasn't put out until after Nixon had conceded the following morning.

MOSS: Let me go now to the period after the election. When was it decided that you should go into the USIA? How was this whole appointment business worked out? And then how was it worked out with the agency for you to go in early and sort of look the place over?

WILSON: I wanted to go into the administration, and they wanted me to go into the administration, but the question was, where. Everybody, of course, was in a position of jockeying around in those days. My first choice was to be assistant Secretary of State

for Public Affairs, but, as I understand it, and I'm not certain of this, Doug Cater [Douglass Cater] was offered that job and turned it down. Eventually it went to Roger Tubby [Roger W. Tubby].

But, along about the last week in November, Robert Kennedy asked me to go over to USIA and write for him a paper on what I thought were the major problems and opportunities presented by USIA and present the same to him. Through the Clark Clifford machinery -- and this could be late November or early December, I can't quite remember -- I would be the liaison man from the new administration at USIA. I'm really quite positive at that stage of the game, they hadn't decided to make me deputy director of USIA. But they wanted to utilize me and that seemed like a good place to do it.

MOSS: Why was it Robert Kennedy who told you this?

WILSON: Well, I think perhaps it was Robert Kennedy because Robert Kennedy and I were close friends and he handled many such lower level appointments for his brother. So it was natural that he -- as you know he was handling a lot of things for his brother -- and I talked about what I would do. Whatever he discussed

with his brother on USIA, I don't know. Anyway, he said, "We're interested in USIA, and why don't you go over there as the liaison man."

MOSS: Any particular instructions beyond seeing what it's all about and what..

WILSON: No, basically seeing what it's all about. The basic underlying attitude was it's not very good at all; and how can we make it a lot better.

MOSS: Did you know at the time that others were doing reports on USIA?

WILSON: Yes.

MOSS: Tom Sorensen [Thomas C. Sorensen] was doing one and Ball [George W. Ball - Sharon [John Sharon]....

WILSON: Tom Sorensen was doing one. Yes. I know about both of those. Actually, the Ball-SHaron one came before I got my assignment. The Sorensen one kind of coincided with my assignment. So after Clifford squared the situation away with USIA (the acting director was a man named Abbot Washburn, at the time), I went over to Abbot Washborn one day and he gave me the director's office and said, "It's yours." I started talking to people, and I talked to people nonstop for days. Although I must say I started

with Tom Sorensen and spent an awful lot of time with him and was very impressed with him. I have no question that his report made quite an impression on me. I think more so than the Sharon report, because Sorensen's report was based on many years in the agency. Yet he was in his own way an independent guy, because he was that kind of a guy, and also his brother was Ted and that gave him an independence. I thought he was very sound in his criticisms and his recommendations. Anyway, I would say I spent approximately three weeks there, talking to all the top officials of USIA. Then I wrote a report for the president-elect, which I gave to Bobby, which he gave to the president-elect because the president-elect mentioned it to me in a subsequent conversation and said he thought it was a good report. Bobby told me he thought it was a very good report, and we discussed it a number of times after he'd read it. Somewhere in late December the idea sort of began to surface that I should be deputy director of the USIA.

MOSS: You don't happen to have a copy of that report, do you?

WILSON: I might find that.

MOSS: Because I don't think that we have one in the files. The earliest thing I have is a memorandum somewhere in January which more or less

summarizes the conclusions of the report, but not the report itself. We could certainly use that.

WILSON: Anyway, the facts of the matter are that I was offered the job as deputy director of USIA before it had been decided who the director would be. The directorship had, I think, initially been offered to Edward R. Murrow. No, I take that back. I think it had initially been offered to Frank Stanton, and he had turned it down.

MOSS: That's the story the way I heard it.

WILSON: Then, I think, Ed Murrow was next, and Ed Murrow had demure. They talked to Jonathan Daniels in North Carolina. And, I think, then it came back to Murrow. I don't think they made an offer to Daniels; they talked to him. They may have considered several other people. But anyways they came back to Murrow and talked to him and ultimately he decided to do it.

MOSS: Okay. Now in the reports -- in the reports that came out of the task force, in Sorensen's report and yours -- there was an argument for a greater degree of independence on the part of USIA, particularly a greater role for the director in policy discussions, and a movement of the cultural and exchange programs from

State [State Department] to USIA. Now on the latter Fulbright [J. William Fulbright] evidently was the block. Do you know the background of this or why Kennedy did not want to challenge Fulbright on this movement of the cultural exchange programs?

WILSON: I think that it was a pretty small matter on the President-elect Kennedy's slate, a really piddling matter compared to other problems he had to face. So I think the mere opposition from Senator Fulbright, with whom he had much bigger business to do, was sufficient to kill it and to me that's completely understandable. I don't think there's any more to it than that.

MOSS: All right. Was this regretted at the time by you, Sorensen, Murrow?

WILSON: I think it was regretted by Tom Sorensen. I don't think it was all that much regretted by Ed Murrow or myself. You know, one lives in a bureaucracy, one gets a much more emotional attachment to it. I think Tom felt deeply about it. I don't think Ed Murrow or I felt deeply about it at all, nor do I feel so in retrospect.

MOSS: Now, let me ask you if in the greater independence end of things, and the question of playing an increasing role in policy determinations, did

Murrow have to figure for this or was this something that managed to come along simply in the nature of the Kennedy administration? Did he have to fight Rusk [Dean Rusk]? Did he have to fight Coombs [Philip H. Coombs] over in State -- people like this?

WILSON: He really didn't have to fight at all for it. He felt it was important, but he had an aversion to what he would regard as petty bureaucratic infighting over prerogatives and powers and all that. The reason I say he didn't have to fight is that what happened really, without any question, is just his own personality, hsi own sort of tremendous common sense and commanding presence gave him the independence. Not all the way, I mean it took some months. But I would say after six or eight months, I think President Kennedy thought, "This is a pretty smart fellow. I'm sure as hell going to listen to him independently." I know McGeorge Bundy felt that way. It came. It came without any bureaucratic infighting on Murrow's party.

MOSS: There was a meeting of Murrow and Bundy on February 8, 1961 where they have a working lunch to talk over just what the role of the USIA director is going to be. You had a

memorandum of January 26 which, in effect, summarized the reports, and I presume this was the basis for understanding of the White House as to just what the role would be back and forth between Murrow and Bundy.

WILSON: Yes.

MOSS: Did you attend the meeting?

WILSON: No, I did not attend the meeting. I remember Murrow coming back and reporting on the meeting but my memory isn't that good that I can recall any more. Murrow inherited an agency that had no particular independent voice.

I think when Murrow first took over he was amazingly shy of exerting what was really a great potential of power. He was, after all, the most famous man who went into the whole administration. In terms of the American people, he certainly was as well known as anyone. But I think one thing that President Kennedy and Robert Kennedy, who I know liked him enormously, found appealing about him was that he didn't push himself. Actually his aides, myself, Tom, some of the others, thought he didn't push enough. He just damn well wasn't the kind of guy who would push that hard. He had a lot going for him on his reputation and his name and all that, but he wasn't going to be a narrow, bureaucratic infighter. Eventually, I think, in the three years that he was at USIA he did establish a real independence for the agency in terms of its opinions, in terms of its impact on foreign policy decisions from the point of view of public opinion. But he did it strictly on the basis of his

own enormous good sense, good recommendation and general track record which, at meeting after meeting turned out to be awfully good.

MOSS: All right, there are a couple of events early in the administration that might serve as illustrations of the way that USIA would have to handle things.

The first is an about-facing in a political position at the UN [United Nations] on Angola, on the colonial question. Do you recall this hitting USIA at all because it meant an abrupt change from sort of protecting Portugal against the ravages of the Third World to supporting the claims of independence?

WILSON: Well, of course, I remember the incident, but I just don't remember it as being a big thing at USIA at all.

MOSS: Let me take the Bay of Pigs thing then.

WILSON: Okay.

[-44-]

MOSS: This is the one in which…

WILSON: That's much bigger.

MOSS: ...in which Murrow learned too late to do any good…

WILSON: Right.

MOSS: ...and perhaps didn't push hard enough when he did learn.

WILSON: Right.

MOSS: Okay. Can you give me the Bay of…

WILSON: Yes, I can give you the Bay of Pigs scenario quite well, I think. By chance, I first told Murrow about the Bay of Pigs. It came about in the following way: I had been on a trip to Latin America with Vice President Nixon, his famous trip to Latin America with Vice President Nixon, his famous trip to Latin America in which I was the correspondent for *Time* and *Life*. One of the other correspondents on the trip was Tad Szulc [Tadeusz Witold Szulc] of the *New York Times*; so we became friends.

I went into the Administration, and about two or three days before the landing at the Bay of Pigs, I received an urgent phone call from Tad Szulc late at night, saying, "I must see you tomorrow morning. Will you come to my father-in-law's house?" His father-in-law was a former American ambassador to Colombia. His name eludes me. He said, "Will you meet me at 8 am for breakfast at Ambassador X's house? This is terribly important."

And I cancelled whatever else I had, and I went and had a breakfast with him. He said, "I have it on positive authority that there will be a landing in Cuba." And, actually, he had started to write about Cuba in the *New York Times*, so I knew what we were meeting about roughly, although I knew nothing about the Bay of Pigs. But I knew there was something cooking in the Caribbean. We had breakfast, and he said, "I have it on positive authority that armed forces are going to land in Cuba within the next 48 hours. My information is that these forces are totally supplied and equipped by CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] and that this is an American-supported venture to overthrow Castro [Fidel Castro]."

Well, it was news to me. The reason he came to me was, he said, "I know it's true. It's going to happen." He said, "What you must do is set up an official United States government information operation in Miami or somewhere as near to Cuba as you can get, and, as soon as you can, get some information officers into Cuba because I'm

going to go in there and so are a lot of other correspondents. We know it's a CIA operation and we want somebody from the U.S. government to talk to, who will give us the dope on how the fighting is going and what's happening." But his initial request was to set up an information office in Miami, right that day or the next day, an office that would be able to provide up-to-date information on how the battle was going.

Well, that was, as I say, news to me and I left breakfast immediately and went to Ed Murrow's office. (It must have been 10am by this time.) Whatever he had going, I said, "Put aside." And I gave him this tale and his face clouded up; he was furious because he knew nothing about it whatsoever. He picked up the phone and called Allen Dulles, got him right away, and said, "Allen, I'd like to come see you immediately and bring Don Wilson with me." Dulles said, "Come on over." We went over to Dulles's office at 11 o'clock and Murrow said, "Don, tell Mr. Dulles what you just learned." So I recited the whole story, the breakfast with Tad Szulc, and then I ended. And Murrow looked at Dulles and said almost nothing, but with a sort of a quizzical look implying, "Well, what have you got to say now?" And Dulles, who was obviously obeying orders not to discuss the subject, had nothing to say. Ed was a gentleman and Dulles was a gentleman.

We left CIA and everybody was very clear about what the situation was. The situation was that we knew what was about to happen from the *New York Times*, that the the USIA had not been informed at all. And Ed Murrow was really furious, but he didn't take it out on Dulles since he knew Dulles was obeying orders.

Well, what happened then, obviously, on our way back from CIA to USIA Dulles immediately checked in with Bundy. And Bundy had Ed Murrow over right after lunch and filled him in on the whole operation and, I presume somewhat apologetically, said that, you know, "We had to keep it quiet so we just kept it down to CIA and a couple of military men." And I know Ed voiced his views and then that it was a very bad idea indeed, but it was too late to do anything about it. The fact of the matter is that USIA lived with the invasion and reported it over the Voice of America, etc., and looked pretty bad, just like the rest of the United States government looked pretty bad. But we were the good boys about it. Well,

everybody knew Ed thought it was a terrible idea. He had a chance to register it before it actually happened, but he didn't make as much of what turned out to be a public rebuttal to it as Chester Bowles did, for example.

MOSS: Were you in on the meeting between Murrow and Bundy?

WILSON: No.

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MOSS: You were not.

WILSON: No, I was not.

[INTERRUPTION]

MOSS: All right, it sticks in my mind that on the Bay of Pigs thing Bundy had clued Murrow in without first checking it with the President, and the President was not too happy about this. Do you recall that?

WILSON: I don't know that to be true although it's possible. I suspect that's a wrong interpretation though because the fact of the matter is Murrow found out about it for the first time from the *New York Times* via me.

MOSS: Right.

WILSON: And so he knew. As I said, he went over to see Dulles right away. So he told Dulles what he knew. Then Dulles called Bundy and then Bundy -- I doubt if Bundy did call the President, although I would think Bundy would have called the President to tell him what the *New York Times* had said. But it seems to me that Bundy did the only right thing, which was to have Murrow in immediately after lunch that day and fill him in, because he knew Murrow's nose was way out of joint. Now, whether the President was mad that Bundy talked to Murrow, I don't know. But it doesn't make much sense if he was because Murrow only knew about it from Ted Szulc via me.

MOSS: Okay. Well, let me ask you to talk about some other incidents, I guess you'd call them.

WILSON: May i just add one thing on the Bay of Pigs. I do think that it ties in with what I think became a much more independent role for USIA during the Murrow years. I think that it began after the Bay of Pigs. I think that a) the President and Bundy realized that Murrow should be involved in information about such things as sensitive as that, b) I think, because I heard it from Bobby and others that the

President felt very warmly toward Murrow for the way he handled this. As you know very well, he didn't feel warmly toward Bowles and a few others, Bowles particularly.

But Murrow didn't blow his top and he didn't talk to the press. Murrow was a good soldier. And I think Murrow was under a test as well as any other.... You know, they didn't know, for sure, what

they had in Murrow. He was a famous American broadcaster. They didn't know whether he'd go off in his own direction and not be a loyal member of the team. But he was a loyal member of the team even though he was sore as hell about it. I think from that time on, Murrow was well on his way to being trusted and much more brought into confidences at the White House, which, I think, was the real beginning of USIA having a more independent role.

MOSS: Yeah, let me ask you, since you've brought it up, to sort of deal with the concept of loyalty in the Kennedy crowd. It's certainly there; it's an important thing. And yet, it's something quite different, I think, from the Johnson loyalty question. Just what is it? How does it function?

WILSON: You're right; it is much different. I'm not sure it's right to cast it against the Johnson loyalty which I think was based, in part, on fear. I lived through almost a year of the Johnson Administration, and loyalty was based, in part, on fear in the Johnson Administration. It was never based on fear in the Kennedy Administration.

MOSS: What was it based on? What were the terms or the expectations?

WILSON: I think it was based on respect and a common outlook on things in general. It certainly was expected by the Kennedys. It was a major human quality that both John and Robert Kennedy wanted of people. Robert perhaps more than John, but, without any doubt, it was a very major element in the human character that they always considered important.

MOSS: What were the terms of loyalty? I'm interested in probing this. It certainly didn't mean agreement, necessarily backing.

WILSON: No.

MOSS: It certainly did mean, "Don't stab me in the back," but where in between these?

WILSON: Well, actually, I think it not only didn't mean agreement, I think it welcomed disagreement, welcomed honest, indeed somewhat passionate

argumentation and discourse. Well, not passion, I don't think they liked passion. No, I take that back. It welcomed strong argumentation at all times. But whether you won or lost the argument, you were expected to go along with the Commander-in-Chief, or the President, depending on what part of the government

you were in. Whether you won or lost, I think you were still accepted completely if, after a decision had been made and it went totally against what you wanted, you could joke about it and refer to it for months afterwards. The President would dismiss it with a laugh; but as long as you didn't take it outside, that was the key.

MOSS: Would you distinguish between a professional loyalty and a personal loyalty? Were there people who were differentiated on the basis of these?

WILSON: Yeah. Well, take Murrow. Murrow had no personal loyalty to start with at all. In fact, Murrow had deep reservations about John F. Kennedy when he went into the Administration. He talked to me quite frankly about them. In fact, in his first six months or so in office he used to refer to John Kennedy -- and not in a derogatory way -- he just used to refer to him as "that young man in the White House."After about six months or so, he neer did again. He gradually developed a tremendous respect and admiration for him. But he didn't have it when he went in. In fact, it's an interesting conjecture why he went in. And I really think he went in not so much out of any particular personal admiration or overwhelming respect for Kennedy, but because he had really reached the end of the road at CBS [Columbia Broadcasting System, Inc.] Not that he still wasn't getting $200,000 plus a year or whatever it was, but they weren't giving him any programs any more over there. He was a famous man who had no forum, and he needed a new career. I think that's really one of the principal reasons he took it. I think he took the job with great reserve. I think he had great reserve about John F. Kennedy. He didn't know whether the man had any substance or not.

MOSS: Uh-huh. How did you then work with him? You had been close to them, very close to them…

WILSON: Yeah.

MOSS: ...and here was Murrow, who had these grave doubts and who was moving over into a new career situation. How did the two of you hit it off at the beginning?

WILSON: We really hit it off very well. He had every reason to resent me in a couple of ways: one, he knew I was a total insider in the sense that I was enormously loyal and close personally…

MOSS: It would have been tough to handle to have a deputy…

WILSON: Yeah. Right.

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MOSS: ...who was an inside man.

WILSON: Well, I mean he had two tough deputies.

MOSS: Yeah.

WILSON: He had one who was the brother of Ted Sorensen, too. He had that and, you know, even kind of more galling, potentially anyway, was that he knew that I'd been picked before he had. But, you know, some men come into government, big men, and say, "Well, I'll come in, but I damn well want to have at least a veto on who my subalterns are."

MOSS: Yeah. There's a very sharp contrast there between McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] virtually picking all his people and Rusk virtually picking none of his.

WILSON: Right. Now Murrow was presented with me as a fait accompli when he came in, and we had never even met. I went down to the railroad station, met him the day he arrived in Washington, loaded with a bunch of briefing books, and went back to the Carlton Hotel with him and briefed him for several hours. We just got along very well right from the beginning. But, you know, I don't kid myself that I must have present potential problems in his mind. First of all I was much younger. I was a magazine man. I was probably regarded as sort of an intimate chum of Bobby's. Oh, I'm sure he regarded me as a possible problem at the beginning. I know he did not at the end.

MOSS: Is there any time in the earlier days that he was not candid with you that might have reflected this?

WILSON: No, no, he was great. Right from the beginning he was candid. You know, he was a marvelous man. No, no, right at the beginning he was enormously candid, and I was with him. I think each day it built up and he realized that I was going to take orders from him, that I wasn't going to go around him. I never did; I never had any desire to, because the more I saw of him, the more I respected him. So it did not become a problem, but it could have been.

MOSS: Let me get off this and on to some events. Some of these I have simply picked out of thin air as likely thing you might have some comment on. The files, as I say, are very sketchy.

[BEGIN SIDE II TAPE I]

MOSS: The handling of the Vienna meeting with Khrushchev [Nikita S. Khruschev], for instance, this strikes me as something that might have had a great impact on USIA, been a problem to USIA to handle. Do you recall this? The way it was done?

WILSON: Well, I do recall just a little bit about it. I do recall that we had advance information from Vienna that it had been a very tough meeting, that it had really shaken President Kennedy right to his roots. It was just much rougher than he had ever dreamed it would be. That came back to us very fast. We did know that before the press knew that. We knew that within the first cables or the first phone calls. We knew we were in for rough weather. It was good to know ahead of time because the mechanism of USIA had set up a sort of a cautionary light in how we handled our output that keeps churning out twenty-four hours a day to the world.

MOSS: Okay. On the nuclear testing with the Russians coming up and breaking the implicit moratorium, one of the things that is on the record is Murrow saying, "We can't go right away. We've got to wait and let the full impact of the Russian testing sink in on people. Let ourselves be forced to test." Was there any opposition ot this feeling, do you recall?

WILSON: Well, no opposition within USIA, although that may not have been your question. First of all, you're absolutely accurate. Murrow argued this at the National Security Council and in a number of meetings. He was very strong on it and, I think, had a lot to do with carrying the day on it. Was there opposition? Well, I'm not going to guess. I just can't remember.

MOSS: Okay. We may be able to pick this up later. I've got a list of appointments and meeting and so on that we'll go over, if not this afternoon, at some future time. This may be picked up then. Let me talk a minute about the Berlin thing, the wall. This was a sudden thing, kind of like the Bay of Pigs; the kind of thing that is on a short-time fuse, you need a quick reaction. Do you recall the handling of that? How did they….

WILSON: Yeah, well Murrow was in Berlin when it happened. You know that.

MOSS: Right.

WILSON: Murrow was in Berlin when it happened, was personally outraged, more so, really, even than anyone could be back in Washington because he saw

it happening.

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MOSS: He must have recalled his World War II Europe. It meant something to him, a good deal.

WILSON: Very much so. I remember he cabled us, and, I think, he also called us on the phone. He was vibrant with emotion on it and felt that it should be handled by USIA with absolutely the maximum treatment imaginable. Actually, from a propaganda point of view, it was an enormous plus for the West, an enormous minus for the Communist nations. He recognized it as such. In effect, what he said was everything must be done in terms of pictures -- pictures particularly but all the other forms of communication -- to describe what a dreadful thing this was in terms of bottling up a whole nation and preventing them from leaving. IT was a very instant, emotional, strong thing. I would think, in the years I was at USIA, it was certainly one of the two or three biggest events in terms of the outpouring of radio shows, television shows, and other USIA propaganda. It kept being used all the time, the erection of that wall.

MOSS: There was one particular thing, the pamphlet, the illustrated booklet. I guess it was about the size of a *Life* magazine.

WILSON: Right.

MOSS: We have a copy of that in the file. We also have a little correspondence -- memoranda back and forth -- in which the Budget Bureau was balking at the use of about half a million dollars to put this thing out, saying, “Well, if this is going to help the Germans, why the devil don’t the Germans pay for it? If Ed Murrow wants this, why doesn’t he take it out of his contingency fund? Is it worth half a million dollars to put this thing out?” DO you recall the background on that?

WILSON: I recall it only as much as you recounted it. Gee, it’s a tough thing. I wouldn’t have recalled it if you hadn’t reminded me of it.

MOSS: Well, there are two different figures: Murrow comes through with four hundred and some thousand; the Budget Bureau turns around and says he’d really talked about five hundred and some thousand. I forget the details of the thing, but I wondered if you ever got that cleared up because we didn't have a record of having actually been approved.

WILSON: The question is, who paid for it?I suspect we probably did. The Budget Bureau usually wins those arguments.

MOSS: On a thing like that would you go say to CIA to ask for some funds?

WILSON: No.

MOSS: No.

WILSON: No, I wouldn't think so.

MOSS: Okay.

WILSON: I wouldn't think so. I think it was probably paid for by USIA. The reason I would conjecture that -- and I don't really remember -- is that it's the kind of things you could divert other funds from to, and you wouldn't have any trouble with Congress since it was tangible and it was anti- Communist and they would understand it, Mr. Rooney [John J. Rooney] wouldn't object to that sort of thing at all.

MOSS: How about the Indian invasion of Goa in December 1961? Do you remember the handling of this?

WILSON: I really don't. No.

MOSS: Okay. We'll pass that one up. I think what I want to get from you also is your recollections of the ExComm [Executive Committee] meetings, and so on, in the missile crisis. Now we have this second-hand in Sorensen's book and in a couple of other places, but could you give me…. How did you first hear about it? How did you get into it? What were the meetings like? This kind of thing.

WILSON: Okay. Murrow was sick at home in Pawling, New York, when all this came up. The first indication I had that anything was going on was at a Cabinet meeting. It was the regular Cabinet meeting the week before the Cuban Missile Crisis became public knowledge. If I can get my dates straight here, it might be useful. I think Monday was October 22 unless I'm mistaken.

MOSS: Right. You were at the White House on both October 10 and October 18, then again on October 22, 28, 29, 31, November 2, I believe it is.

WILSON: Gee, I was there a lot more than that; I'll tell you that.

MOSS: These are the ones that were in Evelyn Lincoln's…. There was a Cabinet meeting on the 18th.

WILSON: All right, that's the base point. Does that give what day of the week that is?

MOSS: No. I don't have it here, but we have it at the….

WILSON: Well, let's say I was at a Cabinet meeting on the 18th.

MOSS: It says set up by Mr. Bundy, no list available.

WILSON: Okay. I was at the Cabinet meeting, a routine Cabinet meeting about…

MOSS: 11:10am

WILSON: … God knows what it was about, because, as you know, Cabinet meetings didn't count for much at all in the Kennedy Administration. But anyway I was there replacing Murrow. After the Cabinet meeting, Robert Kennedy came up to me and said, "Where's Ed?" I said, "Ed is home in Pawling, New York." Robert Kennedy said, "Do you expect him back soon?" I said, "No. I'm afraid not for a while. He's feeling quite sick." Robert Kennedy said, "What are your plans for this coming weekend?" I said, "I'm going to visit my mother in Montclair, New Jersey." He paused for a moment, then he said, "Well, I think you'd better cancel those plans and stay around. We'll be in touch with you. Something important is going to develop." So I cancelled my plans to go to Montclair. New Jersey. The next thing I had was a phone call from Robert Kennedy, which was on a Thursday which I suspect is the 19th of October. I wish I had the calendar.

MOSS: I wish I had put down the days of the week on this thing.

WILSON: I think Thursday's the 19th, Friday's the 20th. I guess the next call I had was on Friday the 19th. That's my guesswork anyway.

MOSS: You're sure that it was a Friday then, that it was the 19th?

WILSON: Yes. It was a call from Robert Kennedy, and he said, "You will shortly receive a call from George Ball and/or Ed Martin [Edwin M. Martin]. They're going to fill you in on an important situation." At 6pm, Friday night, I was summoned to George Ball's office at the State Department; Ed Martin was present. They gave me the rough outline of what was going on and said that USIA will have to be brought into this; it's terribly important that we are able to communicate, not only to the world, but also to Cuba, what the Russians are doing and what the American response will be. Having been so informed by these two gentleman, I then was specifically asked by them, at that meeting, to come up with a plan for informing the people of Cuba of the fact that missile sites had been placed there by the

Russians and what this meant and what we were going to do about it, even though at that time the quarantine had not been officially decided upon. Now, if my recollection is correct, I think it was at the White House meeting on Saturday…

MOSS: There is a meeting on the 20th…

WILSON: …in the afternoon, in the Oval Room upstairs.

MOSS: ...of the National Security Council.

WILSON: Well, there's a meeting upstairs which….

MOSS: Well, this may have preceded it.

WILSON: ...may have been never…. I don't know how they recorded things at the White House, but they would know there was a meeting in the afternoon, either Saturday or Sunday -- and I think it was Saturday -- at which for the first time I was really brought into the inner circle. It was in the living room upstairs.

MOSS: Yeah. Right. The family living room.

WILSON: The family living room, the big family living room -- painted yellow -- and I remember everybody was there. All the alternatives were still being discussed. My task was to make arrangements for the Cuban people to know what was going on. In order to do that I quickly ascertained that I would have to make arrangements to take over a number of American radio stations in Florida and the southeastern part of the United States, which were easily heard in Cuba at night. At night medium wave stations carry great distances.

I had to tell three people at USIA what was going on, which I did. I had to tell Henry Loomis, who was the director of the Voice of America; I told Tom Sorensen; and I told Hewson Ryan who was the director for Latin America at the time. I said, "We have to set up plans," -- we didn't even know then when the speech would be; it might be Sunday, it might be Monday -- "to broadcast the speech to the Cuban people and then go on from there and continually broadcast to Cuba."

Loomis, being a very good technician and all this, had in his possession a list of seven or eight radio stations which were the most listened to in Cuba, American radio stations that could be heard in Cuba. We set up, he and I particularly, in conjunction with the White House technical man, a plan whereby these stations could all be linked

into the White House in preparation for the speech.

Then we worked up a script whereby, as it turned out, on Monday afternoon Pierre Salinger, who did not know about it at this time, would call from his office at the White House at about 2 o'clock on Monday afternoon, and say, "It's in the national interest that you allow us to feed into your radio station the speech the President is going to make tonight." Well, all the station owners agreed immediately. To their surprise the technical work had already been done up to the point of actually hooking into the station itself, because the White House technical people had made the preliminary plans.

Anyway, when the speech went on the air at 7pm on Monday night, all these stations carried it. As it turned out, these stations, in effect, were on the air for a month there afterwards every night, not during the daytime because they couldn't be heard. But, starting at about 7 o'clock at night, they carried the Voice of America broadcasts in Spanish all night up until midnight or 2am for which they were never paid, nor did any of them ever ask for payment. They eventually all came to the White House, and, I think, President Kennedy shook their hand and thanked them for what they'd done for their country. But they turned off their own programming for almost a month so that the Voice of America's Spanish programs could be transmitted into Cuba.

Well, I did go to the White House to the meeting in the upstairs room. I do know that when I put this operation into plan, I got a call from either Mac Bundy or Bobby Kennedy, transmitting a note of alarm from the President that I had informed three other people at USIA about what was afoot. You know, the President was scared stiff that the thing was going to blow. That, of course, didn't make me very happy, but I said I had to do what I did. I mean I couldn't transmit the broadcasts into Cuba myself; I needed technical help. I really needed Ryan because he was Spanish-speaking. And I felt that I couldn't go around Sorensen and inform the other two people in the agency without Sorensen knowing, so I told Sorensen too. So I can register for history's sake that the President was distressed about it, but I'm happy to say no one ever leaked it and so there was no problem.

Anyway, as of Monday, the day of the broadcast, this operation went into effect. As of either Monday or Tuesday, a small memorandum was put out by Bundy's office in which I was officially made a member of ExComm. I was the last person to be made a member of ExComm. Thereafter I went to every ExComm meeting.

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MOSS: All right, here's a list of the ExComm meetings for you to have a look at. It doesn't tell you very much except that there were a lot of meetings on Cuba, and some of the other things might help to jog your memory as to what happened when.

WILSON: I did not go to all of these earliest meetings. From the time of the public broadcast until the day that Mr. Khrushchev backed down, which was a Sunday, and for about, oh, I'd say a week or so thereafter, I went to all of them. But, I think, as we get into November here and we get into other subjects -- ending current nuclear test series and all -- I don't remember going to all of these. I did not go to one in Hyannis Port, I'm sure of that. I did not go to one on the Harriman [W. Averell Harriman]

trip to India and Pakistan. I was a part of ExComm for the Cuban Missile Crisis and when the crisis ended, I was part of it for a while. Then, actually, I went on a trip to Africa, and, Murrow came back later in November.

MOSS: So he could well have gone to some of these.

WILSON: He may have gone to some of these. Yes.

MOSS: What do you remember of the people in the ExComm meetings; the way they were handling themselves, the way decisions were being made, that kind of thing? Do you remember any critical points, critical junctures, at which there were problems?

WILSON: I remember it very well. I think what's been written about it -- namely Elie Abel's book, Robert Kennedy's book, and the Sorensen account, and the . Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.] account -- are pretty darned accurate. I have no basic deviation from any of those accounts. They're all pretty similar. Just to go around the table of the principal figures, I felt Mr. Rusk was almost always a person who summarized where we were, but never took sides, never.

MOSS: Not in public at any rate.

WILSON: Not in public anyway. Okay, in fairness to him, right, not in those meetings. He was the summarizer. McNamara was always very persuasive and strong in his opinions. There was absolutely no question that on some of the key items that Robert Kennedy was very outspoken and very strong. When the President wasn't there -- as you know, by choice he wasn't on a number of occasions -- he would allow the meetings to go on. All the meetings were chaired by Rusk under those circumstances. But Robert Kennedy really was as much as anyone the dominant figure. Not that the talked all the time, because he didn't, but he would save himself for the bigger decisions,

and then he would talk, and he was very much listened to.

MOSS: In what ways? Could you pin some of that down with an example because one of the tough things to get at is just how Robert Kennedy made his input. In minutes of ExComm and so on, in the standing group, I find him speaking very, very little.

WILSON: Very little, very little.

MOSS: Not always in a crucial way, either. I mean there are very few times when

it's this "We can't have a Pearl Harbor" kind of turning point. Usually, it's a sense of frustration or exasperation that things aren't clearer and easier to deal with. Now, what kind of thing did he do?

WILSON: Well, of course, you're helpful because when you talk about exasperation you're right. That certainly was one of his major roles. He kept it moving because there's a tendency for those things to just go around, in circles: to go around and around and then off in that direction and back in this direction. His exasperation was useful. That may be part of the genesis of the view that he was the decisive figure. I think he certainly was the decisive figure in the decision to accept one Khrushchev version and reject the other. I remember that very clearly.

But otherwise, no, I agree with you. As I said it before you did so I'm not picking up your information from talking to many other people. He talked very seldom, but when he talked he seemed to be the breaker of logjams, or he seemed to be the mover of the subject. He was a catalytic agent toward recommendations. Maybe he didn't make the specific recommendations so much himself as much as he forced someone else to say, "Well, we've got to get off the dime and come up with a course of recommendation to the President." I think that may be exactly what his principal role was most of the time, rather than saying, "Well, maybe we should take such and such or such and such a course." I mean so many courses were considered and haggled about, but he'd get exasperated with the haggling.

MOSS: How difficult -- that's the wrong word -- how adamant were the military types, for instance, that a surgical strike kind of thing should go?

WILSON: I don't think they were too tough. I didn't think they were too tough at all. No, my feeling was they were…. In fact all the meetings I went to in my years, and I went to quite a few because of Murrow's illness, I always thought the military was pretty damned well under wraps. At any meeting with the

President I ever attended, they never really spoke out.

MOSS: What kept them under wraps? What do you think it was that did it?

WILSON: I think the Bay of Pigs was the thing that did it, basically. But I think Kennedy's attitude and McNamara's attitude toward them, probably McNamara as much as anyone. McNamara was *the* boss. They damned well were cowed by him. Maxwell Taylor was an unusual military man; I think he was very sympathetic to the President and to McNamara in most cases. So you didn't get the kind of Dr. Strangelove-type situation where you had the military always expressing a desire to bomb. Generally, their views were always for stronger, more clear-cut, decisive actions, but I never, in my whole experience to date, found them exerting all that much influence at the

presidential table. They could easily be shut up and were, not in a rude or crude way, but they just didn't carry much weight at those meetings.

MOSS: Now is this because it could be easily demonstrated that the logic of their position was poor, and they suddenly discovered that they had no ground to stand on, or was it weight of authority, or what?

WILSON: Well, I think it was weight of authority primarily. I'm trying to think of some cases where their position was sound. I mean I remember in the Dominican crisis -- and we shouldn't get off on it….

MOSS: In the Johnson Administration.

WILSON: That's the Johnson Administration.

MOSS: Well, go ahead. This is part of….

WILSON: Of course it is. I was going to say they had a much bigger role. Of course, it was a different administration, but I participated in quite a few of those meetings. Of course, you had a real military thing going on there in Santo Domingo, and they had a lot to say.

MOSS: You've mentioned Taylor as being a lot different.

WILSON: Yes.

MOSS: What about a guy like Krulak [Victor H. Krulak] for instance, on the Vietnam thing? I want to get into that with you a

little bit. How did he stack up against the…. He seems to be not the unusual type of Arleigh Burke or Curt LeMay [Curtis E. LeMay].

WILSON: Yeah.

MOSS: He's a different breed of cat.

WILSON: Well, I was in a number of meetings with Krulak, and he was a different breed of cat. He was a pretty sophisticated guy. I think he meshed very well with McNamara and Gilpatric [Roswell L. Gilpatric] and Nitze [Paul H. Nitze], who were really the three key civilians. I think it's why he rose in power during that period. He was a pretty sophisticated, smart man. You know that sort of the classical

military figure of the period in many…. Well, there was LeMay of course, and Anderson [Admiral George W. Anderson] during the Cuban Missile Crisis was….

MOSS: Yes.

WILSON: I'm getting into books now, because…

MOSS: Yes.

WILSON: … I never really witnessed any of the confrontations with Anderson.

MOSS: You didn't know that story. Okay.

WILSON: But he was that kind of a fellow. I mean he was pretty simple-minded…

MOSS: To treat one military name that flits in and out and that's General Bonesteel [Charles H. Bonesteel, III]. For heaven's sake, if you're going to write a novel, there's the name. Did you ever meet him?

WILSON: No, I met him, but I never saw him in action.

MOSS: Okay. Let me move to a Vietnam topic. USIA, as I understand it, produced a documentary called "A Threat to the Peace." Was this taken from the Bill Jorden [William J. Jordan] report?

WILSON: Yes.

MOSS: Okay. Do you remember the background of this?

[-60-]

WILSON: Well, generally, but I'm not going to be too good on it. I do remember there was an awful lot of work on the Bill Jorden report. It certainly came with continual heat from the White House and, I presume, from the President. The feeling was that that side of the Vietnam struggle was not being reported about either inside the United States or outside of the United States, and that would be a logical thing for the United States to pick up. The USIA could pick up the Jorden report and put it on film. It wasn't only film: articles were prepared; picture stories were prepared; pamphlets were prepared. It was a big effort.

MOSS: As I read it, even with the Jorden report, it was very difficult to get hard evidence of the infiltration from North to South…

WILSON: Very hard.

MOSS: ...that this bothered people a lot. The Jorden report was as much conjecture and suspicion that this-has-to-be-the-case-because-there-is-no-other-explanation kind of logic as it was hard evidence. It was a very tenuous kind of conclusion really. Is this fair?

WILSON: Absolutely right. I agree with that.

MOSS: And yet, you referred to it as a hard-hitting case.

WILSON: It made it very hard to do a hard-hitting case. We followed orders. We didn't object to them, I think we felt that was okay. But it was hard to do it very effectively.

MOSS: Did you attend the task force meetings, Sterling Cottrell's task force?

WILSON: Some.

MOSS: Could you describe the general flavor of that? I recall one occasion, for instance -- I think it probably was a Cottrell-conceived idea that we either had to go for protection of all of SOutheast Asia or none of it and if we were going to go, we might as well plan to go all the way -- that this was one of the topics that was discussed. Do you recall the kinds of things that were discussed at the meeting? How they went? Who were the guiding lights?

WILSON: I can't honestly say I do.

MOSS: Who were the guiding lights in the meeting? What was the target of the task force? What were they supposed to do? Just keep an eye on things?

WILSON: Keep an eye on things.

MOSS: And come up with proposals.

WILSON: They were to keep an eye on things, I think, basically.

MOSS: Did Cottrell really run the thing?

WILSON: No, I do not think he was very effective at all. Actually, when Forrestal [Michael V. FOrrestal] succeeded Cottrell, if my memory serves me right, Forrestal became the guiding light.

MOSS: That's interesting, I hadn't heard that.

WILSON: Well, I think so. I think Forrestal became the guiding….

MOSS: I knew that he was a strong figure in all this, particularly in '63.

WILSON: ...light on Vietnam for quite a while there and I have a clearer view of meetings with Forrestal and others than I do with Cottrell. I remember I used to go to the Cottrell thing regularly. The Cottrell thing was kind of a classic State Department or interdepartmental subgroup that didn't do much -- talked a lot.

MOSS: Okay. Let me shift to an entirely different subject. Well, wait a minute. Before I do that, let me follow up on Vietnam, I think, and the business of the Diem [Ngo Dinh Diem] coup, USIA having to deal with this whole coup situation. Were you all clued in, for instance, back in August when this began to break?

WILSON: No, we were not clued in to the intimate CIA operation, all of which has come out. On the other hand, it was not like the Bay of Pigs. Murrow and myself and Sorensen were aware that there was a good deal of ambivalence about whether to overthrow him or not to overthrow him. We were not kept abreast of each day's developments with the generals nor do I see now any reason why we should have been nor would we have wanted to be. We knew that there was a lot of maneuvering going on. We knew that our official line, the government line, was pretty critical of Diem and Nhu [Ngo Dinh Nhu]. The overthrow, therefore, came as no surprise really, no giant surprise to us.

MOSS: There was one point at which the VOA [Voice of America] broadcasts were going to be used as a tip-off. Do you remember anything of that?

WILSON: Really?

MOSS: Yeah. There was a suggestion a VOA broadcast would be used as a trigger.

WILSON: I don't remember that at all. I'd say I do not remember that at all. Are you sure?

MOSS: It may have been purely on the local Saigon level. It may never have gone that far.

WILSON: I don't remember that, but that could be.

MOSS: All right. Now let me move to my entirely different subject. I understand

that you and Murrow both were frequent visitors at the Hickory Hill seminars.

WILSON: That's correct.

MOSS: Could you talk about those a little bit and what the flavor of them was? Who were some of the participants? How were they handled? What did it do for the administration, for you, for the participants, this kind of thing?

WILSON: Now, my wife and I were, I think, right in at the beginning of the HIckory Hill seminars and went to almost all of them. The idea was to get interesting people to talk about a wide range of topics, to give about maybe a fifteen or twenty minute talk about their subject of specialty, whether it was psychiatry or whatever, and then to open it up to questions. The whole thing would last about an hour. It would be in someone's living room and then you'd have drinks or tea. Everyone would go home about 10:00. As I recall, most of them started about 8 o'clock. I hope you have a list of the participants, if you don't I can….

MOSS: No, I don't.

WILSON: You don't.

MOSS: I just picked up little bits and pieces here and there: Ross Gilpatric, Udall on occasions, Schlesinger….

WILSON: Well, Schlesinger was the head professor, no question about that. Actually, it was either Schlesinger's idea original or Bobby Kennedy's or a combination of both. But anyway the first one was at Hickory Hill and a number of them were at Hickory Hill but after a while people got tired of going to Hickory Hill so they moved around. We had one at our house, for example, one night. But definitely Schlesinger was the major-domo of the operation. He arranged the schedules. He, in most cases, lined up the speakers, or if somebody else knew the speaker, he saw to it that that somebody else got the speaker there on occasion at the appointed hour. Well, the Robert Kennedys, the McNamaras, the Gilpatrics, the Murrows, the WIlsons, the Maxwell Taylors came on occasion, Dave Bell -- I remember one night we went to Dave Bell's house, so they were there. You know it wasn't always everybody at the same time. Well, I think everybody got invited, but lots of times some couldn't come. The Udalls….

MOSS: Did the Rusks come to these?

WILSON: Never, never, never came.

MOSS: Dillons?

WILSON: Dillons, always. Yes, Dillons always, right. Definitely. Not the Rusks, not the Bundy's.

MOSS: Sorensen?

WILSON: No, not the Sorensens.

MOSS: Nor Rostow [Walt W. Rostow].

WILSON: Yes, the Rostows did come.

MOSS: Did they?

WILSON: Oh, yes. They did come and, as a matter of fact, there was one session at their house and Elspeth Rostow, who's a very bright woman, was often a questionner in the question and answer periods. No, the Rostows were part.

MOSS: Freeman [Orville L. Freeman]?

WILSON: I think occasionally.

MOSS: Ribicoff [Abraham Ribicoff]?

WILSON: No, no never the Ribicoffs. Freemans occasionally. There was one session at the White House, which somewhere I have some notes which I took on a yellow pad because I thought it was so interesting. This was with a Princeton professor named David [David Donald], who was a professor specializing in the Reconstruction period. He's an American history professor and his speciality was the Reconstruction period. It was held at the White House. It was held with Robert Kennedy was on his trip around the world -- I remember because he was not there. It's one of the reasons it was held at the White House. My wife went on the trip around the world with the Kennedys. Ethel asked her to go and so she went, because I remember she wasn't at the thing either. But it was an absolutely fascinating evening because the subject of Lincoln [Abraham Lincoln] came up and Lincoln's place in history and whether Lincoln's place in history would have been so assured if he hadn't been assassinated. Professor Donald said that he thought his place in history would have been assured, but not probably as solidly so, if he hadn't been assassinated. President Kennedy asked that specific question of Professor Donald. Also there was some discussion that evening of the ranking of presidents.

MOSS: Yes, I've heard this.

WILSON: You've heard this.

MOSS: I think from somebody else.

WILSON: The ranking of presidents as to greatness. There was nothing terribly…. Actually, it was about that time, I think, that na article had come out…

MOSS: Yes.

WILSON: … maybe by Arthur Schlesinger, Sr. As I recall it, I'm quite sure I'm right here, President Kennedy asked Professor Donald whether he agreed with this evaluation. The only trouble is I can't remember how…. He had a few changes, and there was some discussion of presidents. But the most interesting thing, the thing that sticks clearly in my memory, was the discussion of Lincoln and his place in history. It was held upstairs in the living room of the White House. The President sat in a rocker. It was an absolutely delightful, fascinating evening in which the President did a lot of talking, a lot of questioning.

Anyway, other Hickory Hill… Well, I remember one funny Hickory Hill evening. We had [redacted] and everybody hated him. After it was over he was mad about it. One thing that infuriated

everybody is that [redacted] insisted on being paid $500 for the appearance.

MOSS: Oh, boy.

WILSON: I guess he got paid.

MOSS: He's rather a fatuous….

WILSON: Oh, he's a real fatuous man. I don't know whose idea he was. But, anyway, he did appear, and there was outrage that he had insisted on being paid. I guess he did get paid, but I don't know who paid it. As far as I know, everyone else came for free. One man, there was on psychiatrist. Oh, it was Dr. Kubie [Lawrence S. Kubie].

MOSS: Uh huh.

WILSON: What is his first name? Dr. Kubie.

MOSS: I don't recall.

WILSON: He was, as you know, an eminent psychiatrist.

MOSS: Yeah.

WILSON: I remember Ethel Kennedy engaging in long arguments with Dr. Kubie. Basically, her strong Catholicism came into conflict with him. They were very free and open sessions, lots of humor and light. No one ever got mad at any of them, as I recall. They were really lots of fun. God, you mean there's no records at all of who came, who were the guests?

MOSS: Not that I know of, not that I know of.

WILSON: Because there must have been at least fifteen of them.

MOSS: Various people have attempted, you know, to say, "Oh so and so was always there." Oh, you know, the usual crowd kind of thing. We've never….

WILSON: I've given you a pretty good list there.

MOSS: Yeah.

WILSON: Maybe a few I've forgotten, but I think that's a pretty good list of those who generally were there. I can remember

the various homes. It was interesting to go into the homes. I remember going to the Bells' home. I remember going to, of course, the McNamaras'. I think we went several times and the Dillons' and Hickory Hill and the Schlesingers' and our house once, Udalls'.

MOSS: I note on the appointments calendar for the White House that there was one off-the-record informal dinner at the White House: the Murrows and the Wilsons with President and Mrs. Kennedy.

WILSON: Right.

MOSS: Do you recall that evening?

WILSON: You know, I used to recall it. I remember….

MOSS: June 13, 1962.

WILSON: Oh yes, one thing I do recall about that evening was the President brought up the subject of whether Edward R. Murrow would be interested in running for Senate in the state of New York.

MOSS: Yes.

WILSON: Does that ring a bell?

MOSS: That does ring a bell.

WILSON: There's no question that it was discussed. Whether that was why he had the dinner, I don't know. But it was discussed. Murrow was very cold to the whole idea and pretty well said he couldn't see himself as a candidate, he wouldn't enjoy it. There was some laughter about it, and it was dropped. I remember the evening as a thoroughly enjoyable one, but I can't remember anything else noteworthy about it.

MOSS: What about the sessions that were held preparing Kennedy for his news conferences? You and Murrow used to sit in on these too, didn't you?

WILSON: Actually, I did, not Murrow.

MOSS: Yeah.

WILSON: Really, what happened on those is Pierre would have a meeting of all the public relations bosses of each of the major

departments before the press conference. On occasion, sometimes a few of us, sometimes all of us, would actually go in and talk to the President himself. Not often, though. We would come armed with what questions we thought would come from our department or our particular sphere of responsibility and we'd bat them back and forth, but it was mostly with Pierre. Occasionally, we met with the President.

MOSS: What about Bundy's staff meetings? You attended these on a fairly regular basis, too.

WILSON: I did.

MOSS: How did Bundy handle a staff meeting?

WILSON: I think I was the only man in the United States government during the

Kennedy Administration who went regularly to both the Bundy meetings and the Rusk meetings. Therefore, every morning of the week I started off my day by either going to a Rusk meeting or a Bundy meeting. The Rusk meetings were Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and the Bundy meetings were Tuesday and Thursday. I'll tell you the Bundy meetings were a hell of a lot better than the Rusk meetings. The Rusk meetings were large, you know, there must have been twenty-five people at them. They were dull, and there was never any give-and-take. The Bundy meetings were small, and were much gustier in terms of what they talked about.

MOSS: The Rusk meetings being larger, I assume, were more of a briefing kind of thing.

WILSON: They were. They were a pro forma briefing in which he'd go around the table and the assistant secretary for the Near East and South Asia would report on what was cooking there. Actually, he went around the table -- it was a pretty big table -- and everybody would report, anyone that had anything to report would report on what was going on. There was never any decision-making. Everybody would be brought up-to-date.

MOSS: Now, on the other hand, how would Bundy do it? There were topics that required decisions?

WILSON: No.

MOSS: Or was it work assignments?

WILSON: Work assignments, definitely. Very different in the sense that Bundy would almost always start of with saying, "Well,

these are the three big things we've got to worry about today." He'd outline A, whatever it was, and he'd ask, "Well, what do you think we ought to do about it?" to Kaysen [Carl Kaysen] or whomever. You'd usually come out of them with an assignment or be asked to come back with an opinion or paper or whatever. Also there was substantial argumentation and discussion of subjects. They weren't decision-making meetings any more than the Rusk meetings were. But the Rusk meetings were just reports, one guy after another. The Bundy meetings involved a lot of dialogue. The Bundy consisted of ten men, or something like that.

MOSS: Talk a little bit about some of the people on the Bundy staff: Kaysen, Forrestal, people like that, Bromley Smith as the secretary. I've run into an

Air Force guy that just -- I've never heard of before, who seems to stick his nose into USIA things, a Colonel Albert Cox, early in the game. He may have been an Eisenhower leftover.

WILSON: Colonel Albert Cox.

MOSS: Yeah.

WILSON: I never heard of him.

MOSS: He wrote several memoranda…

WILSON: On USIA?

MOSS: That wound up in the USIA file on….

WILSON: Well, that could be, but he didn't count for anything, I don't believe. I never heard of him, and I sure would have if he'd been nosing into our business with any effect.

MOSS: At the beginning, he was saying, "There are lots of things we've got to do -- a lot more multimedia, propaganda," this kind of thing.

WILSON: I never heard of him.

MOSS: Well, what about these other guys? What about Kaysen, Rostow, Forrestal, and so on? How did they handle their job? How did they appear to you as to what they were doing?

WILSON: Well, you know, first of all, it was a very high-powered crowd intellectually. You had a lot of mental talent there

which, in my opinion, always operated in a very healthy, friendly positive way wherein they were bouncing things off each other. Bundy was a decisive man who kept directing the discussion swo alternative courses of action could be presented to the President. I thought it was an extraordinary staff. They did an extraordinary job.

MOSS: There's a picture of Bundy as the foreign policy advisor, that is popular….

WILSON: I don't think that's true.

MOSS: … and I don't think it's accurate.

WILSON: No, no, I do not think that's true. I think Bundy….

MOSS: He's not playing the Kissinger [Henry A. Kissinger] role.

WILSON: No, no, he did not play the Kissinger role.

MOSS: Yeah.

WILSON: I think he scrupulously tried to give the President a fair picture of what State [State Department] felt about something and of what Defense [Defense Department] felt about something. Loo, he couldn't avoid, on some occasions, getting his own views into it.

MOSS: Sure.

WILSON: But I often discussed this with him. I used to play tennis with him before we went to these meetings, all the time. I really and truly believe that Bundy played it very fair in everything he gave to the President in terms of who thought what. Now he's only human, and I"m sure his bias got in there plenty of times, but it was no Kissinger role. He did not see his job as a Kissinger role. I'd heard him articulate what his role was, and his role was not to make the decisions or try and make them or even try and influence the President, but to present the options to the President. And I think he did.

MOSS: We are pushing on to your three o'clock deadline, I have what I think may be as much as an hour of bits and….

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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