Steuart L. Pittman Oral History Interview – JFK1, 09/18/1970
Administrative Information

Creator: Steuart L. Pittman
Interviewer: William W. Moss
Date of Interview: September 18, 1970
Place of Interview: Washington, D.C.
Length: 20 pages

Biographical Note
Pittman, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Civil Defense (1961-1964), discusses Administration support for civil defense programs and the construction of federally funded community fallout shelters, among other issues.

Access
Open

Usage Restrictions
According to the deed of gift signed November 14, 1973 copyright of these materials has been assigned to the United States Government. Users of these materials are advised to determine the copyright status of any document from which they wish to publish. Users of these materials are advised to determine the copyright status of any document from which they wish to publish.

Copyright
The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

Transcript of Oral History Interview
These electronic documents were created from transcripts available in the research room of the John F. Kennedy Library. The transcripts were scanned using optical character recognition and the resulting text files were proofread against the original transcripts. Some formatting changes were made. Page numbers are noted where they would have occurred at the bottoms of the pages of the original transcripts. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy, they are encouraged to visit the Library and consult the transcripts and the interview recordings.

Suggested Citation

Steuart L. Pittman, recorded interview by William W. Moss**,** September 18, 1970, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

Gift of Personal Statement

By Steuart L. Pittman

to the

JOHN F. KENNEDY LIBRARY

I, Steuart L. Pittman of Washington, D.C., do hereby give to the John F. Kennedy Library, for use and administration therein, all my rights, title and interest, except as hereinafter provided, to the tape recording and transcript of the interview conducted at Washington, D.C. on September 18, 1970 for the John F. Kennedy Library. The gift of this material is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

1. The interview is to be opened immediately to general research.

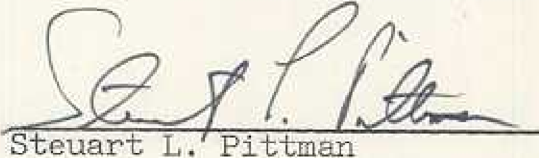
2. Researchers who have access to the transcript of the interview may listen to the tape; however, this is to be for background use only. Researchers may not cite, paraphrase or quote from the tape.

3. I hereby assign literary property rights in this interview to the United States Government.

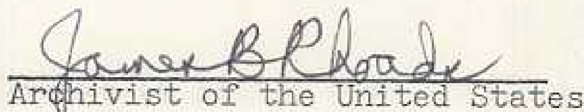
4. Copies of the interview transcript may be provided upon request to any researcher.

5. Copies of the interview may, upon request, be deposited in other institutions.

6. This agreement may be revised or amended by mutual consent of the parties undersigned.



Steuart L. Pittman — Date: Nov 2, 1973



Archivist of the United States — Date: 11-14-73

Steuart L. Pittman – JFK #1

Table of Contents

Page	Topic
1	Pittman's appointment as Assistant Secretary of Defense for Civil Defense
2	Administration's growing concern over the subject of civil defense
3	Reorganization of civil defense programs from the Office of Emergency Planning to the Defense Department
3	Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's reluctance to support civil defense programs
5	The Governors' Committee on Civil Defense
6	Federal support for creating fallout shelters
7	Involvement of local government to support fallout shelter programs
9	Individuals in the Administration's reluctance about civil defense matters
10	Publishing "The Yellow Peril"
12	Nationwide survey for fallout shelter space
13	Legislation to federally fund construction of community shelters
14	Public reaction to building shelters
16	The issue of municipal evacuation
18	Rejection of civil defense programs in Portland, Oregon, Baltimore, Maryland, and New York City
19	Pittman's first meeting with John F. Kennedy
ADDENDUM	

Oral History Interview

with

STEUART L. PITTMAN

September 18, 1970
Washington, D.C.

By William W. Moss

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MOSS: Let me ask you, first of all, Mr. Pittman, when, how and by whom were you approached for the job of Assistant Secretary of Defense for Civil Defense? What were the origins of your appointment in effect?

PITTMAN: Well, the principal answer to that is that when I got out of law school in 1948, I worked for Roswell Gilpatric [Roswell L. Gilpatric] at the New York law firm, Cravath, Swaine & Moore, and he was my first boss. As Deputy Secretary of Defense, he asked me to do this. He was always very persuasive as far as I'm concerned. Adam Yarmolinsky, who worked for Gilpatric and was a key administration talent scout, thought that this was a special interest of mine because we were fellow members of a small "think group." I had once made a talk on civil resistance, and having only the notice and not attending, he reported to Gilpatric that I was an expert in civil defense, which I was not. That was the beginning.

MOSS: It was Gilpatric who contacted you, was it?

PITTMAN: Yes.

MOSS: Okay, when you came to talk to Gilpatric, what were the terms at which he put the job to you? What was on his mind and what was on yours?

PITTMAN: First of all, he had been interested in the subject, I think, back in the Gaither Report days—the late 50's. He had worked for Rockefeller [Nelson A. Rockefeller], strong civil defense advocate, politically and otherwise. So he took the subject seriously. This was after the President's two speeches in May and July, launched the subject Gilpatric genuinely believed that President Kennedy was giving this a very high priority, which would continue. That's the impression he left me with, that the policy question had been decided. He indicated that the precise nature of the program was still fluid and that there'd be plenty of opportunity for the man in charge to shape the program.

MOSS: All right. Let's go back then to that May 25th speech. You said that there was some question in your mind as to why it had been done.

PITTMAN: Yes, I think that universally it has come to be believed that the beginning of this upgrading of civil defense and reaching out for a nationwide fallout protection program, shelters, began because the President had his confrontation with Khrushchev [Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev] and decided that the nation was in great peril and that, for one reason or another, it was desirable to make an overt move to prepare for nuclear war. This alarmist view was presented by the President in a speech on July 25, largely about civil defense. Although this speech came to be thought of as the beginning. This overlooks the fact that two months earlier on May 25th, the President made a less alarming but more comprehensive statement on initiating a full civil defense program that would provide some degree of protection for everybody, concentrating on the fallout problem. This speech was the result of staff work in the White House. Carl Kaysen was very active and instrumental in that work. I have never heard a coherent explanation of just how the President got into this subject so publicly at that time and why he thought it was that important. My own feeling is that the concept of the President that people should be involved in public affairs and not be passive was behind it; that he saw defense in these terms, and he saw civil defense as the opportunity for people to participate in the defense of the country as civilians. He thought that was an inherently good thing. Later this whole concept was challenged by his principal advisors as an inherently bad thing, dangerous to the President politically. Many of his staff tried to protect him by deliberately cutting back public involvement in civil defense, by keeping it as out of sight as possible and as professional as possible, not getting people excited and involved. But the President's own attitude, I think, was otherwise in the beginning. He first saw civil defense as something people could do for their country. Two months later it was part of the Berlin crisis, but the pundits were wrong in assuming it was merely psychological warfare to the President.

MOSS: Okay, now when you came aboard, in effect, the civil defense function had been moved from the Office of Emergency Planning to

the Defense Department. Do you know the background? How much were you made aware of the reasons for this and the way it was done?

PITTMAN: Well, this was the first major problem that I confronted as this was not completed, and it had a very messy aftermath. So I, of course, heard a good deal about the reasons why it was done because it was a continuing source of friction and debate. Frank B. Ellis, who had headed the program before it was taken away from him and put in the Defense Department, and I were working together trying to make the best of it. He never believed what had happened, and there was a great deal of misunderstanding among all the agencies involved as to what the President intended in making this shift. The obvious purpose was to upgrade the priority and make civil defense an integral part of the national defense posture, and this was demonstrated by putting it under the Secretary of Defense. It was also, I think, an expression of distrust for the reliance on state and local governments. There was a feeling in this first burst of enthusiasm that, if this is important, it's got to be done at the federal level. I think McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] reluctantly went along with taking this responsibility on the basis that it not be a shared responsibility. The Defense Department should make the decisions.

MOSS: Why do you think he was reluctant to take it?

PITTMAN: I think he was reluctant to take it because he was a tidy man who likes to have clear responsibilities and a clear opportunity to accomplish what he sets out to do, and he couldn't really see how a nationwide shelter program would fit that. It was too messy, and he didn't like that kind of responsibility. All through his involvement in it he tried to contain it, and confine it to subjects which could be accomplished under his control, the Defense Department's control. Surveying, marking shelters, the Corps of Engineers [United States Army Corps of Engineers] could do this. Other aspects of civil defense local governments had to do. Well, he was very keen to draw a sharp line and say, "We are not responsible for important parts of this program. That's the business of local governments."

MOSS: Do you think that it's had any deleterious effect on the eventual civil defense posture, the fact that he backed off from this?

PITTMAN: Yes. Rightly or wrongly, I felt at the time that this was the main problem, the main reason why civil defense didn't achieve its potential. When I say civil defense, I'm talking about essentially a fallout protection program that is nationwide, with supporting warning and training and so on, not the massive civil defense of underground bomb shelters that is sometimes, or during this period was constantly, confused with the program that was being developed.

MOSS: It's my understanding that Adam Yarmolinsky was more or less looking after the Defense Department's civil defense thing before you came on.

PITTMAN: That's right. He was clearly in charge and had the full responsibility on sort of a holding basis while they were looking for somebody to take the job.

MOSS: So what did he hand to you, in effect? What were the ideas and programs and so on that he handed on to you?

PITTMAN: The unfinished problems that were taking up most of his time and mine when I came in were to complete the reorganization that you just alluded to, separating civil defense out of the old OCDM [Office of Civil and Defense Mobilization] and keeping emergency planning, post attack recovery, related subjects in the new OEP [Office of Emergency Planning]; how this related to the regional state and local levels, which all looked upon this as one subject. It had a lot of problems. He was deeply into that, as I was. The surveying and making of shelter space in large buildings was just being started. The Corps of Engineers was being employed to take a large hand in this. Finding people, employing people in the office of civil defense to work on this—these were all live problems when he was in charge. I think the problem of developing a program for the future which would create new shelter, as distinct from surveying existing space, was not yet a major concern at that time.

MOSS: Did you have any reservations about taking the job, or did you ask for any special considerations in doing the job?

PITTMAN: Well, I had this reservation that I was deeply involved in developing a law firm with my partners. It was a small firm and it was a painful business to leave it at that point, which Ros Gilpatric well understood being a lawyer. I asked that I be allowed to limit this to two years, whereas the general rule at the time was everybody stays through the duration of the first term of the President. This was understood and agreed to. My main concern about taking it was the interruption of law practice, but I guess I also had some doubts as to whether this was the kind of thing I'd be any good at because I saw it as heavily involved in promotion and speech making and political activities which I didn't consider my cup of tea.

MOSS: And what persuaded you to accept the job in the face of these reservations? Simply the friendship with Gilpatric and his persuasiveness or what?

PITTMAN: Yes, I think he persuaded me, and I became….Well, I had always been intrigued with the subject of civilian involvement in civil defense in a different way than shelters, because of my experience in China during World War II. I began to, as I looked into this, become intrigued with the possibility of accomplishing this very difficult task in a way that wouldn't disturb the country. To try to

design a program which would involve the public in the right way in civil

defense I thought would be good for the United States and seemed like a challenge. To make the country somewhat less vulnerable without the kind of unfortunate side effects that so many were worrying about appealed to me as kind of a one-shot effort in program designing that would leave something behind that was useful. So that's why I decided to try it.

MOSS: Okay, let's move on then to the October meeting in which the Governor's Committee was down in Washington, I understand, Rockefeller heading the Governors' Committee on Civil Defense [of the Governors Conference]. They were developing some ideas at any rate, or some pressures, and I have a record of your meeting with the President, McNamara, and McGeorge Bundy on the sixth of October 1961. Can you sketch the background of that for us?

PITTMAN: Well, let me recall what I can. It seems to me the first event was Rockefeller, who chaired to Governors' Civil Defense Committee, came to town with his entire committee and met in the Pentagon with McNamara and myself and others involved. There was a clash right off between the concept of community shelters and home shelters. Rockefeller and most of his committee were on the side of home shelters, encouraging people to put "bomb shelters" in their backyard. McNamara was really quite sympathetic to this idea, the do-it-yourself, self-reliant, the original American concept; but the program that seemed practical to those of us working up a new program was all community shelter oriented, using existing buildings of some size, getting people together in groups where you could have leadership and give them guidance and have communications. This clash took place and it was sort of papered over, compromised. As a result, we wouldn't turn our back on home shelters abruptly, but our work all pointed to a future of community shelters. I believe it was several weeks later that Rockefeller wanted to see President Kennedy about this whole subject and do something helpful. I think his motives were entirely sincere. President Kennedy and his staff were very suspicious of the man for political reasons and thought that he might be trying to steal their thunder, nobody yet knowing that this was not that popular a subject. His desire to publicly see the President and call for stronger civil defense measures was headed off by a meeting of Bundy, McNamara, and myself the President. The main purpose of the meeting was how do you deal with Rockefeller. My main purpose was a bit different. I had a piece of paper in my hand that I hadn't been able to get Bundy and McNamara to go along with, which in effect said that the goal was fallout protection for all Americans, not just making shelter space, implying that we'd find a way to do the whole job. I managed during this meeting to bring up my proposed statement and said in effect to the President, "If we can get this statement out for a meeting of local civil defense people [that was going on in Washington at the time] this will steal Rockefeller's thunder. This is really all that Rockefeller is after and what you have given the country reason to expect. Let's

get the statement out in your name, and there'll be no need for meeting Rockefeller, or if you do meet him, it will be an anticlimax." It was a very confused meeting in which people were not thinking much about substance. The President permitted me to release the statement in his name. My impression was that both Bundy and McNamara considered it unwise to go this far. Later on I tried to hook people with this statement, to maintain the priority in the federal government, and I used it heavily. I think that many of the people around the President felt that he did not clearly intend to go this far.

MOSS: What did they think he really meant?

PITTMAN: Well, I don't think anybody could've answered that question. The President—this really came to a head at that Hyannis Port [Hyannis Port, Massachusetts] meeting in November, 1961, where there was a decision made to go beyond marking and stocking shelters and to put some money into new shelters. This was the rather typical process of putting up three alternatives with price tags on each alternative, and the one I wanted, of course, was the middle one, and the other two were designed to make the middle one look good. The middle one would've called for putting federal money into the design of new schools, hospitals, and other public-type buildings to increase their capacity to shelter people against fallout radiation, as an extension to the approved program of surveying existing shelter spaces. This extension of the program has never happened to this day. Most of my tenure in the job was a struggle to make it come to light to get that end of the program launched. At Hyannis Port it was very curious: Secretary McNamara went along on the paper with this middle position that I just described, signed the recommendation to the President, but at the meeting at one point he quite clearly said that he really preferred stopping at marking and stocking shelters. At this point Bobby Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] was out playing touch football in the rain and came in dripping wet with a red shirt on in the middle of this meeting. The Joint Chiefs [Joint Chiefs of Staff] and twenty people were there. This was one of many important national security subjects that were being discussed over, I think, a two-day period. He discovered what was being talked about, and said that he'd give this a little thought and he didn't think we ought to get involved in anything beyond marking and stocking shelters until we organized the country; that this was going to take intense local organization which should come first, and that there ought to be several years of that. McNamara agreed with him. Wiesner [Jerome B. Wiesner] was there. He had continuing reservations about this program throughout my tenure. He made only one statement at the meeting, which was to tell the President that fallout shelters would be obsolete within five years. This was a five-year program which would be completed only at the end of five years. Obviously it made no sense whatsoever if you believed that they'd be obsolete within five years. Nobody seemed to answer him. The President didn't say anything. I finally filled the silence with my

version of why this wasn't so and the subject dropped.

I say this to convey the impression that this meeting seemed quite unreal to me. There wasn't a real coming to grips with the issues of whether this kind of a program made sense over the long haul, or whether we should commit ourselves to it. The decision was finally made when I said to the President something about his May 25th statement, which had called for continuously increasing federal financial involvement in a shelter program. He said, "What did I say?" McNamara read him the short part of his speech which he had in his packet there, and he in effect, said, "Well, it seems to me we can't do any less than this middle position." The implication being quite clear that having said this I'm not going to retreat. It was that kind of a decision. So already the uncertainty had set in.

Actually Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.] was the only person, other than myself, at this meeting that spoke in favor of the position that was being recommended. Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] spoke against it briefly. He had prepared a memorandum to the President arguing strongly against it a few days earlier. So there was a decision made to start the nation down the path of a nationwide shelter program with major reservations and dissensions among the people around the President. I remember the President at the end, having made a decision, he turned to me, looked at me and he said, "You've got the most difficult job in Washington next to mine." There was sort of nervous laughter around the room, and then he asked McNamara and Gilpatric to retire with him to another room. They came back five minutes later and the President said, "Here's how we're going to proceed." And said, "Mr. Kaysen will follow this from the White House, and Mr. McNamara will pay personal attention." I took this personally, that the President sort of looked at this inexperienced lawyer in government and said, "How is he going to do this?" and went out with McNamara and said, "How is he going to do this? And who is going to really get this done? You better be darned sure you're involved." I suspected he sort of threw it to McNamara to be responsible.

When we got back to the Pentagon, we sat down with each other. McNamara starting laying down the law about how we're not going to get involved in anything except what we can do at the federal level, and the responsibility of local government is not our business. I was very upset about that because it was clear to me by this time that the whole thing builds on local responsibility inspired by federal direction and support, and you won't get anything done without it. I told McNamara I didn't think that was possible and that it was a great mistake, and he said, "Never mind. That's how it is."

[-7-]

So a piece of paper was prepared. Adam Yarmolinsky was actively involved in preparing it. This was the internal guidance later revealed to the governors and put out as a policy paper, and that had as its principal: We're not really taking the responsibility for civil defense. We're just doing certain parts of the job at the federal level and we're looking to state and local to do the main thing. This was totally impractical, and was a way of retreating from the decision that was made, in my view. That behind a long series of friction points between me and McNamara which resulted in his finally staying clear of the subject. Let me more or less run with it until it came to budget time. I wouldn't see him much in between.

MOSS: What caused him to move away? Was there a particular occasion, or was it just a…

PITTMAN: I thought the most revealing explanation for this was in the article in the *Saturday Evening Post* that Stewart Alsop wrote, based on an interview with McNamara, in which nuclear war and its impact on the United States was discussed. McNamara said that this, a major nuclear war with the Soviets, would result in the total destruction of the United States. And Alsop in the article pointed out that he had given McNamara an opportunity to change that quote, in effect asked him, "Did you really mean total destruction inevitably for the United States?" which of course means civil defense and things of this kind are of no significance. And the answer was, "Yes, that's what I meant." I think this is what McNamara would think, because he's an orderly man who cannot conceive of the vastly complex structure of our organized society being shattered and then carrying on. It's just, as I said earlier, he doesn't like a mess. A mess on this dimension is something that he would call total destruction.

MOSS: That's very interesting. I was very interested in that last remark of yours because it has some implications, I think. A great deal was made of Kennedy and McNamara's concern with nuclear warfare, the whole business getting out of control and that kind of thing. Now, if this proceeds from a very rational knowledge of the consequences of nuclear war, it's one thing. If it proceeds from McNamara's personal, intellectual distaste for a messy situation, it has another kind of implication. And I was wondering if…

PITTMAN: By it, you mean the sort of pulling back from civil defense.

MOSS: Right. Right.

PITTMAN: Well, I think it's the latter. We had extensive studies going on while I was there and they've been continued uninterrupted since, attempting to predict and analyze the destruction to live and property and the ecology and whatever, of certain

numbers of megatonnage delivered on the United States, and this thing has been war-gamed almost ad nauseam. The surprising result of these studies, which wasn't all war games—some of it was agricultural, recovery, and things like this that took a different kind of study—but the surprising result was that there was much more survival than anybody dared guess on all fronts. Nobody could honestly paint a picture that would relieve you of responsibility by calling it total destruction. There's no question that even without any civil defense there would be a level of survival which would leave a very serious problem that would be responsive to some advance thinking, planning, preparation, which would make a great deal of difference to those who are left. McNamara knew this, sort of. I think this reached him intellectually, but not emotionally. I'm trying to say what he thought when, in fact, I think he

and I lost the kind of relationship early in the game where he'd be telling me what he thought.

MOSS: Were there any others with whom you established this kind of communication that you could enlighten us on? Who else was thinking about these things, and in what way?

PITTMAN: Well, Kaysen, I think, was the most rational, disciplined thinker on this subject. He had the same distaste for the subject that everybody had, was worried about some of the side effects, but he paid attention to the results of these studies and came to the necessary and obvious conclusion that it'd be irresponsible not to do things that are manageable and not too expensive and don't have an unfortunate effect on the public in the United States and people abroad. Even Jerry Wiesner, who was a strong opponent at the level of the President on civil defense, I think would've subscribed to that. What divided people was whether to go beyond surveying, marking and stocking shelter, into putting federal money into construction. There was a fear by McNamara and others about getting into federal financing of construction. Even though you're not building the building, you are merely trying to put a relatively small amount of money in to encourage them to put a little more masonry in at certain points to give more shielding from radiation, the concern was that people could take advantage of this, and get federal money by purporting to do something for defense. It would be hard to manage. We spent a great deal of time and effort working with architects and engineers and committees of them on the outside to perfect systems which would make it possible to do this without it being abused, to define just what it was that federal money was going for. I became confident that it could be done. I don't think that confidence ever reached McNamara.

MOSS: What about other people such as Gilpatric, for instance, Harold Brown, John Rubel [John H. Rubel], people like this?

[-9-]

PITTMAN: Well, Harold Brown, I think, was negative, thought more or less what McNamara did. John Rubel I don't recall getting into the act. Gilpatric was always available and always helpful to me and I somehow felt that it was more personal than substantive. I wasn't sure how deeply he felt about the subject. He was generally in favor of a good civil defense program, and he would say the things that I occasionally wrote for him, and so would McNamara for that matter. Both made public statements that were strong on this subject. But it certainly was not high on Gilpatric's list of problems. He was trying to help McNamara with very important problems where McNamara was badly needing Gilpatric's kind of help in relating within the Pentagon. These were the important matters to him and civil defense was very much incidental and off on one side. But I think he felt some sort of responsibility to me, having hired me and tried to help.

MOSS: I think we ought to come back to this a bit, but I do want to get the story of the booklet that was put out. As I understand, this was in the works even prior to the November meeting in Hyannis Port.

PITTMAN: Yes.

MOSS: Okay, now how did this get started and what was the rationale for doing it and what happened to it?

PITTMAN: Well, it got started before I arrived by probably an unwise statement of President Kennedy, which was that he was shortly going to tell every American what to do about nuclear war. This was a statement which, I think, the Pentagon approved, cleared. I believe that McNamara and Yarmolinsky really did believe that it was going to be possible to put out a booklet that would tell everybody how to handle the problem, or at least give them a lot of information that would clear the air, leave people feeling that they knew what to do. We have to admit in hindsight that this was very naïve. Before I got there this booklet was in preparation. A decision had been made to employ the *Time-Life* book division, to prepare it in a way that would make it a booklet—I think it was then considered a book—of great impact. I think the booklet episode did more than any one thing to scare the people in the White House, to make them feel that the Pentagon wasn't very alert to the subtle problems of civil defense and that they'd better be watched very carefully, and that the President had to be protected. The President had asked repeatedly at press conferences, "Where's the booklet?" At first he said, "It'll be available in a few weeks." Time went on and people discovered that this wasn't so easy. It was a very poor performance. The *Time Life* group that came in to do this—Ed Thompson [Edward K. Thompson], who was editor of *Life* was in charge—took it very seriously. This was going to be a great service to the country, and whether they thought it would be good for *Time-Life* or not, I think they were genuinely patriotic in their approach to it. That was Ed Thompson's personal attitude. He wanted to start off with a big picture

of a stockade in early America. The approach didn't fit the slowly developing caution. It didn't fit my views either. I was not against professionals from outside working on this thing, but it seemed to me it was being overdone, but nobody really knew, could see ahead, to whether the major impact would be good or bad. The plan was to put this on everybody's doorstep, using the post office. A late decision after the booklet was finally prepared was to come off that, to put it out much more discreetly. The White House—it was extraordinary the number of man hours from the President, Bundy, Wiesner, Kaysen, McNamara—all these kind of people were crawling over this piece of paper which was to be a booklet, arguing about whether you should show a boat as a fallout shelter because it might offend the poor people that don't have boats. It was really a ridiculous episode, and I think it did more than any one thing to queer people on the whole subject.

What was finally done was to drag somebody down from Battle Creek [Battle Creek, Michigan] where the civil defenders of the past were still sitting it out, waiting for the

Pentagon to take over. This public information man from the old program named Don Thomas [Donald E. Thomas] was finally given the job to pick up the pieces and put the booklet together. They'd put out many, many booklets on similar subject in the past, and he wrote a good little booklet. It was very modest, but was called "The Yellow Peril" because it had a yellow cover. The last paragraph of this little episode is that, after several tortured months, we did what we could've done almost immediately, which was to take the material that had already been written by OCDM, revise it somewhat, put it out in the name of the Defense Department.

MOSS: Okay, the brakes were put on about the middle of December or something, 1961, wasn't it? On this booklet, you were drawing back on it about then?

PITTMAN: Yes. Before the Hyannis Port decision in November of '61. It had its effect on that decision. In fact, I should mention that it was the White House and not the Defense Department that finally said the thing that had to be said: "Before we put out a booklet telling everybody what to do, we've got to have a program so that we can tell people what the federal government's going to do." And McNamara resisted that. He did not want to be committed to a federal program before the booklet. He wanted to get the booklet out first and tell people what they could do in their homes. This was a mistake. It seemed to me it was a mistake at the time, but it took a White House decision, Kaysen's basically, I think, to say, "We just can't put out a booklet after all this background and all that the President's promised without defining the federal role."

MOSS: Okay, there was to be a presidential talk….

[-11-]

PITTMAN: So that tied Hyannis Port together with the booklet.

MOSS: There was to be a presidential talk on the subject of civil defense in early January was there not? It's described in the *New York Times* as a (quote) fireside chat (unquote). It was cancelled.

PITTMAN: Yes, that was right on the level with delivering this booklet to every doorstep, to have a fireside chat. That was dropped.

MOSS: Do you reall? It was still part of this whole reaction to the book, was it?

PITTMAN: Yes. This was the decision to down play things instead of building them up.

MOSS: Okay, now how about the business of going after a nationwide survey for shelter space? When did this get into the discussions, and how did you go about it?

PITTMAN: This was the first solid element of the program. The surprise was that there was far more shelter space than anybody had predicted. They were talking in terms of finding space for fifty million people initially, and there's now surveyed space for something approaching two hundred million people. There's some overlap in this. So that this technique of surveying, marking and stocking shelters, as it turns out, has a potential for covering, oh, I'd say, half the shelter requirements of the nation instead of maybe twenty percent. These figures may not seem to add up because there's some overlap on nighttime population, daytime population, and so on.

MOSS: Okay, now in February, 1962, the Administration submitted a bill for authority to pay all or part of the costs of community fallout shelters for, it says, twenty million people, and it's a four hundred and fifty million dollar program or something of this sort. Was this what led to the Hébert [F. Edward Hébert] hearings?

PITTMAN: Yes.

MOSS: Okay. This grows out of the thinking in both the Defense Department and the White House at the end of 1961, that this is the route to go?

PITTMAN: This was the Hyannis Port decision.

MOSS: Oh, okay. Who was involved in drafting the bill and that sort of thing?

[-12-]

PITTMAN: Well, in early 1962, the bill was drafted and public statements were made, the meeting with the Governor's Committee, Rockefeller's government committee, to explain the new program: this was all done at about that time. I guess I was the one who was preparing the bill with people who worked for me. We couldn't get hearings on the bill that year. Vinson [Carl Vinson], Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, said that the nation wasn't yet ready for this subject, that we should educate people and prepare them and come back only when that was done to bother Congress with the subject. The old man wrote a very well-reasoned explanation of why he felt this way, and McNamara was convinced that Vinson would never hold hearings on this. I made a major effort to get him to change his mind and get his staff to cooperate, and we finally got the hearings scheduled.

As I recall it, the budget decision for that year, which must've been the fall of 1962, had in it a very large item for a new shelter program, and at the final meeting before the President, which I didn't attend, but heard about, Wiesner was all geared up to shoot down this program for civil defense. He had a committee, the panel of PSAC [President's Science

Advisory Committee], you know, the President's Science Advisory Committee, that was organized with some very good people on it, which had made a study. We'd appeared before them and explained our program over a course of a year, maybe once a month. It was a very elaborate investigation. Wiesner never could get his panel to say what he wanted them to say, so they never made a report. They were divided. But he, nonetheless, went before the President at budget time and talked as though PSAC was opposed to this extension of the program, which I considered was playing dirty pool, and I wasn't really able to deal with this through McNamara.

The decision however to include the money for this extension of the program was made by the President, as I heard it, because when Wiesner started to make his presentation about why this shouldn't be done, the President said to McNamara, "Do you think Vinson will hold hearings on this?"And McNamara said, "Not a chance." The President said to Jerry Wiesner something like, "Well Jerry, I guess we don't need to take time over this. This leaves us in the position where we're asking for it. We're not retreating, but it's not going to happen, so let's not worry about it."

Then it was to the surprise of all of these gentlemen that the committee finally did hold hearing. Eddie Hébert caught fire on the idea this would be good publicity, and he was going to be the one that would put the shelter construction program to bed. I think that's what he thought he was going to do, to end this thing once and for all. That's why they held the hearings. I think the Administration thought it was going to be ended once and for all, and I think the people I've described were not averse to that result. By it, I mean the extension of the program which required money going into new sheltering. The impression of the

Hill [Capitol Hill], for anybody following this, was that the Administration was not seeking this. There was no signal from the White House. By that time the Joint Chiefs had gotten more active and interested in seeing this happen, and they were on our side.

The result was that, when they had hearings, the stage was set to kill this. There were three months of hearing, which was quite a circus. We got about a hundred leading citizens from all walks of life, and we battled through those three months in the summer of 1963. The committee, in their report and individually said that they had changed their minds. They decided this was a serious subject, that this should be done, that it wouldn't have all the damaging side effects that were claimed, and they were extraordinarily helpful. Once having been converted, they became enthusiastic, and they put this over on the floor of the House where it passed overwhelmingly, and they were in other ways extraordinarily helpful from then on. When we got into trouble in certain cities—Baltimore and Portland—we had some real allies.

Well, anyway, this was an unexpected turn of events to the Administration which now was faced with spending money they didn't really mean to spend. I may be oversimplifying and exaggerating a little bit, but it was an awkward situation. Nobody was happy particularly. People were congratulating me for turning Congress around as a little personal tour de force, and, at the same time, were unhappy at the result. And then the Senate Subcommittee [Senate Committee on National Security, Staffing and Operations] chaired by Jackson [Henry M. Jackson] killed it, deferred it until an ABM [Anti-Ballistic Missile Treat]

decision was ready. I resigned a few weeks later. My two years having expired six months earlier, I had a good excuse to get out.

MOSS: Okay, there's another thread running along parallel with this and that's the public reaction to it. You have the business of local entrepreneurs specializing in building shelters and then selling them at cut-rate prices to individuals, you have the business of Father McHugh [L.C. McHugh] saying that it was morally right to fight off your neighbors and this kind of thing. How was this being received in the Pentagon and the White House? What was the reaction to the mass reaction?

PITTMAN: Well, during the fall of 1961 we were sort of converting over to the community shelter and working through industry and local government and doing this quietly, without too much fanfare, which was the way we wanted to go and the way it has gone. During that period we didn't want to turn our back on any support that might be available, including the home shelter enthusiasts, which included a lot of local civil defense directors, people of that sort who'd been working on it for a long time, finally saw a chance to move shelters because of the federal involvement and the Berlin crisis. They

were keeping our feet to the fire—pleading with us not to turn our back on this: "If you're going in another direction in your program, don't kill what we might get done in the meantime, which could be important." We took the position that home shelters have definite value, but a community shelter system will be far better when we finally get it ready. In the meantime, anybody who's willing and able, should go ahead with arrangements in their homes.

Now, that laid a basis for commercial development of markets for certain products, medical equipment, food products, and things you stock a shelter with as well as shelters themselves. There were some outrageous advertisements, trying to scare people. But there were also a great many responsible manufacturers who were doing it in a manner which was not offensive, thought they saw a continuing market here and were gearing up to meet it. It was my feeling that this should not be discouraged, that the only discouragement that should come from the Pentagon should be its cooperation with the Federal Trade Commission to discourage the wrong kind of advertising. We did that. But we also cooperated in assisting in the design of products. We stopped short of endorsing products. We saw the commercial interest in the subject as one facet of civilian involvement in defense which, if lawfully conducted, should not be discouraged by the federal government.

MOSS: Did people in your shop get into the spirit of things and build their own backyard shelters?

PITTMAN: Some did. I didn't. I remember getting on television once and being asked this question which was asked all the time. I was so bored with

the question at one point, that I said I hadn't had time to think about it. I got angry letters from local civil defense directors. My answer usually was that I was waiting for a community shelter down the street to be prepared.

MOSS: All right. What were your relationships with the other agencies now, such as Commerce [Department of Commerce], HEW [Department of Health, Education and Welfare], and Housing and Home Finance Agency, and so on, with Agriculture [Department of Agriculture], and whatnot?

PITTMAN: On paper, OEP had the responsibility for coordinating activities of these agencies. OEP was unable to get money from Congress to give these agencies; the agencies themselves were also unable to get money from Congress for their programs. Thomas [Albert Thomas], Chairman of Appropriations Subcommittee [House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations] was death on this whole subject. Being part of the Pentagon, we were best able to get sufficient appropriations. So although the OEP was supposed to be coordination and giving direction

to these other agencies, the way it worked was that we would contract with these agencies to do certain things that were related to civil defense, say, a rural civil defense program with agriculture, or with the Federal Communications Commission or the Emergency Broadcasting System. We would provide the money out of an appropriation and write contracts which would give the directions. So in this way we ended up doing most of the coordinating of interagency civil defense matters. The Executive Orders, however, gave this responsibility to OEP.

MOSS: This kind of situation where you have a somewhat client relationships with another agency is very often a difficult one to follow up. Did you find any resistance or any lack of enthusiasm in the other agencies for following up on the program?

PITTMAN: Well, it was very much the same as dealing with industry and the state and local governments. As long as you could get the President, Secretary of Defense and the Joint Chiefs to say this was important, you would get their cooperation. But when it became uncertain as to whether the federal government really meant this, whether it was really considered important, then you lose it. So it's really part of the whole problem of federal leadership. I'd say in general, during the period I was there, we were getting pretty good cooperation. We were trying to get the GSA [General Services Administration] to put sheltering in all new federal buildings, and to stock all federal buildings having adequate shelter space. It was a little stick for awhile. It finally got worked out.

You know, curiously enough, one of the most difficult areas was the three military services. One of the things that really astonished me when I got in the job was to discover that the plans, the military plans, for forces in the continental United States during a general

war, under nuclear attack, were all laid out without regard to the fallout problem. This slowly changed somewhat, but not enough. The military never went anything like as far as we were going in organizing civilian buildings in the shelter system, trying to realistically plan for a condition where the country would be immobilized by lethal radiation.

MOSS: It's startling.

PITTMAN: They had annually updated plans on the books for moving people around and operating over the open ground when all war-gaming made it clear that it would be impossible to do anything except take shelter for days.

MOSS: The whole idea of municipal evacuation had pretty well died out by this time, had it not? The impractical…

PITTMAN: It died hard because a lot of local civil defense plans were based on it. It was important to us that we convert local civil defense from evacuation to staying in place. You could move a certain distance, but nothing more than a half-hour, possibly an hour, namely, the time it takes for the explosion to occur and the fallout to travel and come down. But it is interesting that now evacuation is a hot subject again because of an assumption that there'll be a lot of crisis tension giving lead time. The Soviets have leaned heavily on this assumption. But even more interesting is that during the Cuban Missile Crisis—I don't think this has been reported anywhere I've seen—President Kennedy personally—and it was only he who raised this—wanted answers from the Defense Department on civil defense measures that could be quickly made available if he was forced to dismantle the Cuban missile sites by force. The question was carefully framed in terms assuming a desperate response by Castro [Fidel Castro] with conventional forces against Miami and the coast of Florida. Could we evacuate Miami before attacking the missile sites? I was brought into the meeting of this executive committee as a result of this question being raised. Both McNamara and Gilpatric were there, and when the question came up and I was supposed to talk about it the President, McNamara got up and left. He may have been uncomfortable. It was a rather impossible question on a subject not dear to his heart. I tried to persuade the President and others there that this would be a great mistake that not only the means to evacuate were uncertain, but we had avoided building and evacuation capability in the presence of a nuclear threat. To revert to evacuation at that time would create a disturbance around the nation. The public had been told by the President by television that Monday that if there's a response from Cuba, we'll treat it as a response from the Soviets. People all over the U.S. would expect the missiles to start flying; nobody could be sure that the missiles weren't yet operative in Cuba, with a range covering, say a third of the United States and better. So you would've had a hell of a mess on your hands if you tried to evacuate Miami and stop there. I used this question to get a decision at the President's level that we should move more rapidly to provide nationwide fallout shelter by lowering the standards for shelter in existing buildings. This decision was actually made just after the

Missile Crisis cleared, but it stuck.

Of course, Rockefeller was banging on the door of the White House again, which provided an additional impetus. I remember sitting at my desk the day Khrushchev threw in the towel and the telephone rang. Darned if it wasn't President Kennedy saying, "This is the President. Rockefeller's coming in. What am I going to say to him? What are these measures that you were talking about at our meeting?" I had sent a memorandum over asking for approval of these measures and I said, "Have you seen my memorandum?" I heard him saying to Bundy,

"What is this about a memorandum?" Bundy said, "Yes, there's a memorandum here." He said, "I'll call you back," and hung up. That was the end of it. But that did result in a decision to step up the program and gave it a new lease of life.

MOSS: You said you'd had a little trouble with some of the cities such as Portland, Oregon, and Baltimore. What was the nature of this problem?

PITTMAN: Well, the city fathers were under pressure from peace groups who were beginning to operate on a nationwide basis, often with scientists as spokesmen, very much like the problems of today. Scientists and other people who had a pedestal to speak from were making speeches in these cities saying this is a lot of nonsense shelters won't help. It's a bad thing, it should be eliminated from the city's plans. At the same time we were saying that the cities had to get on with stocking these shelters and do their part, which was a very distinct, operative part, in the national civil defense plan that had to be carried out. The cities had to put some money into it also, to pay for moving shelter supplies, trucks and so on. In Portland we had open hearings with the city fathers, at which I, as an assistant secretary of defense, was in the role of testifying before, and appealing to the city council to continue the city's community shelter program. The press and television were there because national attention was focused on the resistance of these two cities to the fallout shelter program. It was a serious challenge to our program. The media were playing to what they conceived to be a public concern aroused by the relatively new peace groups. These groups picked out Portland and Baltimore as cities most responsive to their point of view. There was a real circus. There were all kinds of people trying to attract attention. The battle was stimulating and a refreshing change from the struggle within the federal government. We finally worked things out in Portland, and they stayed in the program. In Baltimore we appeared at first to have lost the battle, but they also finally stayed in the program.

New York was later another resisting city. While John Linsay [John V. Lindsay] was still a congressman, he told me he was unalterably opposed to the civil defense program as a simple matter of gut reaction. When he became mayor up there, after I left to program, he made noises as though he was going to drop it, but in fact, didn't. It's still there. I think the cities that resisted, they all ended up going along with the low key, low cost part of the program which is still holding its own. Nobody's fighting it anymore.

MOSS: Okay, you have the peace groups, and so on, saying that the emphasis on this kind of civil defense is provocative and so on. You also have Herman Kahn coming along with his own thermonuclear war and saying that this is a kind of pressure you can put on the opposite side. How seriously was Kahn and his theorizing taken in the Pentagon and in the White House, do you know?

PITTMAN: Well, I think Kahn's first book on nuclear was taken very seriously. When I came aboard many of the people I dealt with had read it. It was required reading for me, I thought, and Herman Kahn himself was in and out of various offices, including mine. He contributed a very real service in sharpening up thinking on the whole subject of nuclear war. He wasn't just talking about the psychological effects of civil defense. He was talking about all aspects of it in a very fresh and provocative way. He's still doing the same thing on other subjects. It's not always easy for the government to get think tank people to help, because they become your captive, and they need your money, so they try and figure out what you want. Herman Kahn was on one of the rare ones that did his own thinking no matter who was paying his bills.

MOSS: Okay. Fine. I'm just about out of tape here. I am going to cut this off.

[BEGIN SIDE II, TAPE I]

MOSS: …put this on the other side here, ask you simple to repeat the story you just told me about your first encounter with the old man.

PITTMAN: I hadn't met the President and just started the job. McNamara took me over there apparently to meet him. I didn't know whether this was a meeting on substance or what. There were three of us, Kennedy, McNamara, and myself in the room. Kennedy was very affable and turned to me and said, "What have you been doing lately?" I interpreted this to mean what was the main problem that had been taking up my time, so I started to tell him about the reorganization, which he'd signed off on, which put civil defense over in the Pentagon and left some of it in the executive offices of the President. McNamara cut in and said, in effect, "No, no, that isn't what the President's asking about." He started to tell the President about the tangible achievements of the marking and stocking of shelters, and I looked at President Kennedy and he didn't say anything. He just had this little quizzical smile on his face and he politely listened. I had the feeling then, and later, the few times I ran into him, that here was a man that never found it necessary to tell people how he felt or what he thought for the sake of being sure that they respected him. He was entirely capable of just observing and listening unless he wanted to ask questions or act. Most people, perhaps even presidents, no matter how much authority they have, find it necessary to have the people around them appreciate their mental processes a little bit. He didn't seem to have that need.

MOSS: Are there other things you think that we ought to put on the record, any other things of that sort at this point, or do you think that does it?

PITTMAN: Well, I think these things are frivolous. I did run into him in Bailey's Beach in Newport. It was about six months before he was killed. He had this bad back, and he was sitting down, and I went up and said hello to him. He apologized for not getting up, on account of his back. I was standing there talking to him and my wife came up, whereupon he bounced to his feet with his usual courtesy. He was saying that civil defense is a rough subject because nobody cares until the clouds come, and then it's too late. It was sort of the usual somewhat mundane comment on the problem. Defeatist approach. You can't do anything about it until people are excited. I was a little discouraged to hear him say it.

MOSS: Okay, well, I think we'll cut it off there. If we find in the future that we want to come back to you for anything, may we do so?

PITTMAN: Okay, sure.

MOSS: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Steuart L. Pittman Oral History Transcript – JFK #1
Name List

A
Alsop, Stewart, 8

B
Brown, Harold, 9, 10
Bundy, McGeorge 5, 6, 11, 17, 18

C
Castro, Fidel, 17

E
Ellis, Frank B., 3

G
Gilpatric, Roswell L., 1, 4, 7, 9, 10, 17

H
Hébert, F. Edward, 12, 13

J
Jackson, Henry M., 14

K
Kahn, Herman, 18, 19
Kaysen, Carl, 2, 7, 9, 11
Kennedy, John F., 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 16, 17, 18, 19
Kennedy, Robert F., 6
Khrushchev, Nikita Sergeyevich, 2, 17

L
Lindsay, John V., 18

M
McHugh, L.C., 14
McNamara, Robert S., 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 17, 19

R
Rockefeller, Nelson A., 2, 5, 6, 13, 17
Rubel, John H., 9, 10

S
Schlesinger, Arthur M., Jr., 7
Sorensen, Theodore C., 7

T
Thomas, Albert, 15
Thomas, Donald E., 11
Thompson, Edward K., 10

V
Vinson, Carl, 13

W
Wiesner, Jerome B., 6, 9, 11, 13

Y
Yarmolinsky, Adam, 1, 3, 4, 8, 10

SHAW, PITTMAN, POTTS & TROWBRIDGE
BARR BUILDING
910 17TH STREET, N.W.
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20006

(202) 296-3888
CABLE: "SHAWLAW"
TELEX: 440143

BRACKLEY SHAW
RAMSAY D. POTTS
STEUART L. PITTMAN
GEORGE F. TROWBRIDGE
STEPHEN D. POTTS
GERALD CHARNOFF
PHILLIP D. BOSTWICK
R. TIMOTHY HANLON
GEORGE M. ROGERS, JR.
A. J. DONICH, JR.
BRUCE W. CHURCHILL
LESLIE A. NICHOLSON, JR.
MARTIN D. KRALL
RICHARD J. KENDALL
JAY E. SILBERG
BARBARA M. ROSSOTTI
GEORGE V. ALLEN, JR.
BARRY M. SMOLER
WM. BRADFORD REYNOLDS*
PETER ANDREW MARX
STEPHEN L. PARKER
MARK AUGENBLICK
FRED DRASNER
ERNEST L. BLAKE, JR.
J. E. MURDOCK III
CARLETON S. JONES
THOMAS A. BAXTER
JAMES THOMAS LENHART*
*NOT ADMITTED IN D.C.

October 24, 1973

Mr. William M. Moss
Senior Archivist for National
Security and Foreign Affairs
John F. Kennedy Library
380 Trapelo Road
Waltham, Massachusetts 02154

Dear Mr. Moss:

I must apologize for the delay in reviewing the transcript of our interview about my role in the civil defense program, but here it is, with my corrections, additions and deletions.

On reading it over, I am a little disturbed that our conversation led so much into personal comments, particularly my comments about Bob McNamara's role. I am among the many who greatly admire that man's intellectual force and integrity. Although I felt that civil defense by its nature was a program that failed to benefit from the McNamara strengths and may have suffered from his weaknesses, it could well be that someone more skillful than I could have related more effectively to this man, who was carrying an immense load of far more important problems. His role in formulating civil defense policy is a necessary part of the story and my recollections should probably be part of your records.

I suppose that the interview was not intended to produce a coherent account of the rise and fall of the priority accorded civil defense in the early 1960's, but I believe that this is needed, because this national experience will have significance to those who would study the difficulties

Mr. William M. Moss October 24, 1973

this country has in setting priorities and otherwise in governing itself. When I left the Government, Dick Bissell, then President of the Institute of Defense Analysis, urged me to take some weeks before returning to law practice to think and write about this experience, and he backed up his suggestion with IDA facilities and a consultancy. The principal result was an account which was later published as one of five chapters in a book edited by Dr. Eugene Wigner and published by Charles Scribner's Sons in 1968. Our interview will perhaps make more sense against the background of that article, which provides a more coherent and less personal account of the Kennedy civil defense program. I am sure that the publisher would not object to the reproduction of that article, which would be more useful in your library than in an out-of-print book.

I would appreciate it if this letter is made a part of the transcript of our interview.

Best regards,

Steuart L. Pittman

Enc.

SLP:ch