

Adam Yarmolinsky Oral History Interview –JFK #2, 11/28/1964
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Yarmolinsky, Adam; Special Assistant to the Secretary of Defense (1961-1965). Yarmolinsky discusses his role in converting the Civil Defense program into the Department of Defense. He discusses the Kennedy Administration's concern for nuclear war, Robert S. McNamara's involvement, and McNamara's position regarding nuclear war, among other issues.

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Adam Yarmolinsky – JFK #2

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Oral History Interview

with

ADAM YARMOLINSKY

November 28, 1964

By Daniel Ellsberg

For the John F. Kennedy Library

ELLSBERG: I think we should try today to cover some of the events which started after you took your job in 1961. What about covering Civil Defense?

YARMOLINSKY: Fine. My connection with the Civil Defense program began, I believe, sometime in the early spring of 1961. The first events are a little fuzzy in my recollection, but I know that I worked with Ros Gilpatric. I attended meetings of the Governors, the Civil Defense Committee of the Governor's Council, of which Nelson Rockefeller was chairman, when the Administration representatives were discussing with the Governor's Council Committee what our Civil Defense posture would be. This was, I would judge, just after Carl Kayse had come down from Harvard to work on McGeorge Bundy's staff. One of Carl's first assignments was to develop a sensible Civil Defense program. Civil Defense at that time was under the jurisdiction of the Office of Civil and Defense Mobilization, later re-christened the Office of Emergency Planning, under Frankk Ellis. But Ellis frankly was brought in as a political appointee. He did not have the full confidence of the President, and he was not thought particularly capable of developing the program. In fact I don't know at what point the notion of taking Civil Defense out of Ellis' operation and putting it into the Department of Defense arose. I recall this was not a recommendation particularly by the Governor's Council Committee, but it was in the wind

during the time we were conducting substantive discussions with the Governor's Council Committee. I remember the COmmittee and representatives

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of some of the interested agencies met with the President when the Committee was down here. In essence the President told the Committee that we were engaged in developing plans for a more active Civil Defense program and we would have something to report to them at an early date. This must have been in March or April. Later I will supply the precise date by reference to my diaries which might be useful for the record. The posture of the Administration at that time was rather a cautious one because we had not developed a plan. The Bureau of the Budget was working on the matter, and was rather solicitous of their wards in OCDM. The Bureau of the Budget people who were working on this were permanent civilians at the middle-management level and were rather suspicious of the suggestion. I think the suggestion may have come from Kaysen. The suggestion that this be transferred to the Pentagon certainly didn't come from anybody in the Department of Defense. The Bureau of the Budget had jurisdiction over OCDM, and also over HEW and Labor, both of which had special Civil Defense functions that the Bureau of the Budget people were afraid might be taken away from them. I am oversimplifying somewhat, but not unduly.

ELLSBERG: Are you sure that the suggestion had not come from anyone in Defense?

YARMOLINSKY: No. Quite the contrary, as I recall McNamara was reluctant but of course when the President said this was what he wanted to do, which was based essentially on the Kaysen suggestion, the President and the Secretary agreed to do it.

ELLSBERG: Do you remember why he was reluctant?

YARMOLINSKY: He thought he had more than enough to do anyway and

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was not anxious to add another task. He was concerned about who in the Department would take this on. It was then in May or June when he called me in and got up from behind his desk and rather facetiously said, "Congratulations, you are Mr. Civil Defense."

ELLSBERG: What did you say?

YARMOLINSKY: I don't recall that I had any ready comment. My assignment at the time was to develop a program and a budget based on the Kaysen plan. The

Kaysen plan was essentially a plan to concentrate on creating an adequate shelter supply, first by the shelter survey and second by a shelter incentive plan. The shelter incentive plan was not proposed for the first year. It was to be proposed as legislation in the second year. And third, to strengthen the state and local organizations by additional funding and by stronger management at the Federal level in the Department of Defense. My job was to prepare the program and the budget, and to get the office moved from OCDM, or EOP as it later became, into the Department of Defense. In the process there was a lot of question about what remaining authority would rest in OCDM and also what authority would remain in the various other agencies which had bits and pieces of Civil Defense.

ELLSBERG: Can you spell out all the reasons for the move to Defense? Was it just essentially to get it away from Ellis? Or was it to affect the funding?

YARMOLINSKY: Well, I think it is 90 per cent to get it away not only from Ellis, but from an organization which had been a kind of political dump-heap for years.

ELLSBERG: In other words, to get more action.

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YARMOLINSKY: To get more action, and to get better management.

ELLSBERG: What were the attitudes that came to you about Civil Defense from the President or anyone else within the Administration, particularly Secretary McNamara?

YARMOLINSKY: I think everybody felt that this was kind of a necessary evil. It was not a program anybody could be very enthusiastic about but it was insurance that no one could afford not to buy.

ELLSBERG: Was there any particular difference in attitude that you can remember between different interested parties?

YARMOLINSKY: No. You will recall that the President came back from his meeting with

Khrushchev in Vienna very much concerned about the possibility of thermonuclear exchange as something that really had to be worried about in the foreseeable future, and part of his reaction was to urge the American people to make some Civil Defense preparations. Unfortunately, the President's warnings were amplified by the mass media, particularly by LIFE Magazine. I recall that LIFE Magazine had been working with us in the Department of Defense in the preparation of a Civil Defense leaflet which was our first great project in order to make people aware of what they could do

by way of self-help. This amplification of the President's warning created a brief period of really near hysteria that made everybody in the Executive Branch, the President and the Secretary alike, draw back. Our program was not one that under any circumstances would provide significantly increased protection for a period of months, or years. It didn't make sense to have a program which would provide that kind of protection. McNamara, who was closer to the problem than the President, was less sensitive I think to the political. The President was concerned

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that by focusing so much popular attention and emotion on the problem, we were making it more difficult to be rational about larger questions of financial security. McNamara's view was that the American people ought to have enough self-reliance so that if you presented them with this problem they could individually deal with it. Each man could construct his own makeshift shelter for his family, piling three feet of dirt on top of some boards. This is the sort of thing McNamara himself, being a model of self-reliance, would be able to do for his own family. He didn't do it because as he pointed out, he didn't have time to do anything like that. However, he felt the average American ought to be able to do it, and he was unhappy that the general reaction was for people to run around like chickens with their heads cut off, rather than buckle down and do what in his view was a fairly simple job.

ELLSBERG: Could we explore this a bit further? I remember that politically this was quite an intense issue. Were you involved in writing the speech at all? Was anybody connected with Civil Defense consulted on passages in the Berlin speech?

YARMOLINSKY: The Berlin-crisis speech.

ELLSBERG: Do you have any memory of how much forethought was given to the possible consequences of raising this issue in the speech?

YARMOLINSKY: I don't. In retrospect I would say not nearly enough. The notion here was that we were merely posing an issue which, without even thinking about it, we assumed people would react in a rational way.

ELLSBERG: Which would have been what way?

YARMOLINSKY: The rational way would have been to devote themselves as individuals and members of communities to making certain simple preparations

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ELLSBERG: If that were rational for individuals, then why wasn't it appropriate for the government to provide a program that would take effect in the

same time period, or to work toward this in the next few months?

YARMOLINSKY: It would have been too provocative for the government to devote its resources and its energies to this effort, I suppose, and to have signalled expectations of doom, which would have exceeded when in fact the government considered were the expectations. Furthermore, our system of Federal government is simply not equipped to go out and construct shelters for individuals, or even to help individuals construct shelters. What the Federal government did was to conduct a massive shelter location program to identify, mark and stock something like 80 or 100 million shelter spaces which already existed in buildings and other structures, and that was done very effectively under forced draft in the first year of the program.

ELLSBERG: Was there an emphasis on community shelters or on individual shelters?

YARMOLINSKY: The early emphasis was on individual shelters simply because community shelters would take time. The Shelter Incentive Program was designed to permit the incorporation in new construction of dual purpose areas which could be community shelters and which could also serve some other purpose. It just didn't make sense to spend large sums of money on one-purpose community shelters, and dot the countryside with these shelters. It did make sense to have the construction serve two purposes, and for a little extra cost to have it to be a fallout shelter.

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ELLSBERG: Do you remember who was mainly responsible for influencing the direction?

YARMOLINSKY: This was in the original Kaysen plan. I would say that Jerry Wiesner was certainly very much an advocate of the dual-purpose idea. Wiesner was particularly concerned about the possibility of excessive expenditures and activities in Civil Defense stirring up popular expectation of doom and accelerating the possibility of thermonuclear exchange.

ELLSBERG: Making it more likely?

YARMOLINSKY: Yes.

ELLSBERG: A dilemma that had plagued policy makers concerned with Civil Defense as far back as the Gaither Report in 1957 was the notion that even a moderate program would so raise public concern that there would be no drawing back from the major massive program once you started, including blast shelters.

YARMOLINSKY: This was very much the concern of many people and of Wiesner, that is to go from fallout shelter to moderate blast shelter to full blast shelter, and you would then be in a war economy.

ELLSBERG: In 1957, with the new new-look under way, the budget implications of this were regarded with a special skepticism because of the ultimate huge expenditures which might be involved. Was this a major consideration in 1961?

YARMOLINSKY: Just the amount of money that would be spent, and only as an index of the allocation of resources in our society. It wasn't so much the kind of Eisenhower fear of inflating the Federal budget. We didn't really reach that issue because the first issue we reached was the

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effect on popular attitudes and indeed the effect on government attitudes.

ELLSBERG: I take it then that the public response to the Berlin crisis speech and the LIFE article took you considerably by surprise.

YARMOLINSKY: Yes, it did. It took me and a lot of people by surprise.

ELLSBERG: Did anyone feel the heat on this one? Did the President complain that the had not been warned?

YARMOLINSKY: There was a lot of indignation. I don't recall who complained to whom. The fact that LIFE included a statement by the President which purported to endorse that issue of the magazine, and the fact that that issue of the magazine carried a number of distortions of fact, was a matter of some concern.

ELLSBERG: How was that article handled at the time?

YARMOLINSKY: The article was produced by the same people who were working with us on the booklet. We finally dissolved our working relationship with these people because we were dissatisfied with what they produced for us. I remember that I was involved in some way in their efforts to obtain the President's endorsement but I don't believe that I was guilty of getting the President into that particular hot spot. I think that their dealings, before the issue went to press, were directly with the White House Press Office.

ELLSBERG: Did anybody in the Administration build himself a shelter?

YARMOLINSKY: I did.

ELLSBERG: You did?

YARMOLINSKY: Yes.

ELLSBERG: Please enlarge on this, it is very interesting.

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YARMOLINSKY: I live in an area where community shelters are not practical because the dispersion of population is too great. It is out in the country. I bought one of the first low-cost, mass-produced, partially do-it-yourself shelters, and I put it together. I put it on the side of a hill where we have enough land, just below our house. It has not been stocked. I haven't been in it for a year or two, but it's still there.

ELLSBERG: Did others of your colleagues know that you had done this? Were you the only one?

YARMOLINSKY: I don't know whether I would have done it if I hadn't been the temporary head of the program. I'm sure there were others who did. Pittman, who took over the program, made a temporary shelter in his house in town. He has a country house which I think probably has a basement that could serve as an adequate shelter, but I'm not sure about this.

ELLSBERG: Herman Kahn used to face a lot of questioning from his audiences on this ground.

YARMOLINSKY: Yes.

ELLSBERG: I understand that there was some concern in the Administration that this not be interpreted as a program being done for Herman Kahn-type reasons, namely to put pressure on the opponent.

YARMOLINSKY: That's right. There was a lot of discussion about whether Civil Defense was a deterrent, and whether it strengthened the deterrent. We took the position that because the casualties which would result from a nuclear exchange would be so great in either event, it was not reasonable to say that Civil Defense strengthened the deterrent.

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If you said it, even though unreasonable, you might give some impression that you were contemplating a first strike or you thought of nuclear war as a legitimate way to settle differences, which of course we didn't. Therefore, we went out of our way to make the point that this was insurance against consequences of a disaster that would be of unprecedented proportions, and not a way of strengthening our deterrent.

ELLSBERG: Was there a specific problem in handling the Kahn question in the sense of his possible association with the program?

YARMOLINSKY: No, I do not recall that there was.

ELLSBERG: Was there any question of bringing him in?

YARMOLINSKY: No. We talked with him. Herman is always in touch with people in government, but we didn't bring him in specifically. Although I might say, as a sort of historical footnote, that my first contact with the whole problem of Civil Defense was when I was working on the talent hunt in December of 1960. I had a visit from Herman Kahn. I had not met him heretofore. He came to see me to talk about the kinds of people he thought should be considered for Head of Civil Defense. This was a problem we were not aware of. It had been treated as a political job but it should not have been. His visit was heralded, in advance, by a copy of "On Thermonuclear War," which was sent to me by the Washington office of RAND with the suggestion that I read certain pages. I was amused at the notion that the work which we were doing at the time was such that we could approach it so systematically, and sit down and read a book. It would have been nice to have been able to do it this way, but it showed a certain lack of awareness of how affairs were necessarily being conducted.

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ELLSBERG: The lack of awareness was real. Did you, by the way, ever read anything by Herman on the subject of Civil Defense?

YARMOLINSKY: Yes, I have read a certain amount.

ELLSBERG: What was your reaction?

YARMOLINSKY: I think I would differ with him on the deterrent point. Also his notion that one of the ways to perhaps escalate if you are in the immediate period of a crisis is to take immediate precautions and turn a lot of bulldozers loose to push earth up against houses. While this may have a good deal of logical appeal, I just can't see it happening as a political reality.

ELLSBERG: One other idea of his was that one should prepare and plan to evacuate cities under certain circumstances.

YARMOLINSKY: Yes. One of the biggest problems in the whole Civil Defense area was explaining to the state and local staffs in Civil Defense, who were not terribly flexible or responsive to innovation and new ideas, that the old philosophy of evacuation was in most instances no longer feasible. The Civil Defense people in Washington had, over a period of years, been trying to persuade the local and state Civil Defense people that evacuation was a good idea, and now we were coming along and saying that it wasn't a good idea, at least in most cases, and this took a lot of education. In fact we were careful to say that we were not ruling out evacuation in all instances because there were some cases where it was feasible. We didn't want to make the transition in ideas too abrupt for these people.

ELLSBERG: What were the grounds for saying it was not feasible in

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context, say, with the suggestion that there might have been fallout shelters prepared in the countryside?

YARMOLINSKY: Well, if there were fallout shelters prepared in the countryside, and if you had enough warning time so that you wouldn't cause a gigantic traffic jam. We thought this much warning time was just not enough. Strategic warning is something you know about and you are aware of only after the event. You realize that you had strategic warning after the event of which you were supposedly warned takes place. So what we would most likely have would be just tactical warning and that wouldn't be enough.

ELLSBERG: You started to say earlier that the President and McNamara had drawn back somewhat on the program after this public outburst. What form did this take?

YARMOLINSKY: It was simply a reluctance to have any public expressions by the Administration on this subject. I got myself into a little bit of hot water when I spoke at the Woman's National Democratic Club. One of the questions asked was what was the point of building individual fallout shelters in Washington, since Washington would presumably be the number one target. What I suppose I should have said was that no one could tell whether any particular city, even Washington, would necessarily be the number one target. Instead I said something to the effect that Washington would not be high on the target list because presumably the Russians might want to leave the centers of government intact, at least for a period. This was really a silly speculation on my part, and just caused headlines and confusion that I could easily have avoided.

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ELLSBERG: Did this hot water come down from above?

YARMOLINSKY: No, everybody was very forgiving about it. I think they realized that I had learned my lesson. I was trying to be dramatic at a point where drama was out of place.

ELLSBERG: Do you want to say anything further about the evolution of the program, including Pittman's coming in?

YARMOLINSKY: We were anxious to find a permanent head for the program. McNamara had made it clear that this was only a trouble-shooting assignment for me. Various candidates were proposed, and I came up with Pittman's name. He was an old friend of mine and I knew that he had an interest, dating back to his service in the Marine Corps in World War II, when he had been commander of a squadron of Chinese junks which he organized against the Japanese. I don't remember whether he was operating against the Chinese Communists at the same time. This was a very irregular situation. I knew he had more than an intellectual interest in the popular militia and how people could defend themselves without organized military forces, so it was natural for him to be interested in this program. We approached him, and he agreed to do it.

ELLSBERG: Did that close out your association with the program?

YARMOLINSKY: I worked with Pittman for a period of several months, particularly on the pamphlet which we put together jointly. This was the largest publishing venture since the Bible. We produced something like 50 or 60 million copies of this pamphlet, with fantastic quantity distribution. We had a lot of troubles along the way, both technical production and content problems. I do not think it was a bad pamphlet by the time we got it finished. Of course we had an awful lot of editors, from the President on down.

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ELLSBERG: Did the President follow it closely?

YARMOLINSKY: Yes, he did. He read it through before it was released.

ELLSBERG: Do you remember any attitudes he expressed?

YARMOLINSKY: I think the general attitude that came from the President, and the people on the White House staff, went to the issue of not giving people the impression that Civil Defense could make thermonuclear exchange a tolerable event, no worse than a bad cold.

ELLSBERG: Which was the accusation made against LIFE article, is that right?

YARMOLINSKY: Yes. The LIFE article started out with a bang by having a cover that showed a picture of what was called a fallout suit, which in fact did not give protection against fallout, but was just something that a Civil Defense worker would put on to keep from picking up the dust that might stick to his skin. The implication was that by putting on a fallout suit you could insulate yourself from fallout. There was also a suggestion that you could cut casualties from 100 million down to 5 million.

ELLSBERG: This seemed a peculiar slant for LIFE to be committing itself to.

YARMOLINSKY: I think it was just over-enthusiasm on their part.

ELLSBERG: Does that cover what you want to say about Civil Defense?

YARMOLINSKY: I think so, unless you have other questions that occur to you.

ELLSBERG: One other question does come to mind. I became aware of what the government was doing about Civil Defense, and this issue, more than any other issues that have been raised on thermonuclear war,

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seemed to unify the critics, especially in the universities.

YARMOLINSKY: Yes, I found myself in a series of debates with academic liberals. I was in a couple of television and radio debates, and on a number of platforms where I found myself dealing with a kind of dogmatism, a dogmatism of the left, if you will, of the liberal group, which got me into a lot of other fights.

ELLSBERG: Was there a kind of layman's attitude about this in the Administration? A lot of the people must have sympathized with some of this criticism.

YARMOLINSKY: Yes. I think there was a degree of sympathy, but there was a lot of indignation at this which was regarded essentially as unthinking reaction.

ELLSBERG: Why? What is your explanation? Was there a discussion among the colleagues as to what had brought this on?

YARMOLINSKY: I think it was mostly just people really not wanting to think about the unthinkable. Thermonuclear war is bad. If you say, all right it is bad but it may happen, the general reaction is that you must not say this. Just by saying it you increase the possibility of it happening. There was a position, which was

certainly logically defensible, that perhaps by talking about it we increased the likelihood of it happening. Therefore, there is the likelihood of a greater number of casualties occurring than would occur if you did not get into this argument. You have to devise a mathematical equation. No one knows what the constants would be that you put into the equation. This was essentially Dave Cavers' argument, and was the argument of the more rational opponents of the program.

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ELLSBERG: Did you ever see the Harvard Crimson thing on the Committee for a Sane Lifeboat Policy?

YARMOLINSKY: Yes, it was wonderful.

ELLSBERG: What were the attitudes of the Administration, McNamara and Kennedy on nuclear war? I imagine this emerged in the course of your work on Civil Defense and in other connections as well.

YARMOLINSKY: Yes. When was the Ann Arbor speech?

ELLSBERG: In June of 1962.

YARMOLINSKY: Yes. The whole thrust of the early effort in defense policy was to be more realistic about the threat of thermonuclear war, and to be more realistic about it in two ways: first, we ought not to have to rely just on our nuclear threat, or a threat of nuclear retaliation. If you rely on that threat for aggressions that are below what people believe to be the line at which you would react with nuclear weapons, your deterrent is not credible. The second point is that if a nuclear exchange is really a possibility, and we make it a possibility, we recognize it as a possibility by having a strategy of deterrence, in effect, of nuclear deterrence. We really ought to be thinking more seriously about how our deterrence survives because survival is the key, it is the effective force with which we can strike back. We have never discussed or contemplated a policy of "no first" use. Eisenhower had always taken the position that we would not in effect be the aggressor, that we would not launch a preventive or preemptive strike. This notion was not a part of military doctrine at any time in the past that I know of, but it may have been contemplated.

ELLSBERG: What policy was that?

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YARMOLINSKY: The policy of preemptive or preventive war under some circumstances. It may have been contemplated somewhere when we were a lot

stronger and the Russians were a lot weaker. It wasn't really in the cards as of December 1960, or at any time going back a period of several years. So if what we are talking about was a likelihood, that we were relying on our deterrent as a retaliatory deterrent, then we had to be more realistic about how you preserve that deterrent strength. So we got into increasing the B-52s on a 15-minute alert, speeding up POLARIS, and concentrating on MINUTEMAN rather than ATLAS and TITAN, plus all the other changes that we made in our nuclear posture in that early period.

ELLSBERG: We spoke of the birth of the Administration in the last session. One of the most spectacular types of information which you acquired in passing from an outsider to an insider had to do with our nuclear weapons program and posture, and the effects of nuclear weapons and so forth. Do you remember your own initiation into these matters, and that of McNamara, and the initial reactions that this information generated.

YARMOLINSKY: I don't really because my own initiation was gradual. My primary concern, except for limited periods during the whole four years, was with the domestic aspects of the Department of Defense. I started out working on questions of appointments and White House liaison. I spent a lot of time in the early months attempting to mediate between the people who were concerned about how much we were able to make Defense contracts available in distressed labor areas. The Defense procurement people said no, we can't do that unless we have 100 percent set-asides, and there were arguments against legislation for 100 percent set-asides. Then there was the

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subject of what we are doing for small business, and this depends again on certain set-aside arrangements which are not terribly productive of contracts, and there are policy reasons why this is undesirable.

I noticed in going through my chron file that I spent quite a bit of time on the question of reducing flying pay. There were a lot of Air Force officers who were kept on flying pay beyond the need of the Air Force for rated officers. Obviously the Air Force needs to have rated officers to fly the airplanes and to exercise command functions where they may sometimes fly. Also spaces for rated officers being rotated through other career development assignments, but who go back to flying and do not expect and should not find that they are taken off flying pay for that period because their career plans are based on that income pattern. There were a lot more people on flying pay, and so what do you do to them. There were a few schemes for reducing the number of people on flying pay, one in which you gradually reduce the flying pay, the other, depending upon the number of years they have been flying, and the other where you gradually reduce the flying pay in proportion to the number of years that they have been off flying status. Again, my role was a mediator, between the pressures from the White House to eliminate what appeared to be a wasteful situation, and the pressures within the DOD not to disturb the career pattern and make it more difficult to recruit officers for flying duty. This is the kind of thing that I spent a fair

amount of time on. I found that I had written two long memoranda explaining the situation and explaining what we proposed to do about it.

ELLSBERG: Didn't the relationship with McNamara evolve which put

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you somewhat in the role of a confidant in general with him?

YARMOLINSKY: If he had any confidants, I suppose I was one of them.

ELLSBERG: How did that really show itself, breakfast meetings at odd hours during the day?

YARMOLINSKY: No, we didn't have breakfast together. He had a series of breakfasts regularly scheduled each week. He and Gilpatrick would have breakfast one day with the Army Secretary, one day with the Navy Secretary, and one day with the Air Force Secretary. I don't recall whether there were breakfast sessions, but there were sessions with the Assistant Secretary for Installations and Logistics, and with the Assistant Secretary for Manpower, and there may have been some others. There was a regular lunch with Wiesner and Brown on R&D matters, and of course a regular weekly meeting with the Chiefs, at least one, often more. To answer your question, in the course of working sessions with him, he would unburden himself a little bit about the things that concerned him such as management, policy, etc. He was always quite close-mouthed. I think he liked to have two or three people to whom he could blow off steam a little bit.

ELLSBERG: Who were some of the other confidants?

YARMOLINSKY: I suppose Gilpatric and Vance.

ELLSBERG: Was Vance a confidant?

YARMOLINSKY: Yes.

ELLSBERG: Even before he was Deputy Secretary?

YARMOLINSKY: Yes, when Vance was General Counsel, and then when he was Secretary of the Army.

ELLSBERG: To get back to this earlier point, do you remember having

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early expressions in the course of these conversations, that indicated his views on nuclear weapons, or the views of the White House?

YARMOLINSKY: I'm trying to remember.

ELLSBERG: For example, you say there was no thought of a no-first-use policy. Now that was certainly a public position. Was that equally unequivocal inside the Administration?

YARMOLINSKY: I believe so. If the suggestion was ever made that we adopt a clear no-first-use policy within the Administration, I never ran into it.

ELLSBERG: The Administration was accused of this. There were reports that Europeans suspected that this was the real drift of our policy.

YARMOLINSKY: Yes, but I don't think there was any basis for it.

ELLSBERG: I'm not aware of it.

YARMOLINSKY: McNamara always recognized that in the event, even the unlikely event of a major Soviet assault on the Western Front, we couldn't stop them without first use of nuclear weapons, unless they chose to begin the assault with nuclear weapons, which I supposed they might.

ELLSBERG: In the spring of 1961 I was studying Decision-Making, and the President is quoted as having said at an NSC meeting, at which the JCS had presented their view that if the Chinese had come in, in the case of the Laos conflict, we would have had to use nuclear weapons. The President has said that we should be giving more attention to fallout protection and to Civil Defense.

YARMOLINSKY: The President said we would have to, or we might have to?

ELLSBERG: The President said we should begin thinking seriously about fallout and Civil Defense.

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YARMOLINSKY: I do not recall that. Aside from participation in the formulation of speeches like the Ann Arbor speech, which of course was a major event, from day to day my concern was much more with domestic repercussions of defense policy than it was with the formulation of nuclear policy, per se.

ELLSBERG: Did you deal with or work on either of the earlier NATO speeches?

YARMOLINSKY: No, I did not. Generally I did not work on NATO speeches when they were being delivered in the NATO context, but I was consulted as were a number of other people.

ELLSBERG: Did you have anything to do with Gilpatric's speech in October of 1961? It dealt with ending the missile gap.

YARMOLINSKY: Yes, but only rather incidentally. I read the speech in draft and made some suggestions. I do not recall that I was particularly involved in the policy decision concerning the assertion of nuclear strength. This is typical of McNamara's way of proceeding. In each case he wanted to move from strength and develop new policy positions on the basis of statements of our strength.

ELLSBERG: Do you remember now how that speech got written? I'd forgotten that a large part of it had been written earlier as a draft for the President.

YARMOLINSKY: I do not remember.

ELLSBERG: I now remember you were working on a speech for the President, and I came in and drafted that part of it. You then took it to McNamara. Do you remember now?

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YARMOLINSKY: Yes, vaguely.

ELLSBERG: And then McNamara okayed it.

YARMOLINSKY: Yes.

ELLSBERG: Later he polished up the speech along these lines and it was sent over to the White House over McNamara's signature, and then the President didn't use it.

YARMOLINSKY: It was decided that Gilpatric would give the speech. This was the Business Council speech at Hot Springs.

ELLSBERG: Do you remember anything about McNamara's famous background press conference in February of 1961?

YARMOLINSKY: The missile gap press conference. I wasn't present at that, but I recall one of the first major projects that I was involved in was documenting

“was there a missile gap?”

ELLSBERG: After the press conference?

YARMOLINSKY: Yes, after the press conference.

ELLSBERG: What conclusion did you come up with?

YARMOLINSKY: Our conclusion was that there was none.

ELLSBERG: I've always been puzzled by the timing because I believe it is correct that the intelligence estimates still indicated that there would be some missile gap, although not as large as the Democrats had stated.

YARMOLINSKY: No, I don't think so. This may have been because we stepped up the POLARIS program. I think that may have taken care of it.

ELLSBERG: Counting POLARIS?

YARMOLINSKY: We did count POLARIS, and we had already taken steps to accelerate the production and deployment of POLARIS. This may have been

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what made the difference. We were addressing ourselves to the question of whether there was now, in the light of whatever changes we had made in the first month or so, a missile gap or a future missile gap. We said no, there was not a missile gap now, and there would not be one.

ELLSBERG: Do you think McNamara's records made this assertion?

YARMOLINSKY: Well he still claims that he did not make the statement that there never was a missile gap.

ELLSBERG: Is that how he was quoted?

YARMOLINSKY: In effect that is how he was quoted.

ELLSBERG: Was there background on this? Was there a tape on this?

YARMOLINSKY: No, there was no transcript made of this conference.

ELLSBERG: So he felt he had been misquoted.

YARMOLINSKY: He felt he had been misquoted.

ELLSBERG: Presumably on all these matters that dealt with nuclear weapons, the Administration must have felt that it had a very narrow row to hoe in the sense that there was Allied concern, and similarly Service concern that we were retreating from reliance on nuclear weapons.

YARMOLINSKY: Yes, indeed, and this was why we began each talk of this kind by pointing out our enormous nuclear superiority.

ELLSBERG: And yet, at the same time, what about our nuclear superiority?

YARMOLINSKY: Our enormous nuclear superiority was not enormous at that point. More recently we have been able to talk about our enormous nuclear superiority.

ELLSBERG: Did this create some inner tension? Did the people making these statements really feel very comfortable about seeming to boast of

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our nuclear weapons, and what they could do for us? Did this represent their real own personal inclination?

YARMOLINSKY: I know it concerned me. It seemed to me to be somewhat inconsistent with the general notions which I was accustomed to thinking about. It sounded kind of sabre-rattling, but McNamara from the start was able to make the distinction between operating from strength and threatening to initiate unnecessary violence.

ELLSBERG: The distinction to himself you mean? Or what?

YARMOLINSKY: To himself, because there was never anything fuzzy about his thinking. Other peoples' thinking may have been fuzzy but not his.

ELLSBERG: Do you think there was a discernible difference on a sort of insider's basis, between the White House and McNamara?

YARMOLINSKY: Only to the extent that when McNamara was preoccupied with the question of whether there should be, say, 1200 or 1000 MINUTEMEN, questions would be asked in the White House, either by the President or by the National Security Council staff, why do we need 1000? It wasn't that they were taking the position that we didn't need 1000, they were asking more fundamental questions.

ELLSBERG: What was McNamara's answer?

YARMOLINSKY: McNamara was inclined to say these are the terms in which the dialogue is cast and other alternatives are not available even if they were to prove desirable.

ELLSBERG: The dialogue with whom?

YARMOLINSKY: The dialogue with the Chiefs.

ELLSBERG: I see. I wasn't sure whether it was the Russians.

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YARMOLINSKY: No, he was talking about the dialogue within the building.

ELLSBERG: I see. I am glad I clarified that.

YARMOLINSKY: I think he was satisfied that these were reasonable terms for the dialogue.

ELLSBERG: Suppose that the dialogue in the building had allowed for solutions like a few hundred MINUTEMEN instead of a thousand. What do you think his attitude would have been?

YARMOLINSKY: Where would McNamara have come out? Well I think he would have come out higher than a few hundred, but probably lower than a thousand.

ELLSBERG: I see. Were you aware of the background to the controlled response approach and the emphasis on damage limitation and that sort of thing?

YARMOLINSKY: I only became aware of it during and after the construction of the Ann Arbor speech.

ELLSBERG: Why don't we go into that?

YARMOLINSKY: All right.

ELLSBERG: The Ann Arbor speech.

YARMOLINSKY: I am not sure that I can make any great contribution to that. You

participated in that, and you may be able to contribute more than I can. I came to it without fundamental education in a lot of these concepts and a lot of this thinking. I had not been getting into it. This was in the spring of 1962. No, it was earlier.

ELLSBERG: The Athens speech was in May 1962.

YARMOLINSKY: Was the Ann Arbor speech in June 1962?

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ELLSBERG: The Athens speech was a sort of declassification.

YARMOLINSKY: Yes.

ELLSBERG: The Athens speech was in June 1962.

YARMOLINSKY: I don't remember what I was spending most of my time on between January and June of 1962.

ELLSBERG: Do you remember how you got into editing and writing the speech?

YARMOLINSKY: I got into it because I was responsible for all of McNamara's speeches. He only gave four or five speeches a year, but this was one of my responsibilities.

ELLSBERG: Unclassified speeches?

YARMOLINSKY: Yes, his unclassified speeches. I was not responsible for his NATO speeches. I was pretty much out of Civil Defense by January. When was SKYBOLT?

ELLSBERG: SKYBOLT was the fall of 1962, ending in December.

YARMOLINSKY: Yes. I don't remember what my primary concerns were, they changed so much but I think it probably was the Bell Report. The winter of 1962 was the period when I was working on the Bell Report contracting for research and development.

ELLSBERG: 1962 or 1963?

YARMOLINSKY: I am talking about January of 1962. From January to June of 1962 I was very much occupied with the Bell Committee. This was not so

much developing the code of conduct, but we were developing basic thinking about contracting with research and development organizations. I was representing the Department of Defense on this committee, of which

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Dave Bell, who was then Director of the Bureau of the Budget, was chairman. This was my major concern until I got into the drafting of the Ann Arbor speech. The Ann Arbor speech was outlined on the basis of the Athens speech and, while I had read the Athens speech, I hadn't really done any work on it, and I hadn't really thought about it very seriously.

ELLSBERG: Did he want to change anything in the Athens speech or add anything?

YARMOLINSKY: I don't recall that he did.

ELLSBERG: Do you remember what his motives were in deciding to declassify this speech?

YARMOLINSKY: I think he was talking primarily to the NATO allies.

ELLSBERG: He had already talked to the governments.

YARMOLINSKY: That is right. He was talking to them. I think his notion was to talk to them through the press.

ELLSBERG: How would you describe the main aims that he had in the Ann Arbor speech as opposed to the Athens speech?

YARMOLINSKY: I suppose the desire to demonstrate in a somewhat different form the necessity for unified nuclear strategy. It was as simple as that. He was using the hold-back-on-the-cities argument just as a sub-argument to support the unified strategy idea. He intended that argument as a fairly subordinate argument and it got more attention than he meant for it to get. He always thought of no-cities as a remote contingency, not as a likely policy.

ELLSBERG: Even within the unlikely contingency of a thermonuclear war?

YARMOLINSKY: Yes. He was always deeply pessimistic about consequences

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of any kind of rationality you had of major thermonuclear exchange.

ELLSBERG: My overall reaction to the draft of that speech was that it should not be

given. Do you remember that?

YARMOLINSKY: I remember.

ELLSBERG: One specific reservation I had was a feeling that this was the first introduction of the US public to this notion of discrimination and avoiding cities, and so forth.

YARMOLINSKY: Yes.

ELLSBERG: Do you remember that?

YARMOLINSKY: Yes.

ELLSBERG: Do you think that McNamara was conscious at the time of the novelty of the speech?

YARMOLINSKY: No. I don't think he was especially conscious of that.

ELLSBERG: Do you think the speech was mainly directed against the French nuclear force?

YARMOLINSKY: I suppose primarily.

ELLSBERG: For instance, one thing I have mulled about, in recollecting the episode, was whether he would have been inclined to drop the pointed reference to the French force.

YARMOLINSKY: Yes.

ELLSBERG: Forces or obsolescent, or rapidly obsolescent, vulnerable, etc. Would he have dropped that from the speech if it had been suggested.

YARMOLINSKY: At that stage, no. If he were giving it again, he might have.

ELLSBERG: I mention it because that particular remark came up for

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so much comment later as having been a gratuitous insult to the French. Do you remember what the attitude was on the French force? How would you describe it?

YARMOLINSKY: He thought that this was unreasonable, and that the French should be

persuaded that there was a more reasonable course. I was in Europe in September or October of 1961 for a NATO Civil Defense meeting, and at that time I had dinner with Raymond Aron. I argued the proposition with him and with various other people while I was over there that the French were illogical on their own terms.

ELLSBERG: Do you think that McNamara did appreciate that there were political motives from the French point of view for the force? Or did he deprecate those?

YARMOLINSKY: I think he deprecated those.

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[END OF INTERVIEW]